



Humanitarian visas in a hostile environment

Historical legacies, geopolitical ties and everyday experiences

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Executive Summary

How do individuals arriving in the UK through the Hong Kong BN(O) and Ukraine visa schemes understand and experience these bespoke humanitarian provisions? Drawing on qualitative interviews conducted with 43 Hong Kongers and Ukrainians, the report 'Humanitarian Visas in a Hostile Environment' provides the first comparative analysis to centre the voices and perspectives of those entering the UK via the government's new suite of 'safe and legal (humanitarian) routes'.

The report sheds light on the thoughts of Hong Kongers and Ukrainians living in the UK about these schemes. It uncovers how geopolitical factors, historical context and individual circumstances intertwine to influence the decision-making process of those who have relocated to the UK as beneficiaries of these visas.

The findings reveal the distance between the government's rhetoric on the humanitarian visas—often portrayed as flagship schemes of the UK's post-Brexit migration regime and evidence of its continuous commitment to international protection—and the experiences and challenges faced by those entering the UK via these provisions.

It considers similarities and differences between these schemes in terms of eligibility criteria, rights and entitlements—notably in respect of settlement, access to health, social care, education and public funds—and how they affect the everyday lives, aspirations and future plans of beneficiaries.

In conclusion, the report addresses the similarities and differences between the Hong Kong BN(O) and Ukraine visa schemes and their implications, in the context of the UK's provisions for humanitarian protection. The key findings come at a particularly timely juncture, given the ongoing policy and legislative development of the UK's approach to humanitarian issues.

Key Findings

- There was considerable variation in respondents' experiences of applying for these bespoke visas to migrate to the UK. While applications for the HK BN(O) visa were generally reported to have been straightforward, administrative delays and errors were notable among those who arrived in the UK through the Ukrainian visa schemes.
- Differences in access to rights and entitlements, determined by the terms of these visas, meant that individuals within these populations faced distinct challenges.
- For Hong Kongers, these challenges included difficulties in accessing suitable housing upon arrival, particularly for those seeking rental accommodation. Other issues involved limited access to public funds, lack of recognition of their professional qualifications and the categorisation of Hong Kongers as international students for tertiary education purposes. While they experienced the HK BN(O) visa as offering protection, they highlighted that they did not feel sufficiently supported to settle in the UK.
- For Ukrainians, whose visas were time-limited with no route to settlement, a prevailing sense of temporariness and uncertainty underscored the challenges they faced, leaving them feeling protected but lacking certain rights.
- Both Hong Kongers and Ukrainians reported prolonged unemployment and downward occupational mobility. Hong Kongers encountered challenges related to the recognition of their educational qualifications and difficulties in obtaining the Certificate of No Criminal Conviction (CNCC). On the other hand, although there were special provisions for recognizing their educational qualifications, Ukrainians faced language barriers.

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Introduction

Humanitarian visas in a Hostile Environment discusses the findings from research with those arriving in the UK via the Hong Kong BN(O) and Ukraine visa schemes. These bespoke routes for Hong Kongers and Ukrainians to move to the UK are part of the small suite of schemes—alongside resettlement, community sponsorship, mandate and family reunion schemes—that constitute the UK Government’s post-Brexit provision of Safe and Legal (Humanitarian) Routes (Home Office, 2023). These new humanitarian visas represent a significant departure from the previous logic guiding humanitarian provisions based on the UN 1951 Refugee Convention—on which the UK’s humanitarian protections have traditionally been based on—in that they explicitly discriminate on the grounds of nationality and afford different rights and entitlements as well as involving different bureaucratic demands and costs for applicants.

The establishment of these routes encapsulates key aspects of the post-Brexit migration regime and should be understood in the context of Britain’s search for a new position in the world after Brexit. These schemes are presented by the UK Government as part of their ‘fair and generous’ approach to migration, the routes they offer for entering the UK are deemed ‘safe routes’ and a central pillar of the UK’s ‘compliant’ environment in respect of migration and asylum. From what they offer their beneficiaries to how they are framed by the UK Government, these provisions appear to contrast with the rhetoric and the introduction, since Brexit, of further measures to restrict access to international protection for refugees in the UK (for example, the 2023 Illegal Migration Act and the Rwanda Deportation plan). Beyond their function within the UK’s current migration regime, these schemes are rooted in Britain’s colonial past and reflect current foreign policy priorities.

This report draws on research conducted by the [MIGZEN research project](#) to explore how these provisions are perceived and experienced by individuals. It offers the first comparative analysis of the voices and perceptions of Hong Kongers and Ukrainians arriving in the UK via the Government’s new suite of ‘safe and legal (humanitarian) routes’. It examines what we can learn from how they think about these schemes. It shows how geopolitical factors, historical context and individual circumstances together shape the decision-making process of Hong Kongers and Ukrainians when choosing to relocate to the UK. Hearing their accounts of their experiences of moving to the UK and establishing lives for themselves, makes visible the limits on their daily lives that result from the terms and conditions of their legal status. Finally, the report highlights the impacts of differentiated rights and entitlements on the UK’s immigration regime.

The report is structured as follows. First, we provide an overview of the Hong Kong BN(O) visa and Ukraine visa schemes, including a statistical snapshot of the number of applications, status granted and arrival data. Next, we introduce the research and methodology, before moving on to discuss the empirical findings. The discussion focuses on two dimensions: (1) arrival and settlement experiences, and (2) aspirations and plans for the future. We conclude by reflecting on the challenges ahead for humanitarian visa holders and the wider impact of these bespoke humanitarian routes on the UK’s approach to humanitarian protection and asylum.

