

ASYLUM SEEKERS AND
REFUGEES' EXPERIENCES

OF LIFE IN
NORTHERN IRELAND

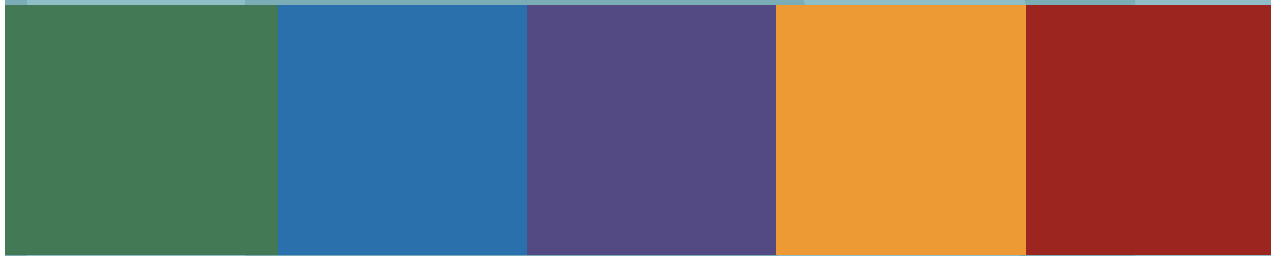
a Policy Brief



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This policy brief examines the challenges of integration processes. The research report offers a more complete picture of the everyday lives of asylum seekers and refugees, but the issue of integration has been identified as fundamental. There are important questions around what integration for asylum seekers and refugees and the broader host community actually involves. The specific challenges of the local context, such as, how integration happens in a divided society and within particular services, such as housing and education- are well addressed in this research.





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What this Policy Brief is About?

This policy brief is based on findings from a research project which investigated the everyday life experiences of asylum seekers and refugees in Northern Ireland. In an effort to gain a true picture of the asylum seeker and refugee experiences in a local context, this research was commissioned by the Racial Equality Unit from The Executive Office. A major objective of the study is to aid the development of a refugee integration strategy for Northern Ireland.

Asylum seekers and refugees are not a homogenous group, and come from diverse backgrounds. In light of recent global conflicts and the movement of refugees into Europe, the question of integration has been the subject of considerable debate locally and internationally. There are also valid questions around whether integration for asylum seekers and refugees is shaped by their membership of particular sub-groups of the population – or, more broadly, by the diverse and individualised life-course events, transitions and pathways that we all experience as citizens.

Integration may carry different meanings at different points in an asylum seekers' or refugees' journey. Or it may represent a broad continuity across their lives, in terms of how they want to interact with localities, cities and wider society. Integration processes should be democratic open to a particular individual choosing to participate or not.

Policy makers, practitioners, service providers, civil sector organisations and researchers face the constant challenge of identifying how best to improve conditions for asylum seekers and refugees. As such, this research examined how asylum seekers and refugees experience local housing, health, employment and education services, which have been identified as key indicators of integration. It also examines their engagement with civil society as well as public and private bodies as they relate with host communities and articulate new senses of belonging.

UK policy-makers have recognised the contribution of migration to the economic and cultural life of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, but has also acknowledged the potential for social exclusion and emergent 'parallel communities'. As such, questions of inclusion, and community cohesion should be key policy concerns in Northern Ireland. Given these challenges, the research for this policy guide concludes the necessity of developing a refugee integration strategy for Northern Ireland.

This policy brief gives an important overview of the commissioned research and in terms of responding to what is one of the major issues of our time. It does so by outlining the significant challenges associated with integration for asylum seekers and refugees here.

Context

Northern Ireland has a relatively recent history of people seeking asylum and refuge. Precise data is difficult to obtain as statistics are aggregated with Scotland by the National Statistics Office (Home Office), estimates, however, claim that

In Northern Ireland, there are three ways to become a refugee:

1. An individual seeks asylum and makes a claim for refugee status,
2. Through family reunion or
3. As a member of the Vulnerable Persons Relocation scheme (in which case they arrive with humanitarian protection).

