

Debate Pack

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Saint Patrick's Day and the contribution of the Irish diaspora to the UK

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1 Background

1.1 Ireland and the United Kingdom

Irish contribution to life in the UK

Irish people in the UK have contributed hugely to life here across a wide range of sectors, and the lives of Irish and British people have been intertwined for millennia.¹

Niall Gallagher, chairman of Irish Heritage, an organisation that celebrates the work of Irish writers, composers, singers and musicians who are trying to build careers in the UK and beyond, has described the contribution of the Irish to cultural life in the UK as “incalculable”.²

The contribution of Irish labour to the British construction industry has been described by Sir William McAlpine as “immeasurable”.³ For example, Irish workers, were part of the teams that built the earliest tunnels for the London Underground network, as well as more modern works such as the Victoria Line.⁴

Irish people have also contributed greatly to the National Health Service; President of Ireland Michael D Higgins paid tribute to their service during his 2014 State Visit to the UK.⁵ As of June 2023, 13,700 members of NHS staff in England reported their nationality as Irish. This includes around 2,300 doctors and over 4,200 nurses.⁶

Two British Prime Ministers—William Petty, 2nd Earl of Shelburne, and Arthur Wellesley, 1st Duke of Wellington—were born in Ireland.

UK-Ireland relations

Relations between the UK and Ireland before the 2016 EU referendum were at their best since Irish independence, as evidenced by the historic state visits by the late Queen Elizabeth II to Ireland in May 2011 and President Higgins to the UK in April 2014.⁷

¹ [“How the Irish shape Britain: A story of rejection and tolerance”](#), BBC News, 24 January 2021

² [“Irish people's contribution to British life is incalculable”](#), Irish Post, 12 April 2014

³ [“A tribute to Irish construction workers”](#), Irish Post, 13 February 2023

⁴ [“Last of the navvies: Irishman who dug all-night Tube line”](#), Irish Times, 19 August 2016; The History Press, [The forgotten men of the London Underground](#), 18 December 2015

⁵ [“President Higgins told how Irish workers play 'an integral role in the NHS'”](#), Irish Post, 9 April 2014

⁶ See Commons Library Briefing CBP-7783, [NHS staff from overseas: statistics](#)

⁷ [“Queen on first state visit to Republic of Ireland”](#), BBC News, 17 May 2011; [“Irish President Michael D Higgins hails UK friendship”](#), BBC News, 8 April 2014

Disagreements between the EU and the UK over how to prevent a hard border between Ireland and Northern Ireland post-Brexit raised tensions between the Irish and UK Governments. However, discussions between then Prime Minister Boris Johnson and the Taoiseach, Leo Varadkar, were seen as instrumental in breaking the deadlock between the EU and UK in October 2019, leading to a re-writing of the Northern Ireland Protocol.⁸

Mr Varadkar welcomed changes to the Northern Ireland Protocol [made by the Windsor Framework](#) in February 2023, saying he hoped it would “allo[w] us to proceed and to open a new chapter in relations”.⁹

In December 2023 Ireland initiated a legal case in the European Court of Human Rights against the UK’s [Northern Ireland Troubles Act 2023](#).¹⁰

1.2 How many Irish people live in the UK?

The 2021 census for England and Wales and for Northern Ireland asked people how they would describe their national identity. It also requested information on the country people were born in. It did not ask about citizenship.