New humanitarian visas at a glance

The new humanitarian visas—the Hong Kong BN(O) visa and the Ukraine visas—emerged in response to distinct political crises, in each of which the UK government was differently involved. Both have foreign policy and geopolitical concerns at their core. The BN(O) Visa was introduced on 31 January

2021 as a humanitarian visa for those eligible for British National Overseas (BN(O)) status.¹

	Out-country application	In-country application	Total number
Applications	159,197	31,800	190,997
Visa Granted	154,078	30,622	184,700
Arrivals in the UK			135,400

Table 1: Applications, visa granted and arrivals via HK BN(O) visa, 31 January 2021-30 September 2023. Source: Home Office

To be eligible, applicants must demonstrate that they can accommodate and support themselves in the UK for six months and pay the associated visa fees, including the Immigration Health Surcharge (IHS).² Unlike other migrants, they are not required to prove a minimum or guaranteed income (Benson, 2021: 749), nor do they have to apply from outside the UK. While the visa allows no recourse to public funds (NRPF), under certain conditions—such as immediate risk of destitution, and immediate concerns over the welfare of child—BN(O) visa beneficiaries may apply for the NRPF to be removed.³ After five years in the UK, BN(O) visa holders can apply for Indefinite Leave to Remain (ILR). After a year of ILR, they become eligible to register as British citizens.⁴ BN(O) visa holders have the right to live, work and study in the UK, and their children qualify for state-funded schooling.⁵ Official data on the demographic profile of this population group is currently unavailable. However, recent research conducted with a representative sample of HK BN(O) visa holders (n=2089) by British Future on behalf

¹ The BN(O) status was created on 1 July 1987 through amendments to the British Nationality Act 1981. It was an entitlement restricted to residents of Hong Kong, to be acquired by registration before 1 July 1997, when sovereignty over the territory was transferred from the UK to the PRC (extended for some to 31 December 1997), and it is not transmissible to their descendants. It did not confer the right of abode in the UK, and its holders were subject to standard immigration controls (Vassiliou 2020).

² As of 11 October 2023, the fees associated with this visa are £180 per applicant for a 30-month visa and £250 per applicant for a 5-year visa. The immigration health surcharge relating to this route is set at £1560 for 30 months and £3120 for five years (with reduced charges for those under the age of eighteen). These costs may vary in the future in light of the government's intention to increase immigration-related charges, especially the Health Immigration Surcharges: <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/new-visa-fees-set-to-come-into-effect-next-month>

³ See Home Office Guidance on Access to public funds to support family and private life for Hong Kong BN(O) visa holders for further details https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/646b5dd5382a51000c9fc501/Access_to_public_funds_within_family_private_life_and_Hong_Kong_BN_O_routes.pdf

⁴ Subject to the usual residence requirements. Nevertheless, this option 'is slightly cheaper than naturalisation, and removes the element of discretion that naturalisation applicants must face' (Vassiliou 2020).

⁵ Initially, applicants could bring dependents with them to the UK. However, this meant that the route was largely out of reach to those born after 1997 who were no longer dependent on their parents. Subsequent changes have relaxed this condition, and in November 2022, the scheme was extended so that those with one BN(O) parent were able apply in their own right.

of the Welcoming Committee for Hong Kongers (Rolfe and Benson, 2023) showed that this was a population of working age, with 59% of those surveyed educated to degree-level and above. Nearly half of those surveyed were in the UK as part of households comprised of parents and children, demonstrating that this is a route through which families are able to migrate to the UK.

The UK's Ukraine visa schemes emerged in response to the large-scale displacement brought about by Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, which began on 24 February 2022. Compared to the extensive protection readily offered by the EU following the European Council's activation of the Council Directive 2001/55/EC (Temporary Protection Directive),⁶ the UK's response was slower and less generous (Desmond, 2023). Initially, the UK issued new visas only to Ukrainian citizens with family ties to the UK. However, these restrictions were quickly lifted following a public outcry, with the announcement of an 'uncapped sponsored humanitarian visa route'.⁷

To date, people need to apply for a visa in advance of travelling to the UK and eligibility depends on either UK family connections or sponsorship. By the end of March 2022, the UK had set three fee-free visas, which offer protections similar to that provided by the EU's Temporary Protection Directive: the Ukraine Extension Scheme (available for Ukrainians already in the UK), the Ukraine Family Scheme and the Homes for Ukraine Sponsorship Scheme (these latter two schemes are open to Ukrainians outside the UK).

	Ukraine Sponsorship Scheme	Ukraine Family Scheme	Total
Applications	210,905	103,600	314,505
Applications awarded	171,336	70,510	241,846
Arrivals in the UK	133,600	54,600	188,200

Table 2: Applications and arrivals via Ukraine visa schemes, March 2022-September 2023. Source: Home Office.

Since the two main Ukraine Visa Schemes were introduced in March 2022, there have been approximately 315,000 applications (UK Government 2023). Just over three quarters of successful applications (77%) have translated into actual arrivals.

The preponderance of females (65%), with adult males aged 18-64 accounting for only 19% of arrivals reflects the imposition of martial law in Ukraine.⁸

⁶ Council Implementing Decision (EU) 2022/382 of 4 March 2022 establishing the existence of a mass influx of displaced persons from Ukraine within the meaning of Article 5 of Directive 2001/55/ EC, and having the effect of introducing temporary protection, ST/6846/2022/INIT OJ L 71, 4.3.2022. (*hereinafter* Council Implementing Decision (EU) 2022/382 of 4 March 2022).

⁷ <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/further-support-for-ukrainians-fleeing-russia-invasion>

⁸ Decree n°64/2022 'On the imposition of martial law in Ukraine' (President of Ukraine 2022.) <https://rm.coe.int/1680a5b041>.

