



# United Kingdom

FREE

**94**  
/100

<u>Political Rights</u>	<b>39</b> /40
<u>Civil Liberties</u>	<b>55</b> /60

LAST YEAR'S SCORE & STATUS  
93 /100    Free

Global freedom statuses are calculated on a weighted scale. [See the methodology.](#)



## Overview

The United Kingdom (UK)—which includes England, Scotland, Northern Ireland, and Wales as constituent countries—is a stable democracy that regularly holds free elections and is home to a vibrant media sector. While the government enforces robust protections for political rights and civil liberties, recent years have seen concerns about increased government surveillance of residents, as well as rising Islamophobia and anti-immigrant sentiment. In a 2016 referendum, UK voters narrowly voted to leave the European Union (EU), through a process known colloquially as “Brexit,” which will have political and economic reverberations both domestically and across Europe in the coming years.

## Key Developments in 2019

- In December’s general election, Prime Minister Boris Johnson’s Conservative Party won a large governing majority, after nearly a decade of coalition governments, slim majorities, or minority support for the center-right. Labour, the largest opposition party, saw its fortunes in long-held seats in northern England reversed as it ceded ground to the Conservatives.
- The UK and EU reached a transitional withdrawal agreement on their separation in October, allowing both sides to begin negotiations on a final settlement due for completion in 2020. Parliament approved the separation agreement between the UK and the EU in December, after Prime Minister Johnson secured his new majority.
- Abortion and same-sex marriage were made legal in Northern Ireland by the national government, in lieu of a suspended power-sharing agreement between the region’s republicans and unionists.

## Political Rights

### A. Electoral Process

**A1** 0-4 pts

**Was the current head of government or other chief national authority elected through free and fair elections?**

**4 / 4**

Executive power rests with the prime minister and cabinet, which must have the support of the House of Commons. The leader of the majority party or coalition usually becomes prime minister, and appoints the cabinet. Boris Johnson, who had previously served as foreign secretary, succeeded Theresa May as prime minister after she resigned as the leader of the Conservative Party. Johnson won the internal contest to succeed her in late July 2019. A snap general election was held in December, where a majority Conservative government, led by Prime Minister Johnson, was elected.

**A2** 0-4 pts

**Were the current national legislative representatives elected through free and fair elections?**

**4 / 4**

The UK has a bicameral Parliament. The more powerful lower chamber, the House of Commons, has 650 members directly elected to serve five-year terms. Members of the upper chamber, the House of Lords, are appointed by the monarch, and the number of members, who do not have to stand for election, varies with time. As of 2019, there were 780 eligible lords. The body largely plays an oversight role in reviewing legislation passed by the House of Commons.

A general election was not due until 2022, but Prime Minister Johnson, who originally led a minority government after winning the premiership in July 2019, secured a new election from Parliament. The Conservatives, who focused their campaign on their intention to stop further delays to the Brexit process, won 365 seats in the December election, up from 318 in the last Parliament and earned an overall majority of 80 seats. The opposition Labour Party won 203 seats, down from 262 in the last Parliament.

The Scottish National Party (SNP), which campaigned to remain in the EU and advocates for Scottish independence from the UK, remained the third-largest party in the House of Commons, gaining 13 seats over its 2017 result and winning 48 of the 59 seats available in Scotland. The Liberal Democrats, the fourth-largest party in the House of Commons, won 11 nationwide.

### A3 0-4 pts

**Are the electoral laws and framework fair, and are they implemented impartially by the relevant election management bodies?**

**4 / 4**

The UK's electoral framework is robust and well implemented, though a limited Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) mission that observed the 2017 election urged lawmakers to boost transparency surrounding campaign financing, and institute an annual cap on how much a single individual could donate to a party or candidate. No such limit was put in place by the end of 2019, however.

Conservative governments have moved towards requiring voters to produce identification in order to vote, implementing pilot schemes during local elections in England in 2018 and May 2019. Britain's electoral regulatory body, the Electoral Commission, reported that the vast majority of voters were able to provide identification. However, the pilot scheme was also criticized for resulting in a number of voters being turned away from the polls, including more than 700 voters during the 2019 local elections. Some voters also reported confusion over which forms of identification was acceptable in polling stations. Voter identification requirements already exist for elections that take place in Northern Ireland.

