

Statistical bulletin

# Long-term international migration, provisional: year ending December 2020

Experimental statistics on UK international migration throughout 2020 including the impact of the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic.

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## Table of contents

1. [Main points](#)
2. [Development of migration statistics](#)
3. [UK net migration in 2020](#)
4. [Immigration to the UK in 2020](#)
5. [Emigration from the UK in 2020](#)
6. [UK migration data](#)
7. [Glossary](#)
8. [Measuring the data](#)
9. [Strengths and limitations](#)
10. [Related links](#)

# 1 . Main points

- Net migration fell considerably in 2020, with an estimated 34,000 more people immigrating than emigrating (uncertainty range: negative 58,000 to 125,000); this is an 88% decrease compared with the 2019 figure of 271,000.
- Immigration was much lower in 2020 than in previous years, likely caused by a combination of the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic and Brexit; an estimated 268,000 people (uncertainty range: 233,000 to 303,000) immigrated to the UK during 2020, compared with 592,000 people in 2019.
- Emigration also fell in 2020, but to a lesser extent than for immigration; an estimated 234,000 people (uncertainty range: 150,000 to 319,000) left the UK to live abroad in 2020, compared with 300,000 people in 2019.
- Net migration in 2020 for EU nationals was negative, with 94,000 more EU nationals estimated to have left the UK than to have arrived (uncertainty range: negative 180,000 to negative 8,000).

These estimates are provisional and based on experimental [statistical modelling](#). There is a high degree of uncertainty around them and over time, as more data become available, these estimates are likely to be revised.

## Statistician's comment

"Although there is no evidence of an exodus from the UK in 2020, global travel restrictions meant the movement of people was limited, with all data sources suggesting migration fell to the lowest level seen for many years.

"These are our best current estimates for international migration over this period, however they are modelled figures based on experimental research and subject to a high level of uncertainty.

"These figures will be updated further early next year as we bring together new sources of data to give the best picture of international migration."

Jay Lindop, Director of the Centre for International Migration, Office for National Statistics.

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# 2 . Development of migration statistics

## Impact of coronavirus (COVID-19) on international migration

In 2020, the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic impacted on people's ability to migrate to other countries. Governments around the world introduced policies and restrictions in response to the pandemic; [air travel to and from the UK dropped by 95% in the early months](#). As a result, UK immigration and emigration patterns were very different to past trends.

This bulletin focuses on long-term international migration. For consistency, we have continued to use the UN definition of a long-term migrant: a person who moves to a country other than that of his or her usual residence for at least a year.

However, we acknowledge that the UN definition has its limits when applied to the extremely unusual circumstances of 2020, when it was very difficult for people to make definite plans. People may have wished to migrate to or from the UK but found themselves prevented from doing so by border restrictions.

Since the pandemic there is increasing interest in who is resident in the country at any given point in time. In a society where people are increasingly mobile, the definitions we currently use are becoming less useful for some purposes. Therefore, we are exploring how we can use alternative definitions of international migration alongside the UN definition in future. In 2022, we will consult users on which definitions would best meet their needs.

## Impact of Brexit on international migration

The UK left the EU on 31 January 2020 and was in a "transition period" until 31 December 2020. During the transition period, the UK continued to be part of the customs union and the single market, and people could migrate between the UK and the EU without needing a visa.

The extent and nature of the impact of Brexit upon people's migration decisions during 2020 is currently unknown.

## Overview of migration statistics transformation

Traditionally, the International Passenger Survey (IPS) was the main source for estimating international migration to and from the UK. However, we had long acknowledged that the IPS had been stretched beyond its original purpose and that we needed to consider all available sources to understand international migration.

In March 2020, the IPS was suspended because of the onset of the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic. In response, we have accelerated our work to [transform](#) how migration is measured and are moving towards producing administrative data-based migration estimates, supported by statistical modelling. While the IPS resumed operation in January 2021, the decision was taken and announced in the [August 2020 Migration Statistics Quarterly Report \(MSQR\)](#) that going forward we would continue to focus on developing methods for measuring international migration using administrative data and statistical modelling, given the limitations of the IPS.

This bulletin forms part of a suite of international migration releases:

- estimates of [the population "stock" of the UK by country of birth and nationality](#) for the year ending June 2021
- a [blog](#) explaining what can be interpreted from these experimental statistics, why they shouldn't be compared to population figures and ongoing improvements to build and refine them

The results of Census 2021 will also be published next year. These will help us further understand the quality of the Office for National Statistics' (ONS') published migration estimates.