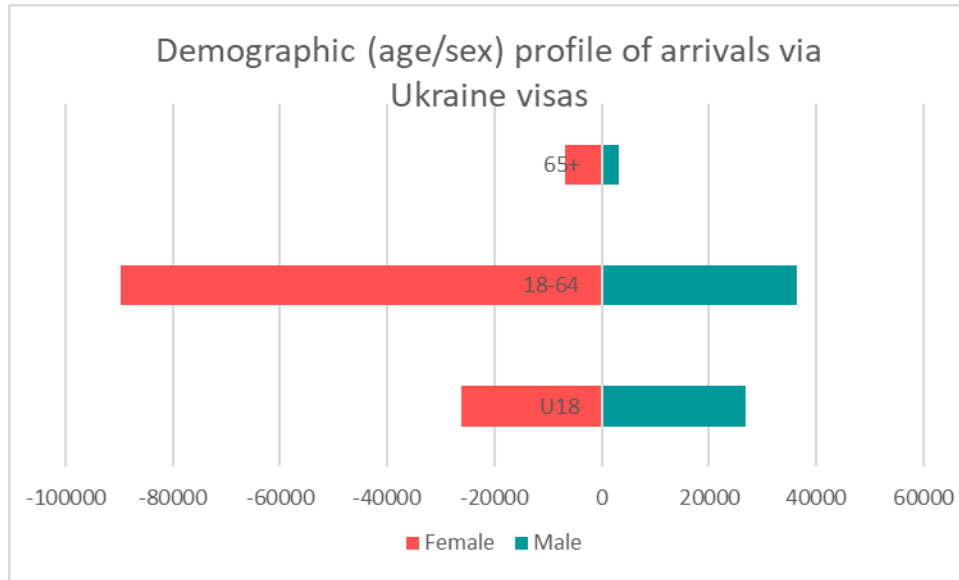


Figure 1: Demographic (age / sex) profile of arrivals in the UK via Ukraine visas, 8 March 2022 to 26 September 2023. Source: Home Office.

Methodology

The report is based on forty-three semi-structured qualitative interviews with both Ukrainian nationals residing in the UK as a result of one of the three visa schemes launched by the UK government in the aftermath of the 2022 war, and Hong Kongers who have arrived in the UK since Brexit, primarily under the BN(O) visa scheme.⁹

Interviews followed a semi-structured format and lasted an hour on average. Questions were broadly organised around finding out about migration and settlement experiences and relationships to place of origin and the UK, and were adjusted to account for different migration motives and trajectories. They included questions on the following topics: (1) reasons for migrating to the UK; (2) reasons for deciding to leave the country of origin; (3) administrative preparations for the move; (4) the journey and arrival in the UK; (5) settling in the UK; (6) making and maintaining connections between the place of origin and settlement; (7) views on ‘Global Britain’; (8) assessment of the migration decision. Every participant was also asked to provide (voluntary) demographic information.

Interviews were audio-recorded with the participants’ permission and were subsequently transcribed and cleaned. Personal and identifying information was removed before importing the transcript to NVivo for thematic analysis based on a coding framework collectively developed by the team.

We conducted twenty interviews with Ukrainians, all but one having arrived in the UK after the onset of the war in 2022. Of these, eighteen were women and two were men, an imbalance reflecting the effects of the imposition of the martial law in Ukraine. With Hong Kong BN(O) visa holders, we conducted twenty-three interviews. Of these, most arrived in the UK in 2021. The majority of interviewees identified as female, and the sample was evenly distributed age-wise overall.

⁹ Detailed information on recruitment methods and interview modalities is available at this page: <https://migzen.net/about/phase-3b/>

Experiencing a ‘special relationship’

Geopolitical considerations rooted in Britain’s colonial past and present-day foreign policy ambitions underpin the establishment of these visa routes for Hong Kongers and Ukrainians to relocate to the UK. In what follows, we outline how the people we interviewed contextualized and assessed the schemes, applied for them and subsequently travelled to the UK.

The commitment to protect

Among members of both groups, there was a general understanding that the opening of the visa route they had used reflected the UK’s commitment to protecting their people. Beneath the gratitude, however, there were some discernible criticisms especially around timing and the routes for migrating to the UK that had been available to them prior to the introduction of humanitarian provisions.

For Hong Kongers, the UK’s commitment to protect was linked back to their country’s former colonial subjection. This often featured in people’s accounts as a time of prosperity and freedom, which many were nostalgic about. Notably, this was contrasted with their accounts of an oppressive political climate since sovereignty over Hong Kong was transferred to the People’s Republic of China (PRC):

I would perceive the UK is kind of the mother to Hong Kong. We inherit so much from the British, like the traffic system, like the way we...the way we need to learn two languages (...) but now, I feel like we are...we are left behind. Like, like the mother abandoned us somehow. (April, woman in her 20s)

This link reflects Britain’s framing of the BN(O) visa as a route ‘providing a haven for its former colonial subjects’ (Benson, 2021: 756). Within this context, the opening of the BN(O) route offered a way out for Hong Kongers wishing to restart their life in their former ‘motherland’ while avoiding direct confrontation between the UK and PRC, thus enabling the ordinary continuation of diplomatic and economic relationships between the two countries. Some respondents nevertheless questioned why it had taken the UK so long to open this channel.

For Ukrainians, the UK’s opening of its doors was understood as a direct effect of the country’s active diplomatic and military support during the confrontation with Russia, which was often linked to the figure of the then prime minister Boris Johnson (who was the first among the NATO’s countries’ political leaders to travel to Ukraine after the beginning of the war):

I know your Prime Minister, Boris Johnson, he’s been great. Absolutely. He’s been supporting Ukraine like crazy on the same level as Poland. So, our countries became like bros in that regard, and we were all really grateful and we loved, we all love the UK now I mean, come on with all the support that you gave us. And I mean the arms, the weapons, just the humanitarian support, we can– we cannot just ignore that, you know, everybody notices the support and help that the UK provides. (Kalyna, woman in her 20s)

Nevertheless, among some Ukrainians, gratitude for the UK’s support did not erase the memory of what the UK’s migration regime was to them before the hostilities began:¹⁰

¹⁰ For an analysis of the living and working conditions of Ukrainian migrants with no or precarious legal status in the UK before the war, see Bloch et al, 2014.

[Before the war] the only scheme for Ukrainians to come to Britain was either family reunification, if one of the family members is European or British ... that's it, or if this family member is dependent on another. Well, it's us we are talking about – parents - here - who depended on children who work here in Britain, and also have a work visa ... the cost of a work visa is very high these days, so I think it would be good if everyone had the opportunity to review some – not only the price, but make a flexible system, because two and a half thousand pounds for a work visa, if you work, for example, in a warehouse, it is a very high price. (Nyura, woman in her 30s)

Favourable terms

For most of the people we interviewed, the UK was a destination they had chosen consciously based on several considerations. These varied significantly between the two groups, reflecting fundamental differences in the context and circumstances they were in as they faced the opportunity to seek protection and rebuild their lives elsewhere.