The UK's electoral regulators and judiciary have also had to address the ongoing consequences of the Brexit campaign in 2019. In 2018, the Electoral Commission originally reported that Brexit campaign group Vote Leave violated electoral law by coordinating a large donation with another pro-Brexit group, BeLeave, with the ultimate intention of spending beyond its legal limit. In November 2019, the Court of Appeal ruled that the Electoral Commission

was allowed to publish its report related to overspending by Vote Leave during the 2016 referendum, rejecting Vote Leave's appeal.

The Brexit Party, led by former financier and longtime Brexit campaigner Nigel Farage, was ordered by the Electoral Commission to overhaul its fundraising methods after it accepted multiple anonymous donations during the 2019 European Parliament (EP) campaign.

The UK's electoral infrastructure has had to contend with Russian interference dating back to the 2016 referendum on EU membership. In November, the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) reported that Prime Minister Johnson's office was delaying the publication of a parliamentary report detailing allegations of Russian espionage, subversion, and interference. The prime minister cleared the report after the December election, but its publication relies on the formation of the intelligence and security committee; by year's end, its members had not been selected.

## B. Political Pluralism and Participation

**B1** 0-4 pts

**Do the people have the right to organize in different political parties or other competitive political groupings of their choice, and is the system free of undue obstacles to the rise and fall of these competing parties or groupings?**

**4** / 4

Parties do not face undue restrictions on registration or operation. The Conservative Party and the Labour Party have dominated British politics for decades, though other parties regularly win seats in Parliament and have participated in governing coalitions with either the Conservatives or Labour.

**B2** 0-4 pts

**Is there a realistic opportunity for the opposition to increase its support or gain power through elections?**

**4 / 4**

Opposition parties operate freely, and have a realistic opportunity to increase their support and gain power through elections.

**B3** 0-4 pts

**Are the people's political choices free from domination by forces that are external to the political sphere, or by political forces that employ extrapolitical means?**

**4 / 4**

People's political choices are generally free from domination by powerful groups that are not democratically accountable, including the military, foreign powers, religious hierarchies, and economic oligarchies.

**B4** 0-4 pts

**Do various segments of the population (including ethnic, religious, gender, LGBT, and other relevant groups) have full political rights and electoral opportunities?**

**4 / 4**

Under Britain's system of "devolution," the UK Parliament has granted different degrees of legislative power to the Northern Ireland Assembly, the Welsh Assembly, and the Scottish Parliament, augmenting the political representation of regional populations.

Women, LGBT+ people, and members of racial and ethnic minority groups have been able to gain a political voice through their participation in mainstream political parties. After the December 2019 general election, a record 220 members of Parliament (MPs), or 34 percent, are female; women now represent a majority of legislators for Labour and the Liberal Democrats for the first time in either party's history. LGBT+ representation has also improved, with a then-record of 45 LGBT+ MPs winning seats in 2017; that



increased to 46 in 2019. The 2019 election also saw a record 62 Black, Asian, and Minority Ethnic (BAME) MPs elected, compared to 4 in 1987.

Despite this progress, a report published in July 2019 revealed the depth of sexual harassment and bullying in British politics, prompting a broadening of the complaints system to investigate historical harassment allegations.

## C. Functioning of Government

**C1** 0-4 pts

**Do the freely elected head of government and national legislative representatives determine the policies of the government?**

**3 / 4**

Britain's freely elected officials can generally make and implement national policy without significant influence from actors who are not democratically accountable.

However, this was tested with Prime Minister Johnson controversially attempted to “prorogue,” or suspend, Parliament in September 2019, to lessen the possibility of opposition MPs interfering with his Brexit policy ahead of negotiations with the EU that October. Prorogation, which ends discussion on pending legislation at the end of the parliamentary session, cannot be voted on by MPs. In late September, the Supreme Court found unanimously that “the decision...to prorogue Parliament was unlawful because it had the effect of frustrating or preventing the ability of Parliament to carry out its constitutional functions without reasonable justification.”

Elections to the Northern Ireland Assembly took place in March 2017, but legislators had failed to form a functioning government by the end of 2019. The initial source of the impasse involved corruption allegations over a renewable energy incentive program, but longstanding disagreements on a number of issues between the two largest parties, the unionist Sinn Féin and

the nationalist Democratic Unionist Party (DUP), stymied negotiations to break the deadlock.

