

ASYLUM SEEKERS AND  
REFUGEES' EXPERIENCES

OF LIFE IN  
NORTHERN IRELAND



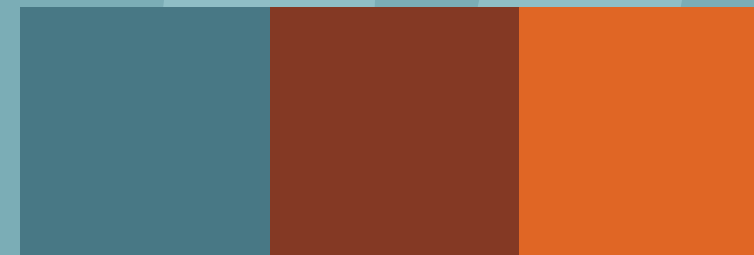
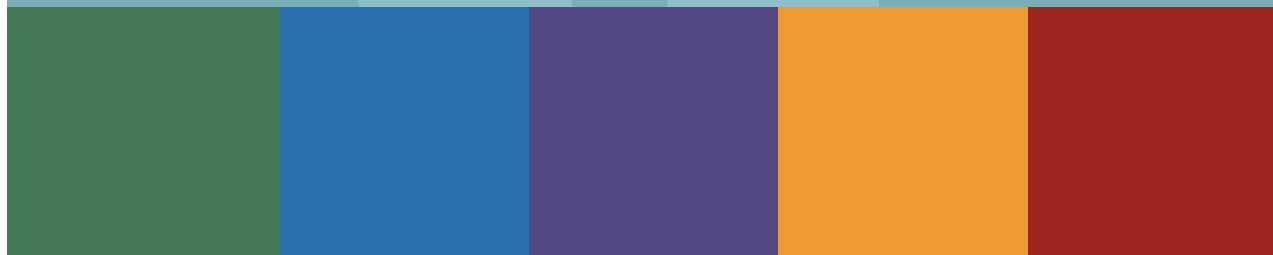
Dr Fiona Murphy  
Dr Ulrike M. Vieten



## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report focuses on the everyday life experiences of asylum seekers and refugees in Northern Ireland. It was commissioned by the Racial Equality Unit at The Executive Office in order to inform the development of a refugee integration strategy for Northern Ireland.

This research identifies the barriers, difficulties and challenges experienced by asylum seekers and refugees as they adapt to their new lives in Northern Ireland. It identifies a number of key indicators of integration, such as employment, housing, education, health, social bridges, language, cultural knowledge, rights and citizenship and examines how asylum seekers and refugees experience these domains in Northern Ireland.





## Executive Summary

### Methodology

Fieldwork was undertaken between February and June 2016 using a mixed methods approach:

- Literature review of research and policy developments;
- A short questionnaire sent to service providers, civil sector organisations, and local councils working with asylum seekers and refugees and in Northern Ireland;
- Semi-structured interviews and focus groups with service providers, voluntary and charitable organisations, as well as among members of the asylum seeking and refugee community in Northern Ireland.

This research engaged with asylum seekers and refugees from ten different countries that are thought to be representative of the largest communities present in Northern Ireland. The service providers and voluntary and charitable sector organisations that we interviewed spanned a wide range of services.

### Summary Findings

The research for this report draws upon the everyday life experiences of asylum seekers and refugees in Northern Ireland and considers their encounters with the domains of housing, education, health, employment and the asylum/legal process. It also considers the views of service providers working in these domains as well as among the voluntary and charitable sectors in Northern Ireland. The analysis noted that all research participants stated that the development of a refugee integration strategy is critical for Northern Ireland in light of the ongoing European border crisis and increasing migration numbers globally. Integration should be a two-way process beginning on the day of arrival, something which was generally agreed upon. Research participants identified a range of challenges that needed to be addressed in relation to housing, health, employment, education and legal issues in order to improve the pathway to integration. The most commonly identified problems were:

This report identifies a range of gaps in service provision to asylum seekers and refugees and, as such, will contribute to the development of TEO's Refugee Integration Strategy in order to aid the successful settlement and integration of asylum seekers and refugees within Northern Ireland. It also outlines the legislative and policy contexts with respect to asylum seeker and refugee rights issues in the UK.