For Hong Kongers, the main factors informing their choice of the UK over other countries were historical ties, access to British citizenship, the possibility of moving with one's family solely based on BN(O) status,¹¹ labour market opportunities, political rights and freedom of expression:

I think UK is my only opportunity to leave Hong Kong. The first thing UK government gives us Hong Kong people who own the BN(O), we can apply for the BN(O) visa and after five or six years we have the citizenship. (Charlotte, person in their 30s)

If I want to live with my mom, Canada and Australia – those countries are quite far back [in my list]. I don't see much chance that I could receive my mom to live with me together. And the UK, relative to other choices, is relatively more secure because my mom also has a BNO. (Leia, woman in her 20s)

I'm a social worker, but I'm only like a bachelor's degree. So, for Canada, if you want to practice as a social worker again, like directly, I think you will need to have a master's degree so that you can perform like an [inaudible] work. But for UK, you don't have to. (Candice, woman in her 20s)

So it was... was the BNO passport that allowed me to be politically active, basically, and it was the desire to be politically active... that kind of shaped my - my desire to apply to the BNO scheme. (Ryan, man in his 20s)

These reasons were further compounded by the BN(O) visa's relatively low cost and rapid processing speed:

Among all the [migration] options open to Hong Kongers, Britain is most attractive to me as a BN(O) holder. Because one, to me, the cost is the lowest. (Leia, woman in her 20s)

I considered going to Australia, considered going to Taiwan. But [I chose the UK] because those all

¹¹ Family members can apply as dependents if the applicant is a British national (overseas), or a child of a British national (overseas) who is aged 18 or older and born on or after 1 July 1997. Broadly, dependents can include partners, children and grandchildren, and parents, grandparents and siblings who are highly dependent on the applicant <https://www.gov.uk/british-national-overseas-bno-visa/your-family-members>.

take exceptionally long time [and] only for UK [the application takes shorter time]. (Lily, woman in her 50s)

Broadly, these findings align with some of the key pull factors identified in previous research among Hong Kongers intending to migrate to the UK (Kan, Richards and Walsh, 2021: 5).

By contrast, for the Ukrainians we interviewed, the criteria underpinning their choice of the UK largely reflected the urgency of people living in displacement: housing security and the ability to communicate effectively with people and institutions in the host country.

Lots of people moved to Europe - the question of housing was quite sharp. And I understood that in principle if I go with children to Poland or Germany, it will be almost similar conditions. And the minus of such relocation was the absence of the language, of the laws, misunderstanding of what to do, where to run and whom to ask. Because when you're in your country, you know how the system works. And I got the information, that Britain is inviting and giving help in a little bit different way. From the beginning, they emphasise giving a place to live. That was a key factor in making a decision to go to Britain. (Ionna, woman in her 40s)

Why England? Because I know a little bit English. Not Germany, not Polish and Italian. But English. And it's more comfortable for me to be here when I can understand the language. (Darya, woman in her 30s)

Different bureaucratic arrangements

People's experiences of the visa application process varied, for a number of reasons. Among these, the most important was the quality of the bureaucratic process they had to navigate to obtain their visa – itself a reflection of the significantly different political circumstances surrounding the opening of the BN(O) versus the Ukrainian schemes.

The BN(O) visa was launched when the bureaucratic infrastructure was ready, with conditions and process laid out clearly for all applicants from the start. For most, if not all, the reported user experience was good:

It was a very easy experience, basically. Compared to, you know, the tourist visa, I had to apply to, for America, or the tier four visa I had to apply to, for the UK. Was, you know, a walk in the park, basically. (Ryan, man in his 20s)

Out of my surprise, let me tell you, I just decided to move here earlier this year in [December], about like, end of [December] something, I forgot the exact date. But I remember the date that I put it in my application or night, [inaudible] [date in December], and I got my visa approved by like [mid-January]. So you can tell, I mean, how quick and fast the process is. (Sam, man in his 50s)

By contrast, the experiences of the visa application process of the Ukrainians we interviewed were varied, as the process changed significantly over time, especially in the first few months. Most notably, applicants initially had to wait to receive their biometric document before they could travel to the UK, but this requirement was subsequently lifted. The printing of biometric documents directly in the UK significantly reduced people's waiting time in displacement. Hence, while Darya, a woman in her 30s who applied to the Family scheme shortly after the war started, waited in Poland for three weeks to receive her biometric document to enter the UK, Artem, a man in his 40s who arrived in January 2023,

reported receiving his visa the day after he applied.

Travelling with family members presented additional challenges and delays in the experiences of people we interviewed. For example, Kalyna, a woman in her 20s relayed that she, her mother and her sister filed a family application through the Home Sponsorship scheme, but their visas arrived at different times, suggesting that they may have been treated as individual cases.

Hard and soft borders

For both groups of respondents, leaving their homelands was described as stressful and anxiety-ridden, especially as they anticipated or experienced being stopped at the border on their way out:

I got a bit anxious before I go, because I think one to two days before I left there's news saying that people got arrested in the airport, on the ['black'] list. And saying that once you leave the country, the immigration, the customs department would know that and then they will have police in airports to come and arrest you, so I'm still very anxious before I left. (Candice, woman in her 20s)

Personally, for me, it was a hard and long trip. Because of being with two small children. We were going from [a city], Ukraine by bus. Crossed the border and went to the city of [a Polish city]. And from that city, we bought flight tickets and a flight to [a city in South England]. To England. A little bit stressed, but normal (laughing). (Lesya, woman in her 30s)

By contrast, neither set of interviews included many references to their experiences of arrival and crossing the UK border – whether positive or negative. This suggests that they possibly approached and experienced it as an ‘ordinary’ border, rather than a highly policed and securitized one; a few Ukrainians even relayed that UK immigration officers treated them with care:

Yes, it was that easy, we were asked, like: Ukrainians, right? Well, is this a sponsored program? We say: Yes, yes, yes [laughs]. And so on. There were some people who knew how to speak, so they helped, how to explain certain points to the officers. Then we also got documents, put seals there, did all this, took to a place where you can take the suitcase, and we took it, and then took them to these volunteers, who redirected us to the hotel. (Andriy, man in his 20s)

Settling in the UK

While the socioeconomic status of the people we interviewed varied both within and across the two groups in ways that do not allow generalizations, one key factor shaping interviewees’ experiences of their relocation to the UK was planning time – its availability, for Hong Kongers, and its lack for Ukrainians, who left as war in their homeland was raging. In the light of this, in this section, we discuss how our interviewees experienced settling in the UK, focusing on the spheres of housing, work, welfare and education.