As a result, the national government has gradually involved itself in some provincial matters, including the budget, in 2017. In November 2019, the prime minister's office also warned that direct rule was possible in order to prepare for an abrupt exit from the EU, if the Assembly did not reconvene. The Assembly had not been reestablished by year's end, though participating parties were attempting to resolve the impasse.

## **C2** 0-4 pts

**Are safeguards against official corruption strong and effective?**

**4 / 4**

Large-scale corruption is not pervasive in domestic political and governance structures, and anticorruption bodies are generally effective. However, the UK is increasingly coming under scrutiny for the ways in which its banking and financial sectors, property market, and offshore services in overseas territories enable money laundering and facilitate corruption globally.

## **C3** 0-4 pts

**Does the government operate with openness and transparency?**

**4 / 4**

MPs are required to disclose assets and sources of income, and this information is made available to the public. The country's freedom of information law is reasonably well implemented, and journalists have been able to access information under its provisions about topics of interest to the public. However, there are growing calls to extend the law's reach to private companies contracted by government departments and agencies.

# Civil Liberties



# D. Freedom of Expression and Belief

**D1** 0-4 pts

<b>Are there free and independent media?</b>	<b>4 / 4</b>
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Press freedom is legally protected. The media are lively and competitive, and espouse viewpoints spanning the political spectrum. The BBC, which is publicly owned and relies on a dedicated television license fee for the majority of its funding, is editorially independent and competitive with its counterparts in the commercial market. However, Prime Minister Johnson has considered decriminalizing nonpayment of the license fee, and ordered a government review on the matter after his government's reelection in December.

In March 2018, the culture secretary announced that the controversial Section 40 of the Crime and Courts Act would not be implemented, and ultimately would be repealed. Section 40 stipulates that, in media-related court cases, publishers who are not members of a recognized self-regulator can be ordered to pay their opponents' legal costs, even if they win. At the end of 2019, the section had not yet been repealed.

**D2** 0-4 pts

<b>Are individuals free to practice and express their religious faith or nonbelief in public and private?</b>	<b>4 / 4</b>
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Freedom of religion is protected in law and practice. A 2006 law bans incitement to religious hatred, with a maximum penalty of seven years in prison. Nevertheless, minority groups, particularly Muslims, continue to report discrimination, harassment, and occasional assaults. In October 2019,

the Home Office released statistics that showed a 10 percent increase in the number of religious hate crimes in England and Wales during its 2018–19 reporting period. The Home Office partly attributed the rise to improved reporting mechanisms, but spikes in hate crimes were also recorded after the EU referendum in 2016 and terrorist attacks in London and Manchester in 2017.

Muslims have also been reluctant to discuss religious subjects or their identity in some settings, especially in the classroom, due to Prevent, a strategy originally designed to divert individuals vulnerable to terrorist or extremist recruitment. Educators and human rights groups have criticized the policy for forcing Muslims to self-censor, for fear of being referred to the program. In January 2019, the government agreed to launch an independent review into Prevent.

### **D3** 0-4 pts

**Is there academic freedom, and is the educational system free from extensive political indoctrination?**

**3** / 4

Academic freedom is generally respected. However, the Counter-Terrorism and Security Act of 2015 requires schools and universities to help divert students from recruitment into terrorist groups, as part of the government's long-standing Prevent strategy to combat terrorist and extremist recruitment efforts. Educators are increasingly expected to report students suspected of terrorist or extremist sympathies to a local government body, and vet the remarks of visiting speakers, among other obligations.

British human rights organization Liberty criticized the strategy in 2019, saying it stifled open debate and academic inquiry. In March, the Court of Appeal ruled that the government's guidance to universities violated freedom of speech rights, and ordered the government to rewrite its material.

### **D4** 0-4 pts

**Are individuals free to express their personal views on political or other sensitive topics without fear of surveillance or retribution?****3 / 4**

Concerns about the effects of mass surveillance on free and open private discussion persisted in 2019. The Investigatory Powers Act of 2016 requires communications companies to store metadata on customers' activity for 12 months and, in some cases, allows this information to be accessed by police and other security officials without a warrant. The law has been subject to consistent opposition since it was promulgated, with the High Court ruling that law as incompatible with EU jurisprudence in April 2018. In response, the government published new regulations, allowing authorities to access metadata only when investigating serious crimes and with the approval of an independent commission. Liberty brought another case in front of the High Court, alleging it violated human rights law; the High Court rejected that claim in July 2019.