The United Kingdom has established a resettlement programme for Syrian refugees – the Syrian Vulnerable Persons Relocation (VPR) scheme. From 3 July 2017 anyone arriving under the scheme will be given refugee status. Northern Ireland has been a recipient of both programme refugees (through the VPR scheme) and asylum seekers who arrive independently.

Northern Ireland does not currently have a refugee integration strategy. Immigration issues continue to remain an excepted matter, but integration is devolved. While a range of important support services exist for asylum seekers and refugees, the development and implementation of a refugee integration strategy is seen as key to the integration of asylum seekers and refugees.

We use the term 'integration' to conceptualise the relationship of people with the society in which they live. Integration is a holistic concept, meaningful to each individual



and group, but potentially taking a different form for each individual or group. We use Ager and Strang's (2004) definition of integration as a 'two-way process' which places emphasis on the role that both the host society and the newcomer has to play.

Integration should be seen as a process which begins on the day of arrival, as the asylum process impacts on and shapes a given individual's relationship with the local context. The research report shows that asylum seekers and refugees encounter a challenging asylum process and difficult living conditions. As such, understanding integration as a process which begins at the very start of an individual's engagement with their locality is key to better inclusion and community cohesion.

In summary, conceptualising integration as a multi-dimensional, holistic two way process that begins on the day of arrival is key to ensuring that newcomers to our society are welcomed and accorded equal rights.

The Research: What We Did

The project involved three main phases of work. The first phase focused on the collection of quantitative research data from service providers working with asylum seekers and refugees, as well as local council good relations officers. The second phase of research was qualitative and focused on conducting semi-structured interviews and focus groups with service providers, voluntary sector, community and religious organisations. The third phase, also qualitative, focused on semi-structured interviews and focus groups with asylum seekers and refugees. In total, we interviewed 47 asylum seekers and refugees from ten different countries, and 38 service providers and voluntary sector professionals. This policy brief presents selected findings arising from this research. As the majority of asylum seekers and refugees live in Belfast most of the qualitative research was conducted in the city with two fieldtrips to Derry/Londonderry. A full methodology is provided in the report.



What We Found

Understanding Integration

In this research, we oriented our findings along a number of the key indicators of integration such as the 'Asylum process experience', 'Health', 'Mental Health', 'Language', 'Education', 'Employment', 'Housing', 'Safety and Security' (e.g. racism; homophobia) and the meaning of the 'border and boundaries'.

Discussions with service providers, the voluntary sector, and asylum seekers and refugees revealed the complex nature and variety of meanings attached to integration. Understandings of integration were typically shaped by the particular perspectives and roles of our research participants. Interviews highlighted a number of recurring themes relating to how research participants viewed the process of integration across Northern Ireland society. As well as capturing research participants' shared understandings, it is possible to identify distinctive features of the ways in which the different participant groups referred to integration.

Service providers and voluntary sector professionals typically viewed integration in terms of enhancing service users' involvement in service design and delivery. They highlighted service provision concerns within a broader, strategic context, expressing an appreciation for choice, voice, inclusion and meaningfulness as elements of integration. Service providers and voluntary sector professionals also highlighted the need to have tools to measure how meaningful integration happens, as well as opening up better pathways towards mainstream access to services for asylum seekers and refugees. For example, one service provider referring here to the development of an integration strategy captured a common thread across interviews among managers of different services and voluntary sector professionals:

“ I suppose that a refugee integration strategy should be determined by people who have experienced the system as asylum seekers and refugees and then the service providers. But it has to be an encompassing strategy (...) it has to take on board education needs, health needs, social care needs and pathways to employment, language.



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Rights-based understandings of integration that promote equality and inclusion were clearly articulated by research participants. Many emphasised broader, holistic notions of integration with a clear emphasis on understanding integration as a two way process which begins on the day of arrival.