In England and Wales in 2021:

- 362,000 people (0.6% of the population) identified as Irish, either solely or in combination with a UK national identity.
- 299,500 people identified as solely Irish.¹¹
- 324,670 were born in the Republic of Ireland.¹²

In Northern Ireland in 2021:

- 634,000 people (33% of the population) identified as Irish, either solely or in combination with UK national identities.
- 554,400 people identified as solely Irish (29% of the population).
- 40,400 people were born in the Republic of Ireland.¹³

⁸ [“Johnson and Varadkar hold ‘constructive’ Brexit discussion”](#), Politico, 10 October 2019

⁹ [“DUP should be given ‘time and space’ to consider Windsor Framework, Varadkar says”](#), Irish Times, 28 February 2023

¹⁰ European Court of Human Rights press release, [New inter-State application brought by Ireland against the United Kingdom](#), 19 January 2024

¹¹ 2021 Census, Table TS027, via [ONS Nomis](#)

¹² 2021 Census, Table TS012, via [ONS Nomis](#)

¹³ 2021 Census for Northern Ireland, [NISRA Flexible Table Builder](#)

The number of people in England, Wales, and Northern Ireland whose national identity was Irish is higher than the number of people in those countries who were born in Ireland.

Scotland's census was delayed until 2022 and statistics on nationality will not be published until after May 2024.¹⁴

Naturalised citizens

Although dual nationality is common, people from Ireland rarely choose to become British citizens. Around 200 Irish citizens per year apply for naturalisation, Home Office figures show.¹⁵ As explored below, British citizenship has little practical benefit given the special rights afforded to Irish citizens.

The Government is supporting a Democratic Unionist Party bill to [make it easier for Irish people to become British citizens](#).¹⁶ It says this will “help reaffirm and reflect the unique position of Irish nationals in the UK”.¹⁷ The measure also has Labour's support.

Constituency data

For constituency-level data on people born in Ireland, see the Commons Library's online dashboard on [population by country of birth at the time of the 2021 Census](#).¹⁸

The Common Travel Area

The Common Travel Area, or CTA, is a special travel zone covering the Republic of Ireland and the United Kingdom (as well as the Isle of Man and Channel Islands). British and Irish citizens can, at least in principle, travel passport-free within the zone.

Irish citizens can also take up long-term residence and access public services in the UK without immigration restrictions, and British citizens can do the same in Ireland. These reciprocal residence rights are sometimes also referred to as being part of the CTA.¹⁹

The CTA dates back (in various forms) to the establishment of the Irish Free State in 1922. The Government of Ireland has summed up the basic principle (PDF) as being “that the Irish and UK Governments treat each other's citizens in a similar manner to enable them to freely move between the two

¹⁴ Scotland's Census, [Census outputs schedule](#), 7 February 2024

¹⁵ Home Office, [Citizenship detailed datasets, year ending December 2023](#), tab Cit_D01 (average since 2010)

¹⁶ Commons Library briefing CBP-9947, [British Citizenship \(Northern Ireland\) Bill 2023-24](#)

¹⁷ [HC Deb 26 January 2024 c563](#)

¹⁸ House of Commons Library, [Constituency data: Country of birth, 2021 census](#), 27 February 2023

¹⁹ See Commons Library briefing CBP-7761, [The Common Travel Area and the special status of Irish citizens in UK law](#)

jurisdictions, and thereby reside and work in either jurisdiction, without the need for special permission”.²⁰

Impact of Brexit

The UK and Irish Governments confirmed their intention that the CTA would continue to operate without changes post-Brexit in a May 2019 Memorandum of Understanding.²¹ The commitment to continue to operate the CTA post-Brexit was also enshrined in the Northern Ireland Protocol (part of the EU-UK Withdrawal Agreement).²²

Unlike other EU citizens, Irish nationals were advised by the Home Office that they did not need to apply for settled or pre-settled status to secure their post-Brexit residence rights. Irish citizens do not need permission to enter or remain in the UK.²³ However, non-Irish and non-British family members of Irish citizens residing in the UK under EU free movement law did need to apply to the EU Settlement Scheme.

There were 17,600 EU Settlement Scheme applications by Irish nationals between August 2018 and the end of December 2023.²⁴ The statistics do not distinguish between individuals, so people are counted more than once if they make more than one application, including to upgrade from pre-settled to settled status.

