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15 September 2026

Dear Dame Karen and Tonia

Home Affairs Committee and Northern Ireland Affairs Committee: Oral evidence session on public disorder and irregular migration in Northern Ireland.

Thank you for inviting Alex Norris MP to give evidence to your respective Committees on 7 July 2026, in his previous role as the Home Office Minister for Border Security and Asylum. You will be aware that I have now been appointed to the role and I look forward to working with you.

In July, the Home Office committed to providing Committee Members with written responses to a number of outstanding questions. I have included answers to these questions in my response below, based on the published data available to the Home Office at the time.

Of the 500 individuals the Home Office has returned to Ireland, how many have used the Common Travel Area (CTA) to come back to the UK?

The Home Office has conducted a comprehensive review of the c.500 individuals returned from Northern Ireland to Ireland by Immigration Enforcement (IE) between 1 July 2024 and 31 May 2026, as referenced in our [published note](#) on enforcement activity in Northern Ireland, and based on data extracted on 10 June 2026.

Based on the evidence available, our assessment is that ten of these individuals have subsequently returned to the UK. We cannot say with certainty that all ten used the Common Travel Area (CTA) to re-enter the UK, but we judge it to be highly likely. Of these ten individuals, six have already been removed again from the UK. Four remain in the UK, with their cases being actively managed by IE as we seek to progress their removal.

The Department works closely with the Irish Government to prevent illegal migrants and foreign national offenders exploiting the CTA. This is delivered through intelligence-led operations and co-ordinated enforcement activity to prevent abuse and preserve free movement for British and Irish citizens.

There has been a significant increase in enforcement activity in Northern Ireland since the last general election. To expand upon what Eddy Montgomery, the Home Office Director for Enforcement, Compliance and Crime, referenced in the session, between 1 July 2024 and 31 May 2026 IE conducted 2,913 enforcement visits in Northern Ireland, resulting in 2,425 arrests and nearly 1,000 returns (as stated, almost 500 of these were to Ireland).

**What is the basis on which returns between the UK and Ireland are conducted?
What are the criteria for agreeing returns of third country nationals?**

Returns from the UK to Ireland are undertaken on the basis of section 10 of the Immigration and Asylum Act 1999 and paragraphs 8 to 10 of Schedule 2 to the Immigration Act 1971. This allows for a person to be removed to:

- (i) a country of which he is a national or citizen; or
- (ii) a country or territory in which he has obtained a passport or other document of identity; or
- (iii) a country or territory in which he embarked for the United Kingdom; or
- (iv) a country or territory to which there is reason to believe that he will be admitted.

The UK and Ireland continue to work closely to protect the integrity of the CTA and to address abuse of the asylum and immigration systems, including through enhanced co-operation and data-sharing arrangements.

Broken down by year and by whether those returned were asylum seekers, how many people have the UK returned to Ireland, and how many people have the UK accepted from Ireland?

Based on the [immigration system statistics publication](#) which covers the year ending 31 March 2026, the below table shows enforced and voluntary returns from the entire UK to Ireland, and how many of these were an asylum-related return - which has not been published is a subset of the published statistics.

Returns from UK to Ireland	2023	2024	2025	2026 (January to March)	Totals
Enforced returns	6	8	3	1	18
Voluntary returns	370	506	504	132	1,512
Total returns	376	514	507	133	1,530
Of which were asylum-related	28	48	95	16	187

The number of returns from the UK to Ireland (enforced and voluntary returns) has increased since 2023.

The number of asylum-related returns from the UK to Ireland has also increased year on year, as has the proportion of returns that are asylum-related, which has increased from 7% to 19%. Asylum-related returns relate to cases where there has been an asylum claim or further submission at some stage prior to the return. This will include individuals whose asylum claims have been withdrawn or refused and who have exhausted any rights of

appeal, those returned under third-country provisions, as well as those granted asylum/protection but returned for other reasons (such as criminality).

In respect of the return of asylum seekers from Ireland to the UK, we have not accepted any individuals from Ireland. However, the UK and Ireland work closely to prevent abuse of our asylum systems from secondary movements between us. We continue to engage with Ireland on how we can strengthen our capabilities to protect the security and integrity of the CTA, and we keep our approach under review.

Broken down by year, how many people returned to Ireland have subsequently returned to the UK?

