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Asylum policy in Denmark

The UK Government is [reportedly interested in Danish policy toward asylum seekers and refugees](#). This briefing covers recent asylum policy changes in Denmark; the country's rules on family reunification visas for refugees; and its distinctive approach to immigrant 'ghettos' in public housing.

1

Background

In 2023, [almost 12% of the population of Denmark was born abroad](#). This compares to 11% for the OECD group of developed countries as a whole, and to 15% for the UK. As in almost all OECD countries, the foreign-born population has increased over the past decade (from 8% to 12% in Denmark's case).

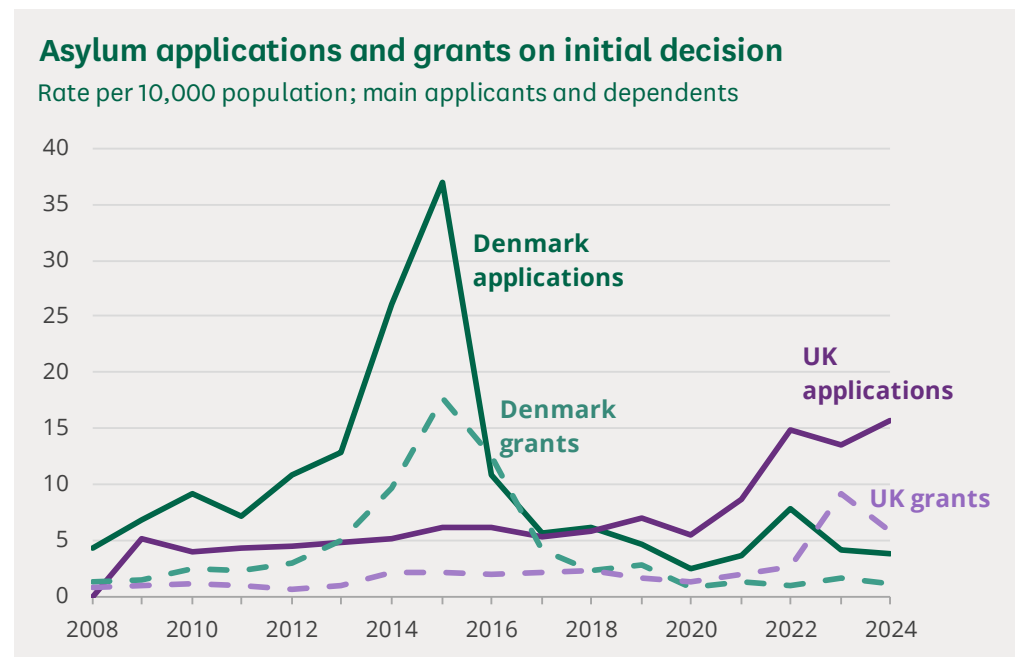
In the context of the European Union, Denmark is about average, [with 6.3% of the population being non-EU citizens](#) compared to 6.4% for the EU as a whole.

However, in recent years Denmark has had a lower than average rate of asylum claims.

In 2024, there were [4 new asylum claims per 10,000 people in Denmark compared to 20 per 10,000 for the EU as a whole](#). The proportion has been [well below the EU-wide level for the past nine years](#) (it was above average in 2015 at 37 per 10,000, but then fell sharply to 11 per 10,000 in 2016 and has remained relatively low since).

Denmark granted a similar proportion of asylum applications in 2024 as the EU as a whole ([48%, compared to 51% EU-wide](#)). The success rate of asylum claims in Denmark has typically been above the EU average, although in some years it has been lower. But [the Dutch think-tank Clingendael notes that](#) the country receives “very few applicants from so-called safe countries... which explains for a large part the relatively high recognition rate in Denmark compared to the EU on average”.

Denmark has also received and granted fewer asylum claims per head of population than the UK in recent years, as shown in the chart below.



Notes: Grants of asylum includes grants of other humanitarian status. Initial decisions do not necessarily relate to applications made during the same period. Initial refusals may be overturned on appeal so these figures may not represent the final outcomes of these cases.