The field research for this project was conducted from February 2016-June 2016. This report presents the key findings from this research. This report was commissioned by the Executive Office and the research was conducted by The Senator George J. Mitchell Institute for Global Peace, Security, and Justice, Queen's University Belfast. The research was led by Dr. Fiona Murphy and Dr. Ulrike M. Vieten. Research assistants on the project were Jennifer Greenaway, Tal Avrech, and Letizia Mattanza. Dr. Neil Jarman served as an advisor on the project.

### Terminology

We rely on the following definitions of asylum seeker and refugee in this report:

According to the 1951 Refugee Convention<sup>1</sup>, a **refugee** is someone, who 'owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality and is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country; or who, not having a nationality and being outside the country of his former habitual residence as a result of such events, is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to return to it.'

The UNHCR also defines an **asylum seeker** in the following terms: <sup>2</sup>*An asylum-seeker is someone who says he or she is a refugee, but whose claim has not yet been definitively evaluated.*



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- Lack of, or poor, legal support during the asylum process leading to the loss of a claim;
- General issues with information distribution regarding both the needs and rights of asylum seekers and refugees in the different sectors;
- Poor, substandard housing and uncertainty about housing and frequent housing moves (on average 3-4 moves during the asylum process);
- Poor or little support during the transition period from asylum seeker to refugee status. Evidence points to this period as a moment during which asylum seekers are made vulnerable to destitution and exploitation;
- Many asylum seekers and refugees feel fearful about making complaints to public officials as they feel this may hamper their claim;
- Lack of support for dealing with the mental health issues of asylum seekers and refugees. No support for victims of torture;
- Better support is needed for employment and the recognition of skills and credentials;
- While most of our participants are registered with GPs, many stated that more information about additional health services needs to be made available;
- Fully accredited English classes with childcare needed;
- Lack of accurate data on asylum seekers and refugees in Northern Ireland makes service design for asylum seekers and refugees more complex.

### Conclusions

The asylum seeking and refugee population is growing in Northern Ireland (see McNulty, 2016). While not large, it is a diverse group in terms of nationality, gender,

class and age. This diversity notwithstanding, this research indicates that there is a range of common experiences which asylum seekers and refugees face in their everyday lives in Northern Ireland.

Our research has indicated a number of gaps in service provision and with the asylum process more generally. In particular, asylum seekers and refugees have critical concerns about housing and legal support in Northern Ireland. Concerns were also expressed about a lack of services for mental health and for victims of torture. Informational requirements across the sectors also need to be better managed. Asylum seekers and refugees are often fearful about speaking out about their experiences and many feel that they cannot make official complaints, in the event that they do have a negative experience with a particular service. Other concerns were anchored in the need to gain new skill sets (English being one example), and the recognition of qualifications and credentials, in order to accelerate the pathway to employment.

While there is a vibrant voluntary and civil society sector, with a good range of integration and support projects, all of our participants highlighted the need for a refugee integration strategy to be developed in Northern Ireland.

### Key Findings

This report highlights the gaps in service provision as they are experienced by asylum seekers and refugees living in Northern Ireland. The work has also been informed by service providers and voluntary sector organisations. It is clear that there are many gaps in service provision and a lot of pressure is exerted on the voluntary sector to backfill, what should be, essential services. While there is some excellent work happening for and with asylum seekers and refugees in Northern Ireland- fulfilling their information needs remains a critical issue. A lack of, or incorrect, information regarding the asylum system and service provision creates considerable challenges for asylum seekers and refugees. There is evidence of disconnected and overlapping projects in a number of services, so the need for a more joined up, partnership-led approach is vital in Northern Ireland. While the report evidences some good practice examples of collaboration across the sector, the Refugee and Asylum forum being one such example, further and more formalised co-ordination is however necessary.