Of the 1530 returns from the UK to Ireland between 1 January 2023 and 31 March 2026, 90 individuals returned to the UK (20 in 2023, 23 in 2024, 40 in 2025, and 7 between 1 January and 31 March 2026). 40 of these individuals were subsequently returned to Ireland again, with the remaining 50 individuals' immigration cases being actively managed by IE as we seek to progress their return.

Can you provide details of the powers available to Immigration Enforcement officers, including those to stop people and vehicles at the Ireland and Northern Ireland border?

IE officers in the UK have a range of powers under the Immigration Acts to enable them to identify, process and remove, where applicable, a person who does not have leave to be in the UK. These powers therefore apply to officers operating in Northern Ireland. They have the power to:

- enter premises with a warrant to arrest
- enter business premises without a warrant to arrest
- examine a person to establish their immigration status
- arrest a person liable to detention under the Immigration Act
- detain a person liable to be removed from the UK
- search an arrested or detained person
- search premises following arrest for relevant documents to facilitate removal
- use reasonable force in execution of these powers.

The exercise of these powers in Northern Ireland takes place within the context of the CTA and the Belfast (Good Friday) Agreement. The UK does not operate routine immigration controls, fixed checkpoints or permanent stop-and-check arrangements on the Northern Ireland-Ireland land border.

IE instead undertakes intelligence-led and risk-based operational activity to identify and disrupt abuse of the immigration system and the Common Travel Area. Activity is focused on CTA routes, including air and seaports and transport networks where immigration risk has been identified. Operations such as Operation Gull are designed to identify and detain individuals seeking to abuse CTA routes and circumvent UK immigration controls.

Where IE officers encounter individuals suspected of immigration offending during lawful enforcement activity, they may use the powers available to them under the Immigration Acts and, where applicable, criminal investigation legislation. However, there is no dedicated power used to conduct routine immigration stops of people or vehicles crossing the Northern Ireland-Ireland land border, and the Government does not operate immigration controls on that border.

Can you provide an overview of how Immigration Enforcement uses its enforcement powers in Northern Ireland, including whether these powers are being used to their fullest extent?

IE operates in Northern Ireland within the unique context of the CTA and the Belfast (Good Friday) Agreement. Despite there being no routine immigration controls or fixed checks on the Northern Ireland–Ireland land border, enforcement activity can and does occur. Activity is targeted, risk-based and intelligence-led, with operational deployments taking place away from the land border across CTA routes, including air and seaports and routes between Northern Ireland and Great Britain, where immigration risk is identified.

The main operational activity is Operation Gull, an intelligence-led operation targeting abuse of CTA routes through Northern Ireland's air and seaports. This is supported by wider enforcement activity and multi-agency co-ordination, bringing together IE, Border Force, policing partners, the National Crime Agency, His Majesty's Revenue and Customs and Irish counterparts to assess threats, share intelligence and coordinate responses to organised immigration crime and other CTA-related risks. IE activity on CTA routes and transport hubs relies heavily on partnership working with law enforcement agencies. Public operations, including street operations and crime reduction operations, may be undertaken where an immigration risk has been identified, but delivery depends on support and attendance from the Police Service of Northern Ireland (PSNI). Any deployment must therefore be considered alongside PSNI's wider operational priorities and available resources. IE is also working with PSNI to increase real-time referrals to IE's National Command and Control Unit for immigration status enquiries when officers interact with foreign nationals suspected of criminality.

The powers available to IE are applied robustly within the legal, political and operational framework in Northern Ireland. IE uses its powers to identify, detain, arrest and remove those who do not meet UK immigration requirements or who seek to abuse CTA arrangements. As noted above, between 1 July 2024 and 31 May 2026 IE conducted 2,913 enforcement visits in Northern Ireland, resulting in 2,425 arrests and nearly 1,000 returns. In 2025/26, Operation Gull detected more than 900 immigration offenders abusing or circumventing CTA routes. There is further planned investment in IE over the next three years, including a 20% increase in officers in Northern Ireland compared with 2023/24 that will strengthen intelligence-led activity across CTA routes.

I have written to you both separately on outstanding questions relating to asylum accommodation.

Thank you once again for facilitating this important discussion.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to be 'A. Turley', with a long horizontal stroke extending to the right.

Rt Hon Anna Turley MP
Minister for Border Security and Asylum