1.3

Irish people in the UK labour market

The 2021 census of England and Wales collected labour market data for people who say their national identity was Irish, alone or in combination with a UK national identity. [Census 2021 data was collected during a coronavirus lockdown](#), which has affected some of the results. This means the figures below should be treated with caution.²⁵

²⁰ Government of Ireland, [Common Travel Area: Information Note from Ireland to the Article 50 Working Group \(PDF\)](#), 15 March 2017, para 3.1

²¹ [Memorandum of Understanding between the Government of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland and the Government of Ireland concerning the Common Travel Area and associated reciprocal rights and privileges](#), 8 May 2019

²² Agreement on the withdrawal of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland from the European Union and the European Atomic Energy Community, [Protocol on Ireland/Northern Ireland](#), art 3

²³ [Immigration Act 1971, s37A](#)

²⁴ Home Office, [EU Settlement Scheme quarterly statistics tables, December 2023](#), table EUSS_01

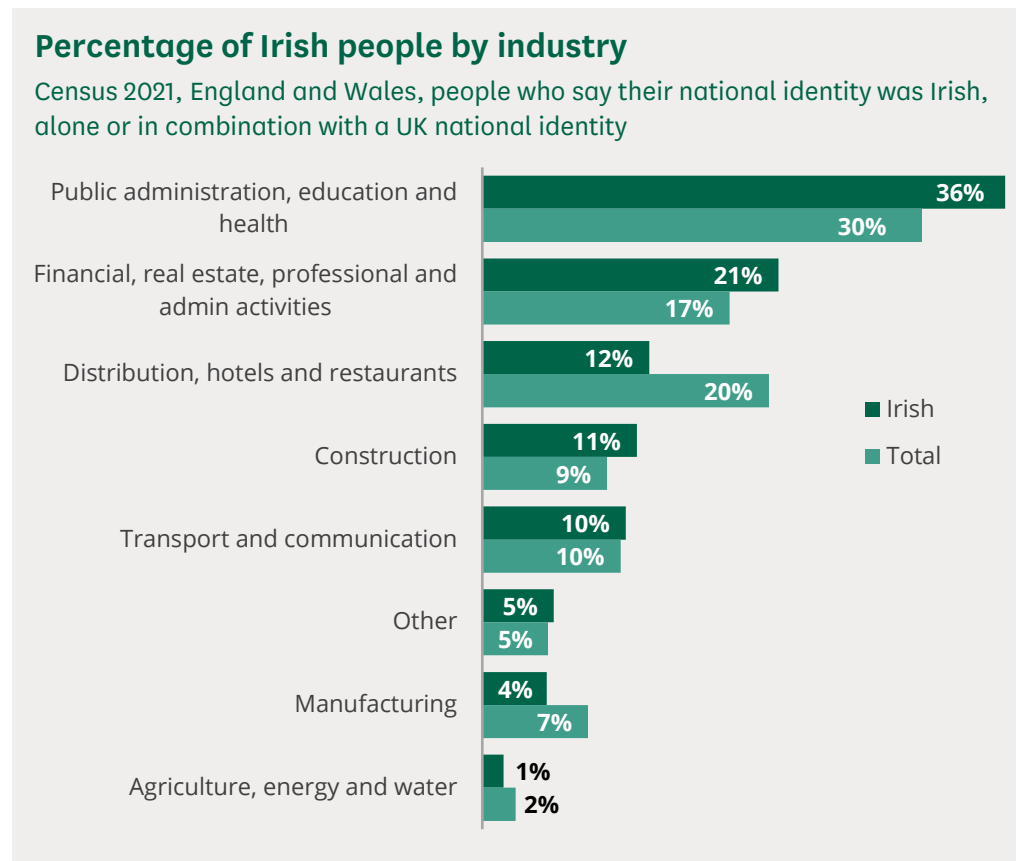
²⁵ Office for National Statistics, [Labour market quality information for Census 2021](#), 27 July 2023

In 2021, there were 185,200 Irish people aged 16+ in employment in England and Wales, with an employment rate for 16-64 year olds of 75.4%, compared to a rate of 70.9% of all people aged 16-64 in England and Wales.²⁶

The unemployment rate and economic inactivity rate (people who are not in work and not looking for work) among Irish people were both lower than average: the unemployment rate for Irish people was 4.7% compared to 5.7% for all people, and the inactivity rate for 16-64 year olds was 20.8% compared to 24.7% for all people.