With this in mind, we have **one major** recommendation – the implementation of an overarching support organisation resembling a refugee council that would be responsible for providing key supports and guidance to asylum seekers and refugees. This council would be linked in an appropriate way to key services for asylum seekers and refugees and to the voluntary sector; as such, it would play a pivotal role in implementing the refugee integration strategy. Akin to the Scottish Refugee Council<sup>3</sup>, this organisation could run a ‘Holistic Integration Service’ dedicated to the implementation of the refugee integration strategy. It could also provide a formalised mentoring system and access to appropriate legal support. In general, we found that asylum seekers and refugees feel that they do not have the right to complain, feeling that it may impact on their asylum claims, and so a support organisation in which they can vocalise their needs is urgently needed. We see the piloting of this service as something necessary for the correct implementation of a refugee integration strategy.

There are a number of additional observations too, all of which have been anchored within this report’s subsections.

### Information needs

- The development of an app (there are a number of successful models in particular the ‘Ankommen’ app in Germany-see <https://www.ankommenapp.de/>) that asylum seekers and refugees can freely and easily download to their phones is encouraged, given that information needs are such a key issue for asylum seekers and refugees. This app can act as a free and accessible guide to services and to the voluntary sector in Northern Ireland and would have a translation feature so that information could be made readily available in a number of languages. If a ‘Holistic Integration Service’ is piloted, then this would also serve as an important basis for the correct distribution of information needs. The service could also develop a social media strategy to engage with asylum seekers and refugees. Using national based social media sites is also a positive way of connecting with newcomer communities. For example, the Californian city of San Gabriel uses the Chinese social media site Weibo to connect with Chinese migrants<sup>4</sup>.

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### Housing

- While the Housing Executive already assists both asylum seekers and refugees with becoming involved with the local community, - through their local estates and housing forums in particular, we believe that this needs to be rolled out in a more systematic and formalized manner. We suggest the development of a tenant participation structure that involves the preparation of newcomers to particular areas, as well as a strategy in which established residents are engaged with. This will benefit asylum seekers, refugees and host communities.
- It is clear that front line housing provider staff need further training in order to understand the diverse needs and make-up of the asylum seeking and refugee communities. There is also an issue with asylum seekers and refugees’ complaints and housing needs not being taken seriously; this causes ongoing harm and needs urgent remedy through the Northern Ireland Housing Executive and other providers. A formalised complaints system needs to be set up in the context of housing that allows asylum seekers and refugees to freely express their concerns. This again might be something that the ‘Holistic Integration Service,’ in conjunction with the NIHE, might implement.
- Better access to emergency housing is needed and access to same through a 24hour/7day service is urgently required. This could be linked to a more progressive housing policy for asylum seekers and refugees modelled on some programmes in Germany; see, for example, the refugee housing policy in Munster, Germany<sup>5</sup>. Progressive housing policies are about building resilient neighbourhoods and, ultimately, to impact upon and to improve housing issues for all members of the community in Northern Ireland.
- Projects to prevent homelessness and destitution amongst asylum seekers and refugees need to be implemented, as does ensuring that destitute asylum seekers and refugees have access to homelessness supports, regardless of their status. A model such as the ‘Destitute Asylum Seeker Service’ could be implemented (see <http://www.rsf.org.uk/what-we-do/destitute-asylum-seeker-service-dass>). Ensuring the training of different service providers around the transition period is also key to improvement in this area. Asylum seekers





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transitioning to refugee status have been identified as being particularly vulnerable during the 28-day transition period; this is an issue that needs to be better understood amongst service providers. Furthermore, benefit's staff should be able to process payments without a national insurance number, in order to make the transition period more effective.