These are the latest official estimates of international migration. However, they are derived from statistical modelling, entail a level of uncertainty, and are therefore badged as [experimental](#).

### More about the population and migration

- Research on [the way we produce population and migration statistics](#).
- View estimates of the [UK population by country of birth and nationality](#).
- Find out about the [future design of migration estimates](#).
- Latest research on [population estimates using administrative data](#).
- Research into [estimating the student population](#).
- Analysis on the [different types of visas held in the UK](#).

### 3 . UK net migration in 2020

In the year ending December 2020, long-term international migration continued to add to the UK population, but to a much smaller extent than in previous years (Figure 1).

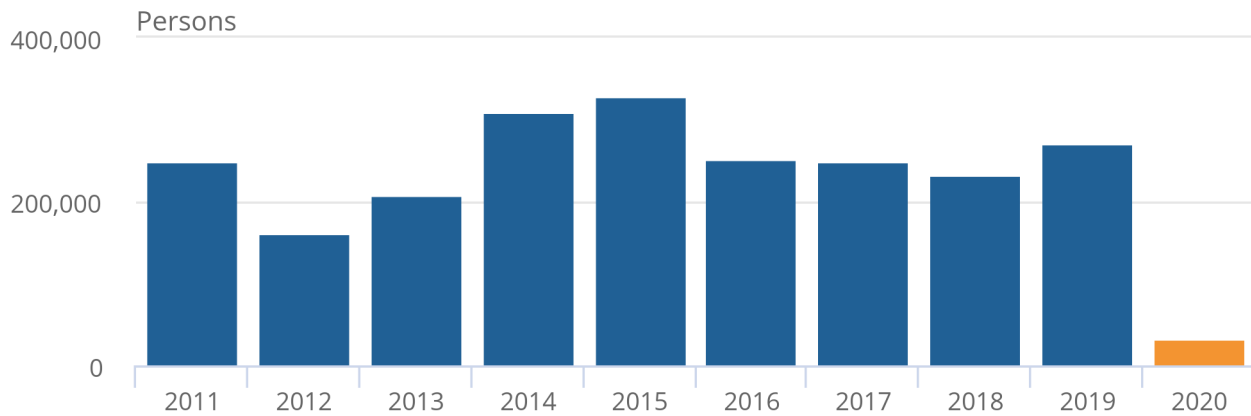
Our provisional estimates show that around 34,000 more people moved to the UK than left the UK in 2020 (net migration). This is an 88% decrease compared with the same period a year earlier.

**Figure 1: Net migration fell considerably in 2020**

Total net migration, 2011 to 2020

Figure 1: Net migration fell considerably in 2020

Total net migration, 2011 to 2020



Source: Office for National Statistics

Notes:

1. The 2011 to 2019 estimates are based on published Long-term International Migration estimates and derived from the International Passenger Survey (IPS).
2. The 2020 estimate is based on the statistical modelling supported by admin data from March 2020 onwards following the suspension of the IPS. Estimates pre-March 2020 are derived from the IPS.

The year 2020 was a highly unusual one in which historical migration trends and typical behaviour patterns were significantly disrupted by the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic (Figure 2).