Housing

Due to a lack of institutional support for housing, most of the Hong Kongers we interviewed had booked temporary accommodation in the UK in which to stay upon arrival and for the first few weeks (often an Airbnb). During this time, people searched for a property to rent, and it was only by drawing on personal financial resources that most of them were able to overcome the problem that all new arrivals face on

the UK rental market – lack of a credit history:¹²

It's quite difficult to get a property here. And, you know, because we don't have any credit. And we don't have any jobs. (Sun, woman in her 40s)

The landlord rejected us, even though we have paid a deposit. Because at the very beginning, we're not employed. So probably it is hard for us to get the reference check done. So that's why we agreed to pay upfront. It is very normal amongst the Hong Konger community – everyone - when we first arrived, and we want to rent a house or a place to live that we have to pay upfront. (Hailey, woman in her 30s)

At the time of the interviews, most of our interviewees either already lived in a property they owned or were actively looking for a property to buy – findings that align with existing surveys on this issue (UKHK, 2022: 21-22).¹³ On the one hand, this position was presented as a response to the challenges of accessing the rental market and the lack of state support for accommodation. On the other hand, it was presented as proof of their decision to relocate permanently to the UK.¹⁴ It also highlighted the relatively privileged financial position of the interviewees.

After the announcement of the BNO visa, and after selling... our apartment in Hong Kong, we just decided to just invest in the UK in real property, buy a house here and to...to basically uproot our lives in Hong Kong and move all over to here, to the UK. (William, man in his 20s)

Housing was embedded in the Ukraine visa schemes right from the start, either because they were joining a family member or because they had a sponsor (whether individual or institutional) who had committed to providing them an accommodation for a minimum of six months. Broadly, people were satisfied with their housing arrangements and hosts (where applicable), and at the time of the interview many of those housed through the Homes for Ukraine scheme had already secured a second term with the same host.¹⁵ Nevertheless, the temporary nature of the housing arrangements emerged as a lingering source of uncertainty, especially as people reckoned with the rental market:

We need to find accommodation for rent. But there is some problem because people who have these flats for rent, they want guarantee from you that you will be able to pay for this flat. And Ukrainians, we don't have guarantee. We don't have this credit history. Most of us don't have salary. For three months. We not sure what will be in one month. One day. So that is a problem.

¹² A study by Hongkongers in Britain on recent arrivals in the UK found that 69.5% of their survey respondents perceived their financial security over the next 6-12 months as somewhat secure/secure/very secure' (Hongkongers in Britain 2021, 16); another by UKHK found that more than 30% of their survey respondents owned over £500k (UKHK 2022, 7) – note, however, that approximately 11% were still living in Hong Kong at the time when they responded to the survey.

¹³ The study found that 62.4% of respondents were considering buying property in the UK in the coming two years, and 15.3% owned one already.

¹⁴ Rolfe and Benson (2023) highlight that those taking part in their research were shocked by the cost of housing in the UK, with affordable housing prominent in the rationale for choosing to live in particular parts of the UK. Further, they stress that the lack of housing benefit available to Hong Kongers means that there are those who are at risk of destitution.

¹⁵ As Tryl and Surmon (2023) report, hosts of the Homes for Ukraine scheme overall rated their experience positively and most are ready to extend their commitment beyond the initial six months term.

(Darya, woman in her 30s)

These problems were compounded by some private landlords' requests for Ukrainians to provide them with financial guarantees that were beyond their reach, such as proof of earning and tax in the UK (Das and Townsend, 2022), as well as insufficient levels of state and specifically local council support in ensuring people's transition to alternative accommodation (Evans, 2023; Tryl and Surmon, 2023). As Machin (2023b) has highlighted, these are leading to rising rates of homelessness.

Unlike the Hong Kongers, none of the Ukrainians taking part in our research had bought a property in the UK. However, it is clear that for some within both populations the lack of appropriate employment and low wages had led to challenges in securing appropriate housing.

Welfare

Stark differences between the two groups also emerged in relation to their eligibility for welfare assistance. This makes visible the stratification of access to welfare and social entitlements even within the humanitarian visa schemes currently on offer in the UK, and the consequences of this for beneficiaries.

BN(O) visa holders have no recourse to public funds (NPRF).¹⁶ Occasionally, this differential treatment was compared to other categories of migrant or refugee and presented as discriminatory.

The problem is, after we got visa, we got a lot of restriction on the visa route. What we are being imposed is no recourse to public funds, unlike the EU settlement scheme citizens, and also the Afghan refugees and also Ukrainian refugees. (Philip, man in his 30s)

I know that Hong Kong people have no recourse to public funds. But actually some of their situations, they really need some help from social services (...), they [social services] also have the responsibility to help and maybe like loosen a bit in the change of conditions to try to understand the situation here, because I know that not, not - the Hong Kong people are not like really want to rely on the benefit, but sometimes they just need like a little help. (Candice, woman in her 20s)

By contrast, Ukrainians were immediately granted access to Universal Credit, alongside other benefits (such as disability and child benefits and so on).¹⁷ As anticipated (Machin, 2023: 300–301), some of our interviewees reported initial challenges and delays in their receipt of welfare assistance:

This first three months it was just because of the Church that we really survived because the Council lost us, we were out of the Council list. We went to the Council and they said 'you are not in our list' and we said 'okay, we understand if you don't have us in the system but we really exist! here we are, here's our apartment, here we are, there are real persons, there's the real apartment. I don't care, please hear me, I'm not asking for extra help. Just give me what Boris Johnson said to Ukraine...' [...] then, when we got the Wi-Fi and I talked to people and I asked so many people and they told me 'you need to write to the Member of Parliament, if you write to a member of

¹⁶ They may apply for this condition to be lifted if they are 'destitute or at imminent risk of destitution as defined in section 95 of the Immigration and Asylum Act 1999', and in a few other circumstances (see UK Visas and Immigration 2023).