- Administrative delays with benefits and Section 4 support result in destitution and this should be addressed.

### Racism

- Establish a procedure to identify racist incidents in local areas through local community groups or housing forums or the suggested support organisation.
- Campaigns for host community - "*I am an immigrant campaign*" or "*I came by boat*" posters specifically for Northern Ireland (these could run with limited funding)<sup>6</sup>. This should be linked to better investment and recognition of the value of the annual *Refugee Week* which runs in the UK and in Ireland. A number of established integration projects, one example being the *Inclusive Neighbourhood project*, have successfully trained host community participants on topics such as integration and racism<sup>7</sup>. Projects like this provide important training sessions aiming to raise awareness about the issues that asylum seekers and refugees in Northern Ireland face. Funding of such projects could be reinstated with view to utilising this as a major anti-racism resource and an accompanying strategy to widen its scope across Northern Ireland.

### Health

- We have made a number of findings regarding health. In the main, asylum seekers and refugees expressed their satisfaction with the health services

in Northern Ireland; however, the issue of accessing information regarding services arose as a particular challenge. We suggest the piloting of a project like the Health Befriending Network (<http://www.refugeecouncil.org.uk/hscvproject>) in Northern Ireland, in order to aid asylum seekers and refugees to better navigate the health service.

- There are identifiable data gaps on health amongst asylum seekers and refugees that need to be addressed in order to improve service design. Further research into the areas of female health (sexual and maternity), and a focus on asylum seekers/refugees and disability could be required to address those gaps.
- There are a large number of resources available online which formally combine English language learning and health literacy in a defined syllabus. Basic literacy and health literacy projects should intersect (a pilot project trialling this is recommended). This could, in conjunction with health service providers, form part of the ESOL strategy. See for example (see for example the Queen's Library Health literacy for ESOL learners <http://www.queenslibrary.org/services/health-info/english-for-your-health/teacher-beginner-level>).

### Mental Health

- The area of mental health is of critical concern. Mental health needs should be better linked to broader services through a partnership and multi-sectoral approach.
- Currently, there are no specific services aimed at working with victims of torture in Northern Ireland. It is suggested that a model based on that of Spirasi (<http://spirasi.ie/>) or the 'Freedom from Torture campaign' (<https://www.freedomfromtorture.org/>) be adopted in Northern Ireland. These supports could be housed within a larger support network.
- In terms of building better relationships with host communities, it is suggested





that links between victim support groups and services in Northern Ireland be made with asylum seekers and refugees. Improved mental health services for all is necessary in Northern Ireland.

### Immigration and Legal Support

- An appropriate support and guidance system should be introduced to guide asylum seekers through the asylum process.
- The provision of appropriate legal support for asylum seekers and refugees is critical. Currently, there are a range of issues within the legal system in Northern Ireland regarding advice given on immigration. We suggest that it be mandatory for all solicitors involved in the process to gain appropriate registration and that they be enrolled for continuing professional development in the area.
- Monitoring of removal and detention practices in Northern Ireland should be introduced
- The piloting of an early legal advice project in Northern Ireland is advised.

### Integration Support

- We suggest the development of a 'Holistic Integration Service' through the establishment of a refugee council for Northern Ireland. This would work to create a partnership between, and cross-sectoral collaboration with, service providers and the voluntary sector in Northern Ireland.
- It is suggested that integration efforts follow a province-wide approach. There is a possibility to extend projects further afield, particularly to the North West; this would assist in the decentralisation of immigration services from Belfast.

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- The relationship between mainstreaming and integration policies needs to be better considered. Further research is needed in this domain.
- Better funding of integration projects is needed, projects which work with both host communities and asylum seekers and refugees in particular. We have previously mentioned how '*The Inclusive Neighbourhood project*,' which ran from 2009-2011, provides a best practice example of a project that has trained and engaged both host communities and newcomers. There would be great value in extending a project of this nature to other regions in Northern Ireland, in Derry/Londonderry in particular.
- Asylum seekers and refugees should be engaged in consultation and partnership during the development of an integration strategy.
- More structured anti-racism and cultural competency training for all service providers working with asylum seekers and refugees is needed –this could be linked to the support organisation.