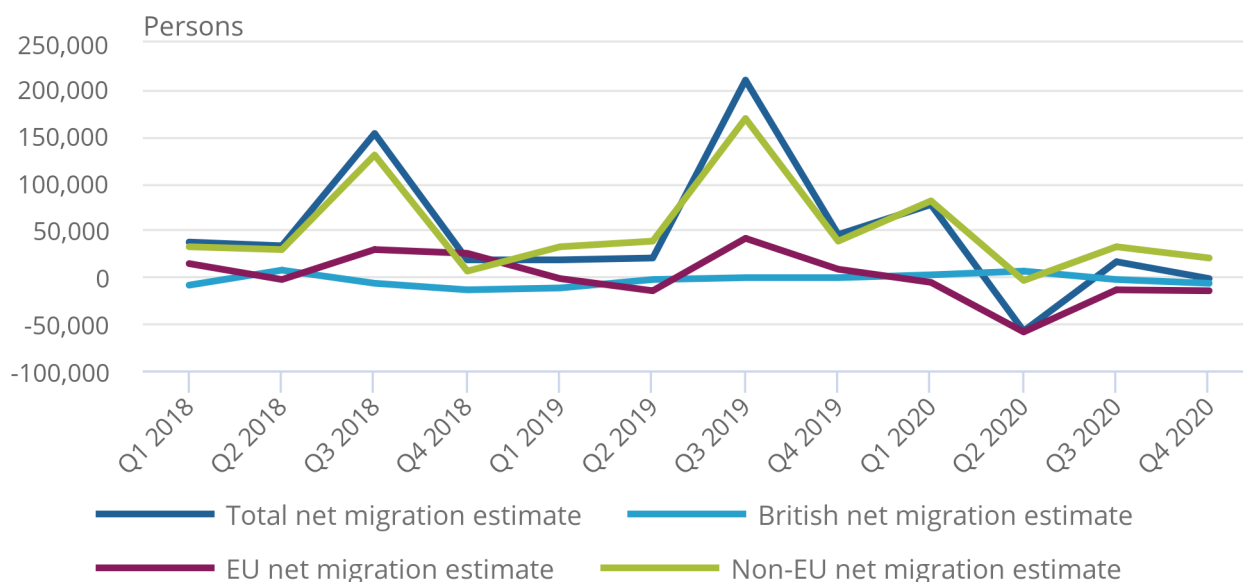
The other major event occurring in 2020 was the end of the Brexit “transition period”. The impact of Brexit on migration will be difficult to disentangle from the effects of the coronavirus pandemic.

## Figure 2: Net migration trends were disrupted in 2020

Breakdown of net migration by quarters, Quarter 1 (Jan to Mar) 2018 to Quarter 4 (Oct to Dec) 2020

### Figure 2: Net migration trends were disrupted in 2020

Breakdown of net migration by quarters, Quarter 1 (Jan to Mar) 2018 to Quarter 4 (Oct to Dec) 2020



Source: Office for National Statistics

#### Notes:

1. Refugees and asylum seekers are excluded from modelling.
2. The 2020 estimates are the latest official estimates of international migration. However, they are derived from statistical modelling, entail a level of uncertainty, and are therefore badged as experimental.
3. The 2018 and 2019 estimates are based on published International Passenger Survey (IPS) estimates.

Caution should be taken when comparing these modelled migration estimates with estimates of [long-term international migration](#) because of the methodological differences between the two sets of statistics.

EU net migration was negative in 2020, with an estimated 94,000 more EU nationals leaving the UK than arriving. EU immigration dropped considerably in 2020 compared with previous years, while numbers of EU people emigrating held steady. This reduction in immigration is most likely to be because of a combination of the impact of both the coronavirus pandemic and Brexit.

Net migration of non-EU nationals was lower than in previous years. The large increase in non-EU arrivals seen in Quarter 1 (Jan to Mar) 2020 compared with previous years was not seen in the remainder of 2020. Overall net migration of non-EU nationals in 2020 was an estimated 130,000 compared with 277,000 and 197,000 in 2019 and 2018 respectively.

Every year, British people emigrate abroad or return home to live in the UK after a period overseas. Typically, net migration of British nationals is negative, indicating that more British people leave the UK than return. Our estimate of net migration of British nationals was negative 16,000 in 2019 but was closer to zero in 2020. This reduction in the migration of UK nationals is also likely to be explained by the combined effects of Brexit and the coronavirus pandemic.

## 4 . Immigration to the UK in 2020

Total immigration was considerably lower in 2020 than in previous years. An estimated 268,000 people came to live in the UK during 2020, compared with 592,000 people in 2019 and 538,000 people in 2018.

The fall in immigration was seen across all three groups: EU nationals, non-EU nationals, and British returnees. It is likely that the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic was a major contributing factor alongside the effect of Brexit.