“ I think there are different theories of what integration is and I do like the idea of it being a two-way process. Ultimately, it's about people feeling safe, feeling part of wider society, and knowing where they kind of sit within that wider society, and that they know of and how to access their rights and entitlements.

While some distinctions remain in terms of how research participants define integration, it was universally acknowledged that integration should be undergirded by a participatory and humanistic and rights based framework.

Equally for asylum seeking and refugee participants' great importance was attached to developing a refugee integration strategy which emphasises rights, inclusion (ultimately, a sense of belonging), and participation. One of our participants, a refugee, stated:

“ If we are serious about integration we have to change the laws and the policies that are there, which means we have to take positive discrimination to ensure that ethnic minorities are included in maybe decision making. (Kenyan Refugee)

Asylum seeking and refugee participants were quick to identify the important role that an all-encompassing integration could play in remedying current gaps in the asylum system and in creating a framework for positive adaption to their new host society.

In summarising participant's views on integration, the evidence points universally to the need for a refugee integration strategy. Each research cohort revealed their

own nuanced perspective of what integration processes should entail which the larger research report summarises. However, it was agreed that key to developing a sustainable integration process is the need to address a number of distinctive gaps in service provision and the asylum process more generally.

Integration:

- a holistic, multi-layered and two-way process which involves both newcomers and the host community
- a process which begins on the first day of arrival
- a process embedded in an equality, participatory and rights based framework
- a process which takes seriously the need to improve the everyday lives of asylum

Barriers to Integration

All of the research participants in this project could readily identify a range of barriers to integration. While participant groups had distinct perspectives on barriers to fuller integration, there were a number of overlaps in key domains. Service providers and the voluntary sector focused on the asylum process, service elements and the broader societal barriers that create challenges for the integration of asylum seekers and refugees. Asylum seekers and refugees concerns dovetailed with those of service providers and the voluntary sector, but also gave researchers deep insight into the challenges of life as lived by individuals and families seeking asylum and refuge. While we note the barriers to integration in this brief, the research report documents the many good practice examples of local integration and support projects. Local civil sector, faith-based organisations as well as good practice State supports (Minority Ethnic Development Fund) provide excellent examples of how Northern Ireland has a repository of expertise on this topic, which should be supported and developed.



The Asylum Process

All of our research participants highlighted the challenges of the asylum application process and the negative experiences involved in attempting to understand the process, e.g. finding appropriate and reliable legal support, undergoing critical and unfair scrutiny in the interview experience, and living in unstable and unpredictable situations. Other barriers embedded in the asylum process are the challenges of family separation and reunion, negative experiences in detention and homelessness and destitution. While the asylum process remains outside of the remit of the Northern Ireland executive, it nonetheless features as a negative experience for many asylum seekers and refugees. The research report highlights areas where Northern Ireland can provide supports around the asylum process.

Housing

Housing insecurity features as a major issue in the everyday life experiences of asylum seekers and refugees here. Asylum seekers and refugees experience multiple moves and a general sense of a lack of control over their personal housing situation, resulting in feelings of insecurity, fear, and unpredictability. Both families and lone individuals experience unsuitable housing conditions (including but not limited to overcrowding, poor conditions, difficulty with landlords, discrimination). Asylum seekers are often moved with limited notice. New refugees experience great hardship and stress during the 28 day period –particularly with regards to housing –better understanding of the transition period is critical to the development of appropriate services and the development of a refugee integration strategy. Overall, austerity measures, waiting lists for public housing, and the moving of the asylum process towards private provision and commercial contracts combine to make housing issues a major barrier to integration.

Destitution

Destitution amongst asylum seekers and refugees is a growing issue in Northern Ireland as it is throughout the rest of the UK. Its links to issues of mental health and exploitation cannot be understated and it was a topic addressed all too frequently in this research. Failed and destitute asylum seekers and refugees are in a position of extreme vulnerability. While charity and local government support is considered excellent, there is still an immense amount of work needing to be done to prevent destitution from growing at such an alarming rate and it remains a major barrier to integration for many newcomers.