The British government has also been advocating for the use of automated facial recognition (AFR), a system that records faces at large public gatherings, builds a "faceprint" model based on those recordings, and compares them to watch lists of suspected criminals. Liberty called for its ban, warning that the system was a form of mass surveillance. It also supported a Welsh plaintiff's lawsuit over the use of AFR in public places in the city of Cardiff in May 2019. AFR's propensity for false positives was disclosed during the case; 2,470 potential matches were made since its initial deployment in Wales, but 92 percent of them were inaccurate. The High Court ruled that AFR did not violate the plaintiff's human rights in September, but the Court of Appeal granted him leave to continue his case in late November.

Weekly newspaper the *Observer* reported in August 2019 that the West Midlands Police, England's second-largest police force, resisted the Home Office's efforts to trial the system in its territory. London's Metropolitan Police ended its trial use of the system in July 2019, leaving Wales as the only area where AFR was in use by year's end. The UK's privacy watchdog, the

Information Commissioner's Office (ICO), also opened an investigation into the use of a facial recognition system in the 67-acre King's Cross area of central London in August.

## E. Associational and Organizational Rights

**E1** 0-4 pts

**Is there freedom of assembly?**

**4 / 4**

Freedom of assembly is generally respected, though peaceful protesters have found themselves under police surveillance for attending public events in recent years. In January 2019, the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR) ruled that British police had no justification to maintain a dossier on the activities of John Catt, a peaceful participant in public rallies between 2005 and 2009. The ECHR ruled that while the police were justified in surveilling the group that organized the rallies for its previously violent tendencies, the police were not justified in recording Catt's political opinions, which amounted to state surveillance.

**E2** 0-4 pts

**Is there freedom for nongovernmental organizations, particularly those that are engaged in human rights– and governance-related work?**

**4 / 4**

Civic and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) generally operate freely. However, groups identified as terrorist organizations can be banned, and there are concerns that the relevant legal provisions are broad enough that they could allow the ban or prohibition of legitimate associations and activism.

In recent years, disclosures of surveillance of NGOs and political have drawn criticism. In July 2019, a government inquiry on the matter disclosed that the parents of Stephen Lawrence, a black teenager murdered by a white gang in 1993, were spied on by an undercover police officer when they engaged in political campaigning to solve his murder. In August, police opened an investigation into former undercover officer Mark Kennedy, who allegedly deceived protesters and activists into forming intimate relationships with him during assignments lasting from 2003 through 2011.

A lobbying law adopted in 2014 concerning third-party campaigning was heavily criticized by NGOs for limiting the amount of money they can spend during election years. New guidance was published in September 2019 which keeps limits in place, but makes a clearer distinction between “regulated” and “nonregulated” activity.

**E3** 0-4 pts

**Is there freedom for trade unions and similar professional or labor organizations?**

**4** / 4

Unions in the UK represent 26 percent of British workers, the majority of which are in the public sector. Britain has one overarching confederation, the Trades Union Congress (TUC), which represents the majority of unions and counts at least 5.5 million individual members. The rights to bargain collectively and strike are generally respected.

Unions have maintained an especially close relationship to the Labour Party, with the TUC playing a particularly active role in its founding in 1900; 12 trade unions are currently affiliated to Labour, including the three largest unions in the country.

## F. Rule of Law

**F1** 0-4 pts

Is there an independent judiciary?	4 / 4
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The judiciary is generally independent, and governmental authorities comply with judicial decisions. A new Supreme Court began functioning in 2009, improving the separation of powers by moving the highest court out of the House of Lords.

**F2** 0-4 pts

Does due process prevail in civil and criminal matters?	4 / 4
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While due process generally prevails in civil and criminal matters, rights groups and some figures within the judiciary have criticized severe cuts in legal aid under reforms that took effect in 2013, which left many vulnerable people without access to formal legal counsel. The cuts notably affected those with immigration-related cases, and parties to cases heard in family courts.