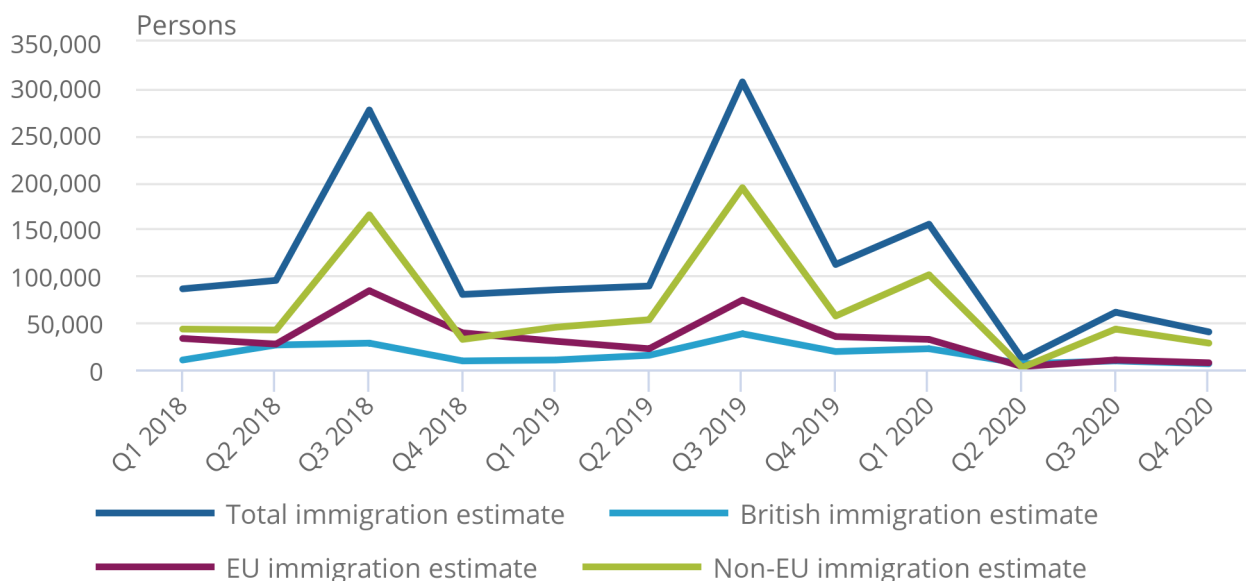
The change from historical patterns is clearly seen in the quarterly data (Figure 3). An increase in immigration by non-EU nationals in Quarter 1 (Jan to Mar) 2020, and near-zero immigration during the first UK national lockdown (March to July) when international travel corridors were effectively closed, stand out. The increase in immigration in Quarter 3 (July to Sept) 2020 was consistent with previous seasonal patterns, however, the volume of immigration was considerably smaller.

**Figure 3: Immigration was considerably lower in 2020**

Immigration by quarter, Quarter 1 (Jan to Mar) 2018 to Quarter 4 (Oct to Dec) 2020

### Figure 3: Immigration was considerably lower in 2020

Immigration by quarter, Quarter 1 (Jan to Mar) 2018 to Quarter 4 (Oct to Dec) 2020



Source: Office for National Statistics

Notes:

1. Refugees and asylum seekers are excluded from modelling.
2. The 2020 estimates are the latest official estimates of international migration. However, they are derived from statistical modelling, entail a level of uncertainty, and are therefore badged as experimental.
3. The 2018 and 2019 estimates are based on published International Passenger Survey (IPS) estimates.

These are [Experimental Statistics](#) and should be treated with caution especially when comparing with previously published migration statistics.

Similarly to 2018 and 2019, the majority of those who immigrated in 2020 were non-EU nationals. They made up around 65% of the estimated 268,000 people who came to the UK in 2020, with the remainder being made up of 19% EU nationals and 16% British nationals.

EU arrivals in the first quarter of 2020 were at a similar level to previous years (approximately 32,000). However, for the remainder of the year from Quarter 2 (Apr to June) to Quarter 4 (Oct to Dec) 2020, only an estimated 20,000 EU nationals immigrated to the UK, compared with 131,000 for the same period in 2019.

Historically, Quarter 3 (July to Sept) has the highest levels of UK immigration, with both non-EU and EU students arriving for study. The total immigration for Quarter 3 2020 was an estimated 61,000 compared with 307,000 in 2019 and 277,000 in 2018, possibly because of a drop in students arriving to study in person.

The total immigration estimate for Quarter 4 2020 was around 40,000. Like Quarter 3, this figure is dominated by non-EU arrivals at an estimated 28,000, while EU and British immigration estimates were around 7,000 and 6,000 respectively.