¹⁷ <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/immediate-benefit-support-for-those-fleeing-the-invasion-in-ukraine>

parliament, he will help you to manage this'. I was like 'what? Why do I need to? What's next, the Queen? Write to Boris? Why it's like so high, you know, why can you not fix things here, at this level? Here we are, all of us, here. And the magic happened. I wrote to the Member of Parliament, [and shortly afterwards] I got my money, everybody welcomed me in to [a community centre] here you are a client, you can have the English classes, you may have blah, blah, blah. And you know, I was knocking to every door for three months. And nobody sees you. (Boyka, woman in her 30s)

Nevertheless, at the time of the interview, all respondents were regularly receiving the assistance they were eligible for.

Work

As a result of their relocation, most of the people we interviewed in the two groups experienced prolonged unemployment and downward occupational mobility. However, the most common reasons for this varied. For Hong Kongers, it was mostly a lack of recognition of their educational qualifications – something also highlighted by existing research on this subject (Hong Kongers in Britain, 2021: 25, 28; Rolfe and Benson, 2023), and the difficulties of procuring the Certificate of No Criminal Conviction (CNCC) issued by competent authorities in Hong Kong:

I try to submit CV for some job but didn't get any response which I expected. (...) I mentioned I was an [inaudible] engineer and data analyst... some of my friends all face the same issue... is that their qualifications in Hong Kong are not recognised here. (Ernie, man in his 30s)

If we want to apply for the CNCC from the Hong Kong Police Force, we may have to get in touch with Hong Kong Economic and Trade Office in London, to ask them for a letter to facilitate us to apply for the CNCC. This is also something that we don't want to do, because we actually we migrate to the UK with the BN(O) visa. We don't want the Hong Kong government or any government body to trace our location. (Candice, woman in her 20s)

Other major obstacles, as reported by existing research on this issue, include language barriers and the mismatch between competences and experiences versus labour market needs and expectations. In many ways, these findings further reinforce the observation made in other research about the deskilling of Hong Kongers upon arrival in the UK (see for example, Hongkongers in Britain, 2021: 26; Rolfe and Benson, 2023; Tse, 2023).

For Ukrainians, special provisions were established to enable recognition of their educational qualifications¹⁸ – although not everybody may have been aware or able to access this opportunity. The obstacles they reported most frequently were language barriers and the mismatch between their qualifications and experiences and local job markets.

It's very complicated with employment. Because of the industry I've been working in, it's almost impossible to find anything without a knowledge of English. And due to this, we didn't settle down as we wanted. (Anhelina, woman in her 30s)

I work in cleaning as [it aligns with] the level of my English. When I started looking for a job, it

¹⁸ <https://www.gov.uk/guidance/conversion-of-academic-and-vocational-qualifications-homes-for-ukraine>

appeared that the [fashion] designer job is not very popular here. I mean in this city. (Ionna, woman in her 40s)

As a result of these obstacles, at the time of the interview, our interviewees across the two groups who were in employment either worked in jobs beneath their skill – factory work, cleaning, hospitality or similar – or in the new employment sphere that emerged to serve their community in displacement. Downward mobility was experienced by many with frustration and perceived as a waste of resources, as they felt they could give back much more to the UK than they were allowed to:

I remember my first job was working in the er...medical factory, you know, and then just a picker...you know, the order picker. Is a...nice shift from 6pm to 2am, eight hours. You know, so weekly is 37.5 hours. And it's first time... I never, you know touch with factory because in Hong Kong is not common... factory... everyone work in office. And especially I'm graduate from university. So... oh, yeah, I did have interview with some administrative work... but then no offer, unfortunately no offer. So I can only do it... and then I think, in the UK, we have to open mind. You can't find the same job as you had in Hong Kong. (Jade, woman in her 40s)

I was working with documents for 15 years in the industry of city self-government, but unfortunately in Great Britain you need ... life started from scratch, and unfortunately, our diplomas don't work out here.¹⁹ Like they are not valid, or how to say correctly. And wherever I went no one wanted to hire me. But of course, I understand that my big disadvantage is very bad English. And I can't pretend for anything at this moment. We appealed to the [city] university library and kindergarten where they needed an employee... I understand when children are having a meal to supervise them, but unfortunately everywhere has rejections. I gave almost 50 resumés, but almost everywhere I got rejected, but the only one, I appealed to one hotel, where the owner gave me 4 hours per day, cleaning. (Alina, woman in her 30)

I think it [finding a job] was easier [for me] than for the majority of people. Just because I personally knew what I wanted to do. I came here and I thought, like I saw the situation with all the Ukrainians here struggling with their language, with English, and I decided I want to be an interpreter. So I just came to the job centre. And I also have like some experience interpreting, I used to interpret as well since I was young, really. So I have some experience. It's not like, it's not my professional occupation. But I do have experience. That's why I feel rather confident in applying for a regular job as an interpreter. So I just knew that I wanted to do that. Since I also know English well, Ukrainian and Russian, I just visited the job centre folks and I said like, Yo, I'd like to be an interpreter. Yeah, I asked where I should start. And they actually suggested that, since I don't have an education in that sphere, and also I never worked officially as an interpreter, they advised that I take some training, and I could get a certificate that would allow me to find a good job in that sphere. So that's cool. And they also suggested the free training and that. (Kalyna, woman in her 20s)

¹⁹ As earlier observed, not everybody had the same knowledge or experience of the translatability of their educational qualifications

Health

Both groups had the right to access and use public healthcare services. However, this entitlement was based on different premises. Thus, like others subject to immigration controls in the UK, Hong Kongers had to pay immigration health surcharges upfront based on the length of their visas, while for Ukrainians, as for asylum seekers and refugees, access to medical services was free of charge. Nevertheless, people's reported experiences were remarkably similar, and characterized by poor service standards, especially in terms of speed, and trouble with finding a dentist. In some cases, language barriers mediated these difficulties further:

The GP is giving me a headache. At first we registered with the nearest GP. And then I got sick on the first week, and then because of the... their processing period, I couldn't use any service. (...) the first time I got sick, I got no support. Then the second time...oh, yeah. I was calling that basically like 70 to 80 calls to the GP, but then it got automatically hang up on me. So I could never reach no one. And then I walked down to the clinic in person and then the GP talked to me through the door. Like they wouldn't even open the door and have a proper talk to me. (April, woman in her 20s)