The 2015 Counter-Terrorism and Security Act has been criticized for giving excessive powers to police, including the authority to seize travel documents of individuals attempting to leave the country if they are suspected of planning to engage in terrorist-related activities abroad, and to forcibly relocate terrorism suspects within the country up to 200 miles away from their homes. In April 2019, the Counter-Terrorism and Border Security Act came into force, which makes viewing terrorist content online punishable by up to 15 years in prison, and allows law enforcement agencies to keep fingerprints and DNA of terrorism suspects for up to five years, even if no charges are ultimately filed.

Police were given enhanced “stop-and-search” powers in August 2019 when the Home Office rolled back restrictions on the tactic’s use, in response to a marked rise in knife crime in British cities including London. The power to stop and search, which was introduced in 1994, has been disproportionately



used against minorities, and specifically against black men, according to a Home Office report in October 2019. The same report warned that more minorities would be impacted by stop-and-search powers, despite committing no offenses, should the historical disparity in the tactic's use remain. According to Home Office internal data, this tactic is 40 times more likely to be directed at black people in the UK.

The government was also accused of denying due process to Shamima Begum, who left her London home in 2015 at the age of 15 to join the Islamic State and was located in a Syrian refugee camp after its collapse in 2019. Begum was stripped of her citizenship by former home secretary Sajid Javid on national security grounds in February, with the government claiming she was eligible for Bangladeshi citizenship and was therefore not stateless. Begum's lawyers appealed the move, noting that she did not hold a Bangladeshi passport. Begum's appeal of the government's decision was still pending at the end of the year.

### F3 0-4 pts

**Is there protection from the illegitimate use of physical force and freedom from war and insurgencies?**

**3 / 4**

Individuals living in the UK are largely free from the illegitimate use of physical force and insurgent campaigns, but acts of terrorism did occur in 2019. In November, two people were killed in a terrorist incident taking place near London Bridge.

Northern Ireland has seen continued paramilitary activity, with three killed and 81 injured as a result of paramilitary violence between July 2018 and June 2019. Journalist Lyra McKee was among those killed, after she was shot by a member of the New IRA, a republican dissident group, in April 2019. Authorities had previously blamed the same group for a bomb attack in front of a Northern Irish courthouse earlier in 2019.

While prisons generally adhere to international guidelines, problems of overcrowding, violence, self-harm, and drugs in prisons have worsened in the 2010s, and were noted by the chief inspector of prisons for England and Wales in his 2018–19 annual report. Conditions in some British prisons have earned recent scrutiny in Parliament. Prison chiefs were questioned over the living conditions in Her Majesty's Prison (HMP) Liverpool after a 2018 surprise inspection recorded squalid living conditions. The state of HMP Liverpool influenced a Dutch court's decision to deny a British extradition request in May 2019, with the court voicing concerns that those conditions violated a European Convention on Human Rights prohibition against inhuman or degrading treatment.

#### **F4** 0-4 pts

**Do laws, policies, and practices guarantee equal treatment of various segments of the population?**

**3 / 4**

Foreign residents in the UK have been subject to increasing scrutiny throughout the 2010s, as a result of the government's ongoing "hostile environment" policy. This policy was created with the stated goal of persuading illegal immigrants to either leave the UK of their own volition or choose not to immigrate, by strengthening immigration checks for individuals seeking public and private services. However, this policy has been used against individuals with a legal right to reside in the UK. A House of Commons report on the policy, issued in 2018, noted that legal immigrants experienced discrimination from banks, landlords, and other individuals as a result of the policy. The committee itself cited reports from two local charities assisting immigrants and asylum seekers; both noted increased resistance from banks in opening accounts for refugees cleared to reside in the UK.

The Windrush scandal of 2018 continued to spur debate about the treatment of immigrants and minorities. Thousands of people arrived from Caribbean countries including Jamaica, Trinidad and Tobago, and Barbados, at the British government's invitation between 1948 and 1971, and received

indefinite leave to remain in 1971. However, many Windrush-era immigrants and their children, who often traveled on their parents' passports, were denied health coverage and housing in recent years, and at least 83 may have been wrongfully deported by late 2018. In addition, Britain's Home Office destroyed the landing card slips for Windrush immigrants in 2010, though that was not revealed until 2018.