Sources: Eurostat, Asylum and first time asylum applicants by citizenship, age and sex – annual aggregated data [[migr_asyappctza](#)]; Eurostat, First instance decisions on applications by citizenship, age and sex: quarterly data [[migr_asydcfstq](#)]; Eurostat, Population by age and sex [[demo_pjan](#)]; Home Office, [Immigration system statistics quarterly: March 2025](#), tables Asy_D01 and Asy_D02; ONS, [UK mid-year population estimates](#)

This shows that rates of asylum applications and grants in Denmark were higher than equivalent figures in the UK for most of the period shown. Following a spike in applications and grants in Denmark in 2015, driven by an increase in applications from Syrian nationals, rates have subsequently fallen, whereas rates in the UK have increased. This has resulted in a reverse in trends compared with earlier years, with the rate of asylum applications higher in the UK than in Denmark since 2019, and the rate of grants since 2020.

2

Asylum policy

The Migration Policy Institute think tank has said that “[in the early 2000s and following the 2015-16 crisis, attitudes and policies changed to support a more restrictive system](#)” of asylum in Denmark. It mentions the following recent asylum policies, explored in more detail below:

- Short-term residence permits for refugees
- Creating ‘departure centres’ to incentivise voluntary return of those refused asylum
- Tighter family reunification rules for recognised refugees
- Confiscating asylum seekers’ valuables
- Exploring offshore asylum arrangements with Rwanda

Such policies are said to mark a shift away from a long-standing focus on “self-sufficiency through labo[u]r market integration, to reduce dependency on welfare benefits”.

Denmark has an opt-out from the full range of EU asylum law, under [Protocol 22 to the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union](#). But it does participate in certain elements, including the ‘Dublin’ rules on transfer of asylum seekers and the Schengen rules on passport-free travel, [through side treaties with the EU](#). As a result, [some of the new EU legislation collectively known as the Pact on Migration and Asylum will apply in Denmark](#).

2.1

Short-term residence permits

This section is based on a [detailed report for the Norwegian think tank CMI](#). It outlines a ‘return turn’ in Danish asylum law, which has:

... reoriented refugee protection from the initial grant of a secure legal status with well-defined prospects of permanent residence to an increasing focus on return of refugees to the country of origin as soon as conditions there are considered to allow for revocation of their residence permits.

This change in focus is said to have been introduced in two stages:

- In 2015/16, as a response to the EU-wide refugee crisis at that time.
- In 2019, as part of a wide-ranging set of changes to asylum law known as the ‘paradigm shift’.

The changes in 2015/16:

- Introduced temporary residence permits for certain people applying for asylum in Denmark. These were relevant where the basis of the asylum claim was general violence in the country of origin, as in Syria at the time. The stated intention was to make it easier to remove such people once their need for asylum had passed, compared with refugees being targeted as individuals whose protection needs were more likely to be long-term.
- Reduced the initial duration of residence permits for other categories of refugees from five years to either one or two years, although still for the purpose of eventual permanent residence. This applied to people with subsidiary protection and Refugee Convention statuses.
- Made it easier to revoke/refuse to extend residence permits for refugees with both temporary status and subsidiary protection status. Residence permits could be revoked if there were some improvement in the country of origin, even if conditions were still “serious, fragile and unpredictable”.

The changes in 2019:

- Stated that residence permits for all categories of refugees were now for the purpose of temporary stay rather than permanent residence.
- Tightened the rules on extension of those permits when they fell due for renewal, so that there was no longer a presumption in favour of granting the extension. Instead it was treated as a new application for asylum.
- Made it easier to revoke residence permits for all categories of refugees by abolishing rules allowing discretion over and above the requirements of international law. Instead, revocation was mandatory if permitted by international law (in particular the Refugee Convention and the ECHR).

The short-term nature and temporary purpose of the permits does not mean that it is impossible to get a permanent residence permit, but the need for multiple renewals mean that refugee status can be regularly reviewed. The requirements for getting permanent residence have also been made tougher, with the standard qualifying period increasing to six years’ residence in 2016 and to eight years in 2017. This can be reduced to four years if the person can show an [employment record, income and Danish-language ability](#) over and above what is required for settlement after eight years.

Those who lose their residence permits are not necessarily removed from Denmark. In particular, the government has not enforced removal of Syrians whose temporary status has been removed. The result is “a kind of limbo situation. Given the loss of lawful residence they can no longer have regular employment, attend educational institutions, send their children to school or receive other public benefits, and they consequently also have to give up their normal housing. Instead, they are generally required to stay in specific

deportation centres ('udsendelsescentre') where they will be offered accommodation and other kinds of services at a minimal level".