Well, it's okay because I speak English and I accompany them to checks. Because even though my parents speak some English, it's not enough to convey you know, what your...your thoughts in front of a doctor. (Ryan, man in his 20s)

I feel good, I feel comfortable [in the UK]. These are some nuances, like for example: waiting for my ultrasound for five months. And I don't know why ... because three days before leaving Ukraine I had an operation ... like a woman thing. And here I should make this ultrasound, and then just waiting because ... I don't know, maybe queue? Maybe COVID? They just write me letters: just please wait if you don't have temperature, if you don't have pain, so just wait. So, I wait. (Darya, woman in her 30s)

We don't have a dentist. It's crazy, for us it's like impossible! In Ukraine the dentist industry is huge you know everywhere and because it's everywhere you just go and it's like, 10 pounds, eight pounds and you can clean it, whiten it like Hollywood smile! When you have some more problems, with 2000 you have all new teeth, from scratch! ... Here, we came 'can we? 'No no no, we are full' (Boyka, woman in her 30s)

Existing research on Ukrainians' difficulty in accessing quality healthcare (Galpin et al, 2023) corroborates these findings, which align with the broader challenges encountered especially by refugee experiences with NHS services (Tomkow et al, 2020).

Education

Both groups included adults travelling with school-age children. In our interviews, we did not identify major material obstacles in their ability to access the UK's public education system (primary and secondary levels) for their children. Instead, it was access to tertiary education that featured prominently in Hong Kongers' interviews, as they lamented their classification as international versus home students for fee purposes:

I saw a student...he is in secondary school, about to take the A levels. His family's not that well off,

they had only enough for their living. But it's about time for him to get into university. But the major thing is, he is a good student, he can get into a good university. But the thing is, he is charged with the international student fee, which their family couldn't afford. (William, man in his 20s)

Thinking about and planning for the future

The nature of the visa that people used to relocate to the UK deeply affected their ideas about and plans for their futures: for the Hong Kongers, the BN(O) visa offers a secure route to long-term settlement; for the Ukrainians instead, the temporariness of the humanitarian protection and the uncertainty on what would happen when their initial visas expired, make thinking about and planning the future more difficult.

The BN(O) visa gives Hong Kongers the chance to stay in the UK for up to five years, after which they are able to apply for indefinite leave to remain. As a route to settlement, it also allows them to apply for British citizenship the following year, after six years in the UK in total. Many of the people we interviewed were planning to follow these steps, further confirming the findings of previous research (Rolfe and Benson, 2023):

Yeah, for the BNO visa scheme... we always mention the formula, five plus one it means that we... our visa let us stay here for five years. After five years, we are qualified as... Indefinite leave to remain (laughs)... but you need an extra year. That's the sixth year, to apply for citizenship... So we need six years... to become a real British [laughs]. (Aiden, man in his 40s)

I would want that [to apply for permanent residency in Britain]. Otherwise, why must I come here? [I] am planning to apply for the permanent residency, after 5+1. (JC, woman in her 60s)

However, obtaining British citizenship did not necessarily imply that people saw themselves living in the UK forever. It was, nonetheless, a formidable asset that they wanted to secure:

I think I stay here for the rest of my life. Except for just sightseeing, travel to somewhere else, sightseeing, travel. I will, I have treated UK as my home. Yeah, I won't go back to home, even for visit my family, for visiting my families and I won't go back to Hong Kong until CCP [the Chinese Communist Party] has left Hong Kong. (Tan, woman in her 50s)

[I] will stay in UK, at least to the point that I get my British citizen status. And then if you ask whether we will stay in UK forever or come back to Hong Kong when the situation is better...or go to other countries. I don't have a very clear answer at this moment. Honestly – to be very honest – I didn't think I will stay here forever. But like things will change. Say if I have a job. If I have a baby here that things will definitely change. But at least at this point, I don't have the answer to be honest. (Ernie, man in his 30s)

Despite the relative security of their legal status, many respondents communicated their fears that the BN(O) visa route might be closed, concerned that such action might follow if there were shifts in the UK's relationship with and position in regard to PRC. Their concerns were focussed particularly on whether family and friends who had stayed in Hong Kong would be able to join them in the UK in the future. These fears were attributed to the instability of the UK government leadership at the time of the interviews, as well as competition for the scarce public resources available locally to support migrants

and refugees:

We are afraid of the cancellation of the BNO visa scheme. We always talk about that whenever the Prime Minister changes, maybe they will experience pressure from different parties... that too many people are coming to the UK. The educational system, the medical system is no longer enough for all these newcomers. So, maybe some days the scheme will suddenly be stopped. And it should not... [inaudible] be affecting us, we are already here. But for our [inaudible], they plan to come, they are still in Hong Kong. (Aiden, man in his 40s)

So I think they're trying their best, but it's very harsh, is difficult for you – for us – to like ask for more, even though we know that there's a right thing to do. So I know that it, you cannot, you cannot just do it at once, because you have a lot of consideration, because you, the UK government still need to consider their own British citizen, like the ones who actually live here. And were here for a long time. And for the economy and there's wars around the world, I know that there's a lot of consideration. (...), you got people like from Ukraine for Afghanistan, who need help more than Hong Kong people. Because you don't have like life threatening issue back in Hong Kong. Yeah, you may suffer from political, ... you may not be as free as before, but you will not like be killed back there. (Candice, woman in her 20s)

By contrast, as a result of the temporariness embedded in the visa schemes, the future for Ukrainians did not seem to flow as smoothly and seamlessly from the present. Rather, it was imagined in scales ranging from a known present, established on the solid grounds of the temporary protection they were granted whilst the war in Ukraine is raging, to the time when, in a maximum of two years from date of their interview, they will know if they will be allowed to choose whether to stay in the UK or be forced to leave it:

I think I can't imagine what Great Britain government will do in the future. After three years of ending my visas. Yeah. It's for me like no future. I feel like no future. Maybe the government need to find solution now. To understand what way I can choose to ... Because now I don't feel 'standable' inside me. I don't know how to say it in English. Without strong ... safe ... I need to know what I can expect after maybe one year, two year. Because I can't imagine it. Maybe Great Britain will say: go out Ukraine. Again, go out. For me it's not good. So, it's like asking your government question like ... question to your government to have decision about our Ukrainian people. (Oksana, woman in her 40s)

But also, for all the people who stay here, I mean, Ukrainian refugees who stay here in the UK, the government cannot tell what will happen after their visa is expired, like, I don't know, what will happen next after I stay here for three years with my BRP. It's still, you know, this thought is still being processed. Like, I'm not sure what my options are. But we'll see. Hopefully, in three years, I want, you know, I won't have to stay in another country, I could just go back to Ukraine, but I cannot tell. Nobody can. Might be hell dangerous. So we'll see. (Kalyna, woman in her 20s)

Speaking to us from within this almost suspended time—a time of temporary protection and respite—people had different wishes about their own and, where applicable, their children's futures, and where these would flourish best. A few appeared to be counting the days before they could return home:

... we don't see ourselves in England. The child misses her friends, she wants to go home. Yes, she

*studies at school, she adapted, and she has good grades. But she still wants to go home.
(Anhelina, woman in her 30s)*

*No, never thought, never wanted, I have always wanted to go back, because I didn't want to come here, I don't like it here from the first day, but I wanted my son to stay here and get an education.
(Diana, woman in her 40s)*

Conversely, many others were pondering whether life in the UK would suit them and/or their children better:

It depends on the war, of course. When the war finish. But now, I have not more [than] one month. And if I can be here successful, in my dreams and my goals, and if I have no problems with accommodation, and I have enough money to pay for my accommodation in the future, so I want to be like the citizen of two countries. I like this country, and I like the help of government. For every people, for every person who lives here. In Ukraine, we haven't such position. And if you have nothing, it can be problem, really. And people can't live without help of friends, of families. But the government ... not like in Great Britain. And here, I feel myself protected because of it. And I [am] tired to feel not protected. So, it's maybe ... I will be here more than three years of that period that we will permitted be here. (Oksana, woman in her 40s)

I'm thinking about it [getting permanent residence or citizenship] more rather than at the beginning. Because I understand that for my child's future maybe it will be the best option if we will also have this country's passport. I understand that to get this passport we need a different visa, either work visa or talent visa or a student visa. I don't [know] if student visa leads to this. Because Ukrainian visa doesn't lead to citizenship. And when the war is over, we could be asked to go back home almost the next day. (Svitlana, woman in her 30s)

What became clear from our interviews with Hong Kongers and Ukrainians was that differences in the terms offered by their visas impacted on their sense of stability and plans for the future. From the outset, the Hong Kong BN(O) visa was designed as a route to settlement for Britain's former colonial subjects, its framing in many ways proximate to that of the ancestry visa (Vassiliou, Benson and Kalivis, 2022). As our interviewees explained, this offered considerable reassurance and allowed them to plan for the future. By contrast, the Ukrainian visas were framed around a logic of temporary protection, with expiration dates. Alongside the prolonged and protracted conflict, and the martial law which had led to the separation of families, this temporary framing of provisions contributed to a sense that the future was uncertain.

Conclusion

In the context of the UK's post-Brexit migration regime and its increasing restrictions on the right to claim asylum, the opening up of bespoke routes for Hong Kongers and Ukrainians to migrate to the UK on humanitarian grounds is often framed as evidence of the UK government's commitment to provide international protection for the most vulnerable. If contrasted with the curtailment of rights experienced by asylum seekers, the provisions included in the humanitarian visas are certainly more generous. However, as we have evidenced in this report, there are also significant reasons for concern, especially in relation to the temporary nature of the protection afforded to Ukrainians and the restrictions in access to public services for Hong Kongers.

It is significant that such provisions have been offered against the backdrop of the Government's ambitions for greater control over who they can offer humanitarian protection to and on what terms, as made evident, for example, by the Rwanda Deportation Plan, criminalization of those arriving in the UK via 'small boats' and calls to revise the International Convention on Refugees.

However, despite being nested within the same suite of provisions—the UK Government's Safe and Legal Humanitarian Routes—these schemes are notably different in terms of the rights they permit, and the degree of access to settlement, healthcare, housing and education they entail. As our interviewees made clear, the consequences of these differences are already visible in the limits they face in their daily lives. Further, while the ambition at the heart of the UK's post-Brexit migration was to remove discrimination, the differentiation of rights and entitlements among those granted humanitarian protection through these schemes shows this is far from being realized.

In particular, our research finds areas of concern for those resident in the UK via these schemes in respect of their limited access to both employment and acceptance of their educational qualifications, which lead to downward social mobility and deskilling.

Difficulty accessing housing is also an area of concern, although this occurs at different points in the settlement experience of visa holders. Hong Kongers are mostly left to their own devices on arrival and struggle to access the rental market. For Ukrainians, assistance is provided on arrival, but the short-termism of the humanitarian visa affects their ability to secure long-term employment and accommodation.

Finally, while the Hong Kong BN(O) scheme assumes that visa holders will ultimately settle for good and convert their visas into indefinite leave to remain and possibly citizenship, for Ukrainians their right to stay is closely tied to the unfolding events in Ukraine and the outcome of the war, with the expectation being that they will return, ultimately, to Ukraine at the end of the conflict. One consequence of this is its impact on the migratory plans and trajectories of beneficiaries, and their capacity to plan for the future.

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About MIGZEN

[Rebordering Britain and Britons after Brexit \(MIGZEN\)](#) explores the long-term impacts of Brexit and Britain's shifting position on the world stage on migration to and from the UK. It is funded the ESRC through the Governance after Brexit scheme [ES/V004530/1]. It is a collaborative research project involving academics at the Universities of Birmingham and Lancaster, and partners The 3 Million, British in Europe and Migrant Voice. It aims to produce new and timely knowledge on how the changing legal and political relationship between the UK and EU in consequence of Brexit shapes migration and migrant experience - including settlement, questions of identity, citizenship and belonging. It adopts a unique approach to understanding Britain's migration story, that brings together emigration with immigration, and that considers British citizens, EU citizens and Third Country Nationals alongside one another.

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