### Language

- The development of an ESOL strategy that sets out pathway(s) to learning and employment and links to health literacy as well as an English language forum for providers of English classes is suggested.
- Ensuring that English classes are fully accredited, in line with employment and higher education needs and standards, would be key to this strategy.
- The availability of childcare with English classes is necessary, given the inability of a number of our female research participants to attend classes.
- Literacy classes need to be made more widely available. It is suggested that this be part of an overall ESOL strategy.





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### Employment

- A number of programs and initiatives exist in Germany (*Berlin-Neukoelln*) that provide a good model for the labour market integration of asylum seekers and refugees<sup>8</sup>. We would like to see the development of 'Early Intervention' projects, where local job centres identify a particular group of qualified asylum seekers and refugees for further training and entrance into the jobs market.
- Better information guidelines on volunteering for asylum seekers and refugees should be distributed to services and potential employers in Northern Ireland.
- Internships (bakery; hotel service; plumbing, to name but a few) for asylum seekers and refugees should be structured and implemented. The Holistic Integration Service could manage these employment pathways and internships.
- IT and coding training for asylum seekers and refugees, as a key skill, is important given the growth of the software industry in the UK and Ireland. Schools such as *The Redi School of Digital Integration* (<http://www.redi-school.org/>) in Germany, at which asylum seekers and refugees are trained in coding, have had great success and could be piloted in Northern Ireland. An awareness of developments in social innovation and refugee projects, such as Techfugees for example, is also important (see <https://blogs.ec.europa.eu/eupolicylab/technology-and-social-innovation-for-migrant-integration/>)
- The development of a social entrepreneurship model (for example the Craftspace –Shelanu initiative in Birmingham: <http://craftspace.co.uk/join-shelanu/>) would provide a good training space for asylum seekers and refugees. At present in Northern Ireland, the ArtsEkta project for asylum seekers and refugees brings great value and could be extended, based on a more formalised social entrepreneurship model. Local Enterprise Hubs in Northern Ireland should also be engaged with these projects.

- The development of a system, such as MyGrade (<http://www.mygrade.net/>), which is a formalised mentoring system in which local people/business owners are coupled with refugees in order to create positive relationships and possible employment opportunities should be implemented.

### Political Participation

- Asylum seekers and Refugees should be given the opportunity to partake in local politics and be seen as future 'rebuilders' and 'peacemakers' of their home societies<sup>9</sup>. A pilot initiative should be undertaken that allows interested asylum seekers and refugees to learn about how they might play a role in local Northern Ireland politics. Additionally, political parties should be encouraged to develop strategies to involve asylum seekers and refugees in their political parties and campaigns.





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*Fiona Murphy and Ulrike Vieten, The Senator George J. Mitchell Institute for Global Peace, Security and Justice, Queen's University Belfast.*

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SECURITY AND JUSTICE**



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# 1 INTRODUCTION

The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNCHR) estimates that by mid - 2016 there were 65.3 million 'forcibly displaced people' worldwide<sup>10</sup>. Recent years have seen an increase in the forced mobility of some of the world's citizens, due to increased conflict in particular regions. The vast majority of refugees, however, live in developing countries<sup>11</sup>. Media representations of asylum seekers and refugees moving into Europe have nevertheless ignited heated debate. How we respond to the current border crisis will be a measure of the kind of societies and world in which we want to live.

This research was commissioned by the Racial Equality Unit from The Executive Office in an effort to gain a true picture of the asylum seeker and refugee experience in Northern Ireland. The aim is to use this research to inform the development of a refugee integration strategy for Northern Ireland. The main objective is to gain an understanding of the everyday life experiences of asylum seekers and refugees in Northern Ireland, in order to improve the pathways to integration and community cohesion.