## 5 . Emigration from the UK in 2020

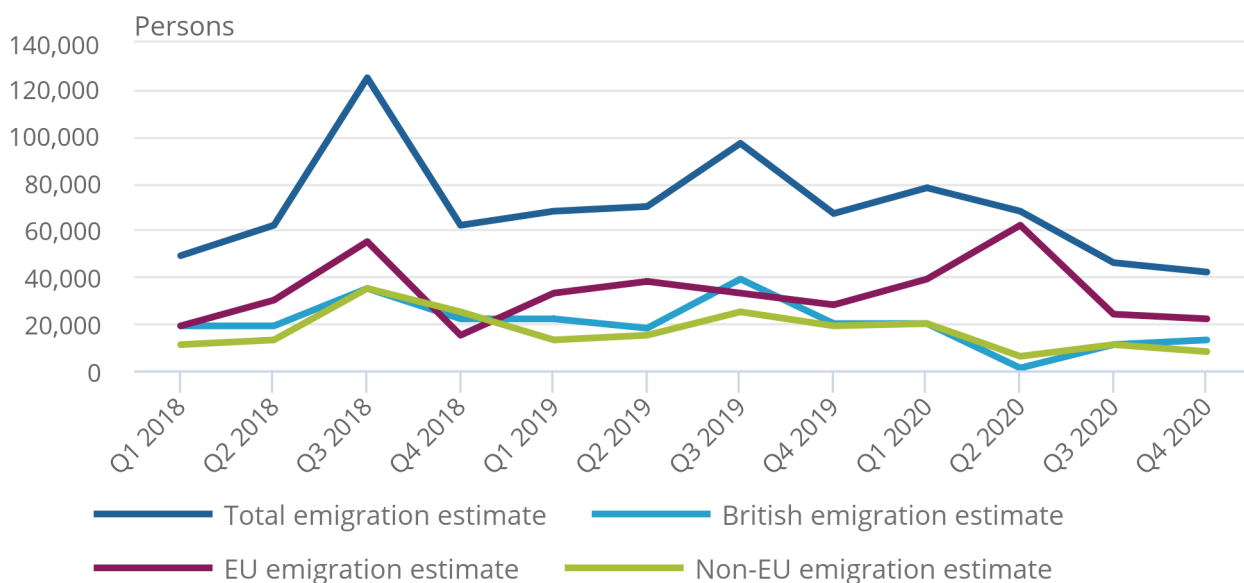
Emigration figures also fell in 2020 compared with 2019, but to a lesser extent than for immigration. An estimated 234,000 people left the UK to live abroad in 2020, compared with 300,000 people in 2019 and 298,000 in 2018. From Quarter 2 (Apr to June) to Quarter 4 (Oct to Dec) 2020, emigration of non-EU and British people was lower than the same period in 2019 and 2018, while EU emigration held steady (Figure 4).

**Figure 4: Emigration figures fell in 2020 but by less than figures for immigration**

Total emigration, by quarter, Quarter 1 (Jan to Mar) 2018 to Quarter 4 (Oct to Dec) 2020

Figure 4: Emigration figures fell in 2020 but by less than figures for immigration

Total emigration, by quarter, Quarter 1 (Jan to Mar) 2018 to Quarter 4 (Oct to Dec) 2020



Source: Office for National Statistics

Notes:

1. Refugees and asylum seekers are excluded from modelling.
2. The 2020 estimates are the latest official estimates of international migration. However, they are derived from statistical modelling, entail a level of uncertainty, and are therefore badged as experimental.
3. The 2018 and 2019 estimates are based on published International Passenger Survey (IPS) estimates.

These are [Experimental Statistics](#) and should be treated with caution especially when comparing with previously published migration statistics.

Similarly to the previous two years, the majority of those who emigrated in 2020 were EU nationals. An estimated 146,000 EU nationals left the UK in 2020, along with 44,000 non-EU nationals and 44,000 British nationals.

The modelled emigration estimate for Quarter 3 (July to Sept) 2020 was around 46,000. While the immigration figures were dominated by non-EU migration, the emigration figures were dominated by EU nationals with an estimated 24,000 departures in Quarter 3.

Total emigration in Quarter 4 2020 was an estimated 42,000. Like Quarter 3, this was dominated by the departure of EU nationals who made up around 50% of the 42,000 departures.

## 6 . UK migration data

[Long-term international migration, provisional: year ending December 2020](#)

Dataset | Released 25 November 2021

Modelled estimates for UK immigration, emigration and net migration, January 2018 to December 2020.

## 7 . Glossary

### Administrative data

Collections of data maintained for administrative reasons, for example, registrations, transactions, or record keeping. They are used for operational purposes and their statistical use is secondary. These sources are typically managed by other government bodies.