2.2 Departure centres

"A foreigner who does not have the right to reside in Denmark and who does not cooperate in his or her own departure will, as a rule, be required to reside at a departure center", [according to the Danish immigration service](#). This includes people refused asylum or whose residence permit has been revoked.

In the departure centres, people are "not to be paid pocket money or cash for food" and are instead "relegated to eating in the canteen", [according to the Danish Refugee Council](#). It adds that "the immigration authorities may also decide that, as a rejected asylum seeker, you must be detained in a prison for a period until you either decide to cooperate or until the police can carry out a removal by force". The departure centres themselves are not detention centres, however: [people are allowed to come and go](#).

2.3 Reduced family reunification rights

When temporary status for people granted asylum on the basis of general violence in the country of origin was introduced, it did not come with a right to be joined by family members. This family reunification ban was initially for one year, later extended to three years. It did not apply to people with subsidiary protection and Refugee Convention statuses.

In 2021, the European Court of Human Rights [found the three-year ban to be in breach of Article 8 \(the right to family life\)](#). Denmark has since reduced it to two years but with provision to increase it back to three years "in the event of a mass influx of asylum seekers to Denmark". See sections 9(1)(d) and 37(m) of the [Aliens Act](#), examined in automatic translation.

See section 3 below for information about the general requirements for family reunification visas.

2.4 Offshore processing

Denmark [passed legislation in June 2021](#) allowing for asylum seekers to be sent to countries outside Europe [for the processing of their asylum claims](#). In 2022, it [released a joint statement with Rwanda](#) saying that the two countries were exploring an offshoring programme, but no such arrangements have been put in place with Rwanda or any other country. The Danish government nevertheless [continues to raise the issue at European Union level](#).

2.5

‘Jewellery law’

Under section 40(9) of the [Aliens Act](#) (examined in automatic translation), assets worth over £1,200 can be seized to defray the cost of asylum support. Although this is sometimes referred to as enabling the seizure of jewellery from asylum seekers, “assets that have a special personal significance for the person concerned shall not be taken into custody”.

There were reportedly [17 instances](#) of the measure being applied over its first six years.

2.6

The importance of narrative?

Although the practical impact of individual deterrence measures is unclear, the Dutch think tank Clingendael argues that “[Denmark has shown that a harsh asylum narrative \(‘stratcom’\) can indeed be effective as a means of deterrence](#)”.

Its report on Denmark concludes:

Is the Danish ‘model’ successful? The current number of asylum seekers is obviously lower than in 2015. However, this is the case in (almost) all EU countries. In Denmark the applicants more than doubled in 2022 (4600) in comparison to 2010 (2100). The focus on re-assessed protection needs, revocation and return have clearly failed. Out of 30.000 Syrians in Denmark, only 1200 cases were re-assessed, only a few hundred were revoked, yet no one has been returned. Instead, they are still in legal limbo in Denmark due to the absence of diplomatic relations with Syria. [...] Currently, the Danish externalization law only exists on paper: there is no concrete agreement with a third state yet, and the operationalization of the law remains shrouded with legal and practical uncertainties and questions.

The message sent by the Danish government to the outside world, however, is quite clear-cut: if you come to Denmark, we will take your valuables and put you on remote islands [[this was not implemented](#)] to await your return. If you are in need of protection, this is only temporary, and you will be sent home as soon as possible. Or we will send you to another part of the world let your asylum claim be processed. This direct and harsh narrative of an unwelcoming state is a conscious political strategy choice. Danish leaders have repeatedly stated: we want zero asylum seekers irregularly on Danish territory.

This approach has been described in academic literature as “[indirect deterrence](#)” or “[negative nation branding](#)”.

3

Family visas for refugees

The requirements for [family reunification as the partner of a refugee](#) are the same as the requirements for [family reunification as the partner of a Danish citizen](#). The main difference appears to be that most of the requirements can be waived if the refugee sponsor is still at risk of persecution in their home country.