Industry

Irish people were most likely to work in public administration, education and health, with 36% of those in work who identified their national identity as Irish only or Irish and a UK national identity working in this industry. Irish people were also more likely than average to work in the financial, real estate, professional and administrative activities industry.



Source: Office for National Statistics, Census 2021, [Create a custom dataset](#)

²⁶ Office for National Statistics, Census 2021, [Create a custom dataset](#) (accessed 8 March 2024)

Occupation

Irish people were most likely to work in professional occupations and were also more likely than average to be managers, directors and senior officials and to work in associate professional and technical occupations.



Source: Office for National Statistics, Census 2021, [Create a custom dataset](#)

2

Parliamentary material

2.1

Parliamentary questions

Cultural Heritage: Northern Ireland and Republic of Ireland

22 Nov 2023 | 1839

Asked by: Andrew Rosindell

To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport, what steps she has taken to promote the cultural heritage of the Irish diaspora in England in (a) general and (b) Romford constituency.

Answering member: Sir John Whittingdale | Department for Culture, Media and Sport

Theatre is the artform that receives the most public funding via Arts Council England, and there are now more theatre organisations in its National Portfolio than ever before. In 2023–24, Arts Council England is investing over £140 million in 194 theatre organisations, including 47 new theatre organisations joining the portfolio this year. The Arts Council will be investing £31,000 in theatre organisations in Romford in 2023–24.

In addition, theatres and orchestras will continue to benefit from the extension by His Majesty's Government of the higher rates of tax relief for a further two years, as announced at Spring Budget 2023.

New Palace Yard: Flags

16 Mar 2023 | 163728

Asked by: Mr Gregory Campbell

To ask the hon. Member for Broxbourne, representing the House of Commons Commission, whether the Commission has had discussions on the flying of the St Patrick's Cross on 17 March in New Palace Yard.

Answering member: Sir Charles Walker | House of Commons Commission

The Commission has not had discussions on the flying of the St Patrick's Cross on 17 March in New Palace Yard.

New Palace Yard: Flags

03 Dec 2021 | 84316

Asked by: Mr Gregory Campbell

To ask the hon. Member for Broxbourne, representing the House of Commons Commission, if the Commission will ensure that the St Patrick's Cross flag will

be flown in New Palace Yard on 17 March 2022 on the same terms as the flag of Scotland was flown on St Andrew's Day on 30 November 2021.

Answering member: Sir Charles Walker | House of Commons Commission

The New Palace Yard flags are an initiative by the Speaker and decisions about which flags are flown there are not decided by the Commission. Members can make representation to the Speaker about flags they wish to be flown.

2.2

Debates

[Irish Diaspora in Britain](#)

17 Mar 2022 | House of Commons | 710 cc1093-1126

Question put and agreed to, That this House has considered the Irish diaspora in Britain.

[St Patrick's Day](#)

17 Mar 2020 | House of Commons | 673 cc971-982

House adjourned without Question put.

[Irish Communities in Britain](#)

27 Apr 2011 | House of Commons | 527 cc95WH-103WH

2.3

Early Day Motions

[St Patrick's message of God's love and redemptive plan](#)

EDM: 1069 (session 2021-22)

Jim Shannon

14 March 2022

That this House highlights that St Patrick's message of God's love and redemptive plan and purpose is as relevant today as it was when he left his home in mainland Britain to spread the gospel in Ireland during the 400 ADs; further reminds all those who celebrate St Patrick's Day that the three leaf clover representing Father, Son and Holy Spirit was used as a tool to spread the gospel message of hope and that St Patrick's selfless devotion to God and to others can be replicated daily in our communities; and reaffirms that prayer of St Patrick asking may Christ be with us, before us, in us and Christ be over all.