While the government introduced a scheme to grant citizenship to members of the "Windrush generation" in 2018, deportations controversially resumed in February 2019, and the Home Office was criticized by a report published in September for continuing to exhibit flaws in their processing of cases.

Asylum seekers and migrants can be detained indefinitely, and there have been persistent reports of poor conditions and abuse in immigration detention centers. Asylum seekers also have reported difficulty finding suitable housing from landlords while their applications are processed. The government also vowed to end reunion rights for minor refugees and asylum seekers living outside the UK with family members living in the country in December 2019.

Citizens of EU member states have also encountered difficulties remaining in the UK. While many in this group of 3.4 million people should be eligible to remain after Brexit, securing this status has proven difficult for some applicants. Much of the settlement system relies on a smartphone application which does not provide a physical document proving status to those who complete the process. The system also suffered a backlog as 2019 continued, with over 525,000 applicants still waiting for an answer on their settlement requests by November. Applicants living in more complicated circumstances, including those with non-EU relatives and those with criminal records, encountered difficulty using the application and voiced reluctance in applying for settled status.

The UK has recorded a sustained rise in hate crimes against LGBT+ residents for much of the 2010s. Homophobic hate crimes in England and Wales have increased by 25 percent during the Home Office's 2018–19

reporting period over the year before, while transphobic hate crimes increased by 37 percent. Between the Home Office's 2014–15 and 2018–19 reporting periods, hate crimes based on sexual orientation increased by 160 percent in England and Wales. Greater London's Metropolitan Police also recorded a consistent rise in homophobic hate crimes in the capital; 2,016 were recorded in 2015, while 3,111 were recorded in 2019.

The authorities actively enforce a 2010 law barring discrimination on the basis of factors including sexual orientation and gender reassignment. While women receive equal treatment under the law, in practice gender discrimination persists in the workplace and elsewhere in society.

## G. Personal Autonomy and Individual Rights

**G1** 0-4 pts

**Do individuals enjoy freedom of movement, including the ability to change their place of residence, employment, or education?**

**4** / 4

Citizens generally enjoy freedom of travel and choice of residence, employment, and institution of higher education.

As Brexit negotiations continued in 2019, the possibility that a “hard border” between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland, which is a member of the EU, would again be imposed contributed to concerns that the movement of goods and people across the border would be curtailed, and that the tensions that fueled the decades-long conflict in Northern Ireland could resurface with the establishment of border checkpoints. In October, the withdrawal agreement reached between the UK and EU specified that customs checks would take place in the Irish Sea, and not a land border.

**G2** 0-4 pts

**Are individuals able to exercise the right to own property and establish private businesses without undue interference from state or nonstate actors?**

**4** / 4

Individuals may freely exercise the right to own property and establish private businesses.

**G3** 0-4 pts

**Do individuals enjoy personal social freedoms, including choice of marriage partner and size of family, protection from domestic violence, and control over appearance?**

**4** / 4

The government generally does not place explicit restrictions on personal social freedoms, but these are governed differently in Northern Ireland, which maintains a distinct legal and political environment. Abortion and same-sex marriage, which became legal in the rest of the UK in 1967 and 2014 respectively, were heavily proscribed or prohibited in Northern Ireland until 2019, when Parliament forced their legalization through the Northern Ireland (Executive Formation) Act.

*Score Change: The score improved from 3 to 4 because national legislation that legalized abortion and same-sex marriage took effect in Northern Ireland.*

**G4** 0-4 pts

**Do individuals enjoy equality of opportunity and freedom from economic exploitation?**

**3** / 4

A 2016 report by a government commission expressed concern about the social and economic isolation of many members of ethnic and religious minorities, and of the poor. According to the Office for National Statistics, income inequality remained stable at 32.5 percent, a trend that was partly the result of a cut in government benefits.

The 2015 Modern Slavery Act increased punishments for human traffickers and provides greater protections for victims. However, its implementation has been weak. This became most apparent in late October 2019, when 39 Vietnamese migrants were found dead in a trailer in Essex. In December, authorities charged two defendants with human trafficking offenses over the incident. Children and migrant workers are among those most vulnerable to forced labor and sex trafficking.



### On United Kingdom

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### Country Facts

#### Global Freedom Score

**94 / 100** Free

#### Internet Freedom Score

**77 / 100** Free

### Other Years

2019

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