Health

Understanding the health needs of asylum seekers and refugees in Northern Ireland is a priority for the development of a refugee integration strategy. The health and well-being of asylum seekers and refugees is not just about physical and mental health but also connects to issues of belonging, security and rights. Asylum seekers and refugees encounter unique barriers in accessing health services; these include but are not limited to challenges in cross-cultural communication, cultural beliefs about health practices, and limited cultural awareness on the part of the service providers (both administrative and front line staff). The mental health and well-being of asylum seekers and refugees is of urgent concern. Better research and data is also needed on asylum seekers and refugee's health needs in order to effect better service design and delivery. At present, the health services collect their own specific data and have developed NINES-Northern Ireland New Entrant Service-which provides important supports for asylum seekers and refugees first entering the health care system.



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Education

Education figured in our research in multiple ways and our research participants come from very varied educational backgrounds. Adults spoke about how displacement had abruptly interrupted their education and employment pathways, and how fundamental its reacquisition is to gaining a foothold in their new home. Significant challenges exist in terms of quality education for asylum seekers and refugees, including but not limited to language and communication issues, prejudice and racism, social exclusion, interrupted schooling and educational lag, literacy issues, lack of recognition of qualifications, and limited or no resources to deal with or awareness of the specific challenges asylum seekers and refugees face. Children who have experienced trauma also experience significant interference with their education. Post-migration stressors, such as a challenging asylum process, and poor housing/health access can also compound educational challenges.

Employment

Asylum seekers are not allowed to work but are allowed to volunteer. Asylum seekers and refugees feel there are a large number of barriers to labour market integration, such as educational and employment gaps due to time in the asylum process, language issues, non-recognition of qualifications and racism/prejudice. Asylum seekers while waiting for their status become extremely vulnerable to labour exploitation.

Racism and Prejudice

Racism presents an ongoing issue for asylum seekers and refugees. The perception that there is a link between sectarianism and racism is widely held. Targeted research is needed to ascertain the full relationship between sectarianism and racism, and its potential impact on integration. Many of our research participants reported experiences of racism and prejudice. Further, LGBT asylum seekers and refugees have little support and often end up housed in conditions which replicate their experiences

in their country of origin. Finally, asylum seekers and refugees feel uncomfortable reporting incidents of racism or discrimination such that a better reporting mechanism should be put in place.

Conclusion

Integration as a two way process involves multiple areas of life, including housing, civic space, health and mental health, education, employment, language skills, social contact (particularly nurturing links with the host community) and personal development, and includes aspects of decision-making, choice, meaningful participation and engagement, tolerance, and acceptance. It is a process that should be underpinned by an equality and rights based framework. Barriers to integration for asylum seekers and refugees include a challenging asylum process with poor legal and advice supports, substandard housing, information gaps, educational and employment lags, racism and prejudice.

Policy and practice should consider adopting a more holistic understanding of integration in Northern Ireland. This would reflect a multi-faceted awareness of the challenges faced by asylum seekers and refugees here and could be delivered by meaningful and regular consultation with newcomer communities and professionals working in this area. Addressing extant barriers and challenges is key to the better integration of asylum seekers and refugees. Further, adapting policies and services that promote an integration underpinned by a rights and equality based framework would create an augmented asylum process and every-day life experience in Northern Ireland. Implementing an integration process will bring value to both newcomer and host communities as the development of an integration strategy brings reflective value to a given society. We recommend the development of an overarching support organisation resembling a refugee council which could enact a number of the report's recommendations. Finally, there is a need to acknowledge the diversity of asylum seekers and refugees in planning and service delivery, and to promote tolerance, respect, and understanding to make this a more welcoming and just society - thus improving society in Northern Ireland for all of its inhabitants.







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