- Marriage or cohabitation requirement: the couple's marriage must be recognised by Danish law or the couple must have been living together for 18 months.
- Voluntary marriage requirement: there must not be signs of forced marriage, which include the couple being closely related.
- Marriage of convenience requirement: the marriage or relationship must not have the primary goal of getting the residence permit.
- 24-year rule: both the applicant and the sponsor must usually be over 23.
- Integration declaration: both the applicant and the sponsor must sign a declaration that they will actively participate in the applicant's effort to learn Danish and integrate into Danish society.
- Visitation requirement: the applicant usually needs to have legally visited Denmark at least once.
- Danish-language requirement: the applicant must usually pass A1 (beginner) Danish within six months of being granted their residence permit and A2 (elementary) Danish within nine months of being granted their residence permit.
- Housing requirement: the sponsor must have an independent, reasonably sized residence.
- Address requirement: the sponsor must not live in a 'vulnerable residential area' (see section 2 below).
- Self-supporting: the sponsor cannot have claimed [certain benefits](#) in the past three years.
- Collateral guarantee: the sponsor must [put money aside](#) which the local authority can draw down if the applicant claims certain benefits. The 2025 level of the collateral is around 60,000 krone or £7,000.
- Criminality: the sponsor must not have been convicted of certain serious offences in the past ten years.

In addition, there are integration requirements. Three apply to the sponsor and three to the applicant. The couple must meet at least one each and four out of six between them. In addition, one of the sponsor integration requirements is mandatory (so in practice the couple need this one plus three of the remaining five between them):

1. Mandatory: The sponsor must have B2 (upper intermediate) Danish which can include school qualifications, or worked for five years speaking Danish on a daily basis.
2. Sponsor has worked in Denmark for at least five years.
3. Sponsor has at least six years' schooling in Denmark.
4. Applicant has B1 (intermediate) English.
5. Applicant has worked full-time for three of the past five years.
6. Applicant has at least one year of vocational education.

Denmark was ranked last out of 56 countries for ease of family reunification (in general, not just for refugees) [in the major MIPEX study](#). The UK was second last.

4 Policy on 'ghettos'

4.1 Background and development

Successive Danish governments have adopted policies to address concerns about low levels of integration and employment in certain neighbourhoods. These often focus on areas with high concentrations of ethnic minority migrants. For example, Prime Minister Anders Fogh Rasmussen [said in a 2004 speech](#):

Many years of failed immigration policy have [...] created immigrant ghettos where the men are unemployed, the women are isolated, and the families speak only the language of their home country. The children grow up without learning Danish properly. Some are influenced by hardened criminals. [...] Ghetto formation leads to violence and crime and confrontation. We know this from abroad. And we neither can nor will accept this in Denmark.

One of the main mechanisms for intervention has been the government's influence over public housing. 21% of housing in Denmark is social rented compared to 16% in the UK, according to the OECD ([table PH 4.2](#)). Such housing is [open to all residents via a waiting list](#), although with priority for certain groups.

Broadly speaking, the aim of ‘ghetto’ policies has been to ensure that public housing is socially and ethnically mixed. For example, under the 2004 [Government Strategy Against Ghettoisation](#) (PDF in Danish), housing authorities were given powers to reject benefits claimants from public housing in relevant areas.

The 2010 paper [Returning the Ghetto to Society – A Reckoning with Parallel Societies in Denmark](#) was more detailed and more explicitly focused on ethnic minorities. It included a precise definition of a ghetto – leading to the [publication of an annual ‘ghetto list’](#) – and proposed 32 separate policy measures to encourage a balanced composition of residents in public housing. These included making it harder for non-EU migrants to secure public housing in ghetto areas and easier for people of means to move there. It also stated that “the number of public housing units in ghetto areas must be reduced – including by demolishing housing units in vulnerable areas and selling housing units”.

The current rules, as outlined in Danish legislation (examined in automatic translation), are covered in the next section.

4.2

Classification of ghettos

Under the [Public Housing Act as consolidated in 2024](#), there is a [four-level classification scheme](#). An area falls into one of the four categories if it is contiguous public housing with over 1,000 residents and meets the criteria below. These are very small geographic areas: [essentially individual or adjacent housing estates](#).

1. Prevention areas

The criteria for a prevention area are:

- More than 30% of residents are non-Western immigrants or their descendants.