### Long-term international migration

The Office for National Statistics (ONS) Centre for International Migration uses the UN-recommended definition of a long-term international migrant: "A person who moves to a country other than that of his or her usual residence for a period of at least a year (12 months), so that the country of destination effectively becomes his or her new country of usual residence."

### EU

EU is the sum of EU14, EU8 and EU2, plus Malta, Cyprus and Croatia (from 1 July 2013).

### EU14

Austria, Belgium, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Italy, Luxembourg, Netherlands, Portugal, Republic of Ireland, Spain and Sweden.

### EU8

Eastern European countries that joined the EU in 2004: Czech Republic, Estonia, Poland, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Slovakia and Slovenia.

### EU2

Bulgaria and Romania.

### EU Other

The two Mediterranean countries, Malta and Cyprus, that joined the EU in 2004 and Croatia, which joined the EU in mid-2013.

### Non-EU

Non-EU is the sum of the rest of the world and the rest of Europe. British nationals are excluded from these numbers.

## 8 . Measuring the data

### Modelling

The Office for National Statistics (ONS) is developing methods for estimating UK international migration for 2020 and beyond. We previously reported on our methods in the methodology working paper: [Using statistical modelling to estimate UK international migration](#), published April 2021.

We continue to use a time series approach to model international migration during Quarter 3 (July to Sept) and Quarter 4 (Oct to Dec) 2020. Detail on our original assumptions and methods is available in [Section 8 of the Methodology Working Paper](#).

Modelled estimates for Quarter 3 and Quarter 4 2020 are provisional and subject to revision, as our models develop, and more data becomes available. Estimates for March and Quarter 2 2020 in this statistical bulletin have been revised in the light of data updates since April 2021.

As before, we used a Delphi approach to gather expert opinion on our model assumptions and modelled estimates. We invited experts to give their views on our assumptions and to provide any other evidence that we should consider in our models.

For non-EU migration the experts were in favour of our modelled approach for Quarter 3 and Quarter 4 and revisions to March and Quarter (Apr to June) 2 2020. For EU and British migration, in the absence of alternative timely data, we continue to model immigration and emigration using non-EU migration trends based on Home Office Exit Checks data. For EU we have incorporated an additional adjustment to the model using the ratio of EU and non-EU IPS data. For British we model immigration (repatriation) using non-EU departure data, and vice-versa.

For Quarter 2 2020 we applied a travel options adjustment to reflect the different travel behaviours of non-EU and EU migrants. This considered increased opportunities for EU migrants to come to the UK or return home than non-EU migrants, given the continued operation of cross-channel travel services when air travel was virtually halted from April 2020. We have implemented the experts' suggestion to turn off this adjustment from July 2020, when the proportion of cross-Channel travel (rail and ferry) reduced as air travel resumed near normal proportions.

### Data revisions

The figures published in this bulletin are based on experimental statistical modelling. We will continue to develop and update our models for international migration. We are currently exploring the use of Home Office data on European Economic Area (EEA) nationals and Department for Work and Pensions Registration and Population Interaction Database (RAPID) and other data sources. We aim to introduce RAPID data to improve modelled estimates of EU migration for provisional data covering 2021 Quarter 1 and Quarter 2 published by March 2022. At the same time, we anticipate revisions to 2020 Quarter 3 and Quarter 4 to account for this new data source. More information on our progress towards bringing together provisional modelled and observed estimates of migration using administrative data sources, and our future approach to revisions can be found in our [statistical design article](#).

## 9 . Strengths and limitations

Because of the nature of the statistical model, these modelled estimates provide headline estimates only and cannot provide further breakdowns or insights.

More quality and methodology information on strengths, limitations, appropriate uses, and how the data were created is available in the [Methodology working paper](#)

## 10 . Related links

### [Measuring migration: the story behind the headlines](#)

Article | Released 17 September 2021

In this interactive article we take you behind the headlines and use the latest data to answer questions about international migration. We also explain why measuring migration is harder than you might think.

### [Population and migration statistics system transformation - overview](#)

Article | Released 15 November 2021

Latest update on our population and migration statistics transformation journey.

### [Population of the UK by country of birth and nationality: year ending June 2021](#)

Bulletin | Released 25 November 2021

Latest population estimates for the UK by country of birth and nationality, covering the period from 2004 to the year ending June 2021.

### [Experimental migration data: No evidence of UK exodus](#)

Blog | 25 November 2021

Jay Lindop explains what can be interpreted from today's experimental statistics, why they shouldn't be compared to population figures and ongoing improvements to build and refine them.