The aims and objectives of this research included tracking the processes of integration for asylum seekers and refugees as they move through the asylum determination process and navigate mainstream society in Northern Ireland. As such, this research examines how asylum seekers and refugees experience housing, health, employment and education services in Northern Ireland, all of which have been identified as key indicators of integration. It also examines their engagement with civil society and public and private bodies, as they relate with host communities and articulate new senses of belonging. Policy recognises the contribution of migration to the economic and cultural life of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, but also acknowledges 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.

There are three ways to become a refugee in Northern Ireland: 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, an individual arrives with humanitarian protection)<sup>12</sup> (see McNulty, 2016)<sup>13</sup>. The United Kingdom has established a resettlement programme for Syrian refugees – the Vulnerable Persons Relocation (VPR) scheme. From 3 July 2017 anyone arriving under the scheme will be given refugee status. Anyone who arrived prior to this date will be given the opportunity to change status Northern Ireland has been a recipient of both programme refugees (through the VPR scheme) as well as having an estimated number of 200 - 300 new asylum seekers per year from different locations<sup>14</sup>. In the past, Northern Ireland has also received individuals with refugee status from Somalia.

The integration of newcomers into Northern Ireland's society is, therefore, of key importance. At present, Northern Ireland does not currently have a refugee integration strategy. This is, in the main, due to a relatively recent history of people seeking asylum/refuge in Northern Ireland. Northern Ireland does, however, have a racial equality strategy and through the Executive Office funds (in particular through the Minority Ethnic Development Fund) important projects in relation to Northern Ireland's newcomer communities.

## 1.1 Structure

The report is structured according to some of the key indicators of integration (Ager and Strang, 2004). It begins by giving an overview of UK policy on asylum seekers and refugees, as well as by outlining some of the key issues within the system of devolved and excepted matters. This is followed by an overview of the methodology of the research project and the ethical challenges it presented. We then present the literature review findings which unpack the notion of integration. Next, we move into a section that examines integration from the perspectives of the research participants in this project- which included service providers, the voluntary and civil society sector organisations, asylum seekers and refugees. The remainder of the report examines some of the key challenges for integration: the asylum process, housing, destitution, health, mental health, education, employment and racism. We conclude this report with a short discussion on how asylum seekers and refugees imagine their future in Northern Ireland.

## 1.2 Central Research Questions

The central research questions of this project include:

**In what ways does the asylum system operate in Northern Ireland?**

**Based on existing literature, and retrospectively through the historical consciousness of research participants, what are the consequences of living within the asylum system for the social, emotional and agent-active lives of asylum seekers in Northern Ireland?**

**How is the transition to refugee status or subsidiary protection framed in terms of policy, governmental and non-governmental supports and networks of assistance?**

**What strategies and tactics do former asylum seekers adopt to negotiate entry into mainstream life in Northern Ireland?**





**What is the everyday socio-cultural, emotional and psychological experience of integration, and how might the data arising from this project inflect broader moves to influence policy change?**

**What barriers to integration emerge and what organic supports exist? What are the particular issues that service providers offering supports to asylum seekers and refugees need to address?**

**In what ways can former Northern Ireland asylum seekers' experiences of integration inform future policy and potential non-governmental support structures? Indeed, how should current policy and processes regarding asylum seekers and refugees in Northern Ireland be altered?**

**How can refugee integration support processes be refined in order to develop an agenda for action, so as to ensure the successful settlement and integration of asylum seeking and refugee communities?**

### 1.3 UK Policy and Legal context for Refugee Integration in Northern Ireland

#### 1.3.1 UK Policy and Asylum Claims

- Official Government statistics<sup>15</sup> show that the UK 'had the ninth highest number (42,000) of asylum applications within the EU in the year ending March 2016, including dependants<sup>16</sup>.
- The largest number of applications