[Non-Western countries are defined](#) as everything except the EU, Andorra, Australia, Canada, Iceland, Liechtenstein, Monaco, New Zealand, Norway, San Marino, Switzerland, the UK, the USA and the Vatican City.

And at least two of the following four:

- Over 30% of residents aged 18-64 are not in work or education
- Over 60% of residents aged 30-59 have only primary school education
- The proportion of residents convicted of criminal offences is at least twice the national average

- Average incomes of residents aged 15-64 are below 65% of the regional average

The criteria are designed to reflect the potential risk of the area developing into a vulnerable residential area (see below). [There are 63 prevention areas on the current list](#) (PDF).

2. Vulnerable residential areas

The criteria for a vulnerable residential area are:

- Over 40% of residents aged 18-64 are not in work or education
- Over 60% of residents aged 30-59 have only primary school education
- The proportion of residents convicted of criminal offences is at least three times the national average
- Average incomes of residents aged 15-64 are below 55% of the regional average

In other words, these areas are poorer and have higher rates of criminality than prevention areas, but there is no immigration criterion. [There are 12 vulnerable residential areas on the current list](#) (PDF).

3. Parallel societies (previous ghettos)

A vulnerable residential area – that is, the area meets two of the four criteria above – is classified as a parallel society if in addition:

- Over 50% of residents are immigrants and their descendants from non-Western countries.

[There are eight parallel societies on the current list](#) (PDF).

The legislative terminology [was changed from ‘ghetto’ to ‘parallel society’ in 2021](#), reflecting the [preferences of the Social Democratic government](#).

4. Transformation areas (previously hard ghettos)

An area that has remained a parallel society for five years is classified as transformation area (previously called a hard ghetto).

[There are seven transformation areas on the current list](#) (PDF).

4.3

Consequences of classification

In prevention areas, [the criteria for public housing must prioritise people in work or employment](#). Housing cannot normally be allocated to people on benefits for more than two years or from outside the EU. This does not affect existing residents.

[Similar housing allocation rules apply in vulnerable residential areas](#), including to sublets. In addition:

- Children living in the area must be enrolled in daycare when they turn one, under section 40(a) of the [Daycare Act](#) (examined in automatic translation).
- But no more than 30% of children at any one daycare can be from a vulnerable residential area.
- As mentioned in section 1.2 above, someone living in a vulnerable residential area cannot sponsor a spouse visa.

The rules for parallel societies are the same as for vulnerable residential areas (that is, all of the above). “The crucial difference is that only parallel [societies] can be designated as transformation areas”, [according to the association of public housing providers](#). Therefore all the restrictions above apply to parallel societies.

In [transformation areas](#):

- The aim is to reduce the proportion of public housing to 40% of the total.
- The housing association and local council must draw up a development plan on to achieve the 40% target by 2030. This can include demolishing or selling off public housing units, or building new private housing to dilute the proportion of public housing in the development.
- Existing residents can be evicted and rehoused as a result.

This is in addition to the housing allocation, daycare and visa sponsorship rules. All transformation areas are also parallel societies and vulnerable residential areas.

As noted above, the only criterion distinguishing a vulnerable residential area from a parallel society is the ethnic make-up of its residents. A parallel society which remains that way for five years can then become a transformation area from which residents (of any ethnicity) can be evicted, but a vulnerable housing area cannot. Therefore [“a vulnerable area can have the same issues... but house mostly ethnic western residents and is thus exempt from interventions”](#).

In February 2025, an advisory opinion for the EU Court of Justice [found that this is direct discrimination contrary to EU law](#). The court’s final decision, which often follows that of the advisory opinion but does not have to, was pending at time of writing.

4.4 Number of areas

The association of public housing providers says that [the number of parallel societies and transformation areas is “steadily decreasing”](#) (instead dropping down to become prevention areas, so the number of those has not fallen significantly).

Changes in areas meeting classification requirements over time			
	Prevention areas	Parallel societies	Transformation areas
2018	n/a	29	15
2019	n/a	28	15
2020	n/a	15	13
2021	62	12	10
2022	67	10	9
2023	56	12	8
2024	63	9	7

Source: Danmarks Almene Boliger, [Udsatte boligområder](#), accessed on 28 August 2025

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