[Celebration of St Patrick's Day](#)

EDM: 1645 (session 2019-21)

Jim Shannon
15 March 2021

That this House notes the celebration of St Patrick's Day; highlights that the gospel message St Patrick left his home to spread to those in Ireland remains true for each of us throughout the world today; and urges people to emulate Patrick's love for God and for each other as we remember St Patrick's Day in a socially distanced and safe way this year.

St Patrick's Day Celebrations

EDM: 2196 (session 2017-19)

Jim Shannon
19 March 2019

That this House notes the wonderful legacy of St Patrick and his theology which provided us with a tremendous example of our three in one God as shown in the three leaf clover; further notes the rich history that Ulster enjoys due to St Patrick's choice to come back to the land of his captivity to lead the people to Jesus; highlights the fact that whilst it is wonderful to spend time enjoying the celebrations that St Patrick's message was not one of celebration of Ireland but rather was one of the celebration of salvation through faith in Christ alone; reminds those who thought it appropriate to hold banners telling the English to get out of Ireland that St Patrick was British and chose to come to Ireland to love and lead people to God; and further highlights the irony of that sign England get out of Ireland held by Sinn Fein on a day celebrating the work of a British Missionary in Ireland.

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Press and media articles

The following is a selection of press and media articles relevant to this debate.

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[British-Irish relationship is 'important and consequential' says Ireland's finance minister on trip to London](#)

The Irish Post
Fiona Audley
7 March 2024

[From Cork to Westminster: meet the latest ROI-born person elected to the House of Commons](#)

The Irish Times
Mark Paul
1 March 2024

[St Patrick's Day 2024: Parade and festival return to London](#)

BBC News (London)
23 February 2024

[Exhibition tells stories of Irish immigration to Great Britain since 1970s](#)

The Guardian
Esther Addley
31 October 2023

[Corkman is key operator in backroom team for the British Labour Party](#)

The Echo
Concubhar Ó Liatháin
23 October 2023

[Celebratory dinner marks 50 years of Irish in Britain and launches anniversary exhibition](#)

The Irish Post
Fiona Audley
20 October 2023

[The Irish Diaspora Is Leading the Trade Union Revival in Britain](#)

Jacobin
Conor Patrick Faulkner
15 August 2023

[CULTURE & CRAIC: How the Irish in Britain celebrate St Patrick's Day](#)

The Irish Post
Fiona Audley
17 March 2023

[Tricolours fly high at London's St Patrick's parade](#)

The Irish Times
Mark Paul
12 March 2023

[No Blacks, No Dogs, No Irish: a short history of discrimination against Irish migrants](#)

Rebel News
Alexandra Day
18 January 2023

['There's not many left now': census shines spotlight on Britain's dwindling Irish community](#)

The Guardian
Rory Carroll, James Tapper and Pamela Duncan
5 November 2022

[When British schools ignore Irish history, is it any wonder Brexit is such a mess?](#)

The Guardian
Jennifer Horgan
3 October 2022

[Queen's funeral: Irish in Britain reflect on changing relations](#)

BBC News
Ciaran McCauley
18 September 2022

4

Press releases

[Capital gears up for Mayor of London's spectacular St Patrick's Day celebrations](#)

Mayor of London/London Assembly

22 February 2024

Central London will be awash with green next month as the Mayor of London's annual St Patrick's Day parade and festivities return to the heart of the capital on Sunday 17 March.

[St Patrick's Day 2024](#)

Mayor of London/London Assembly

Come and celebrate London's St Patrick's Day Festival on Sunday 17 March in Trafalgar Square. There'll be the best of Irish arts, culture, food, music to enjoy, and more, including the spectacular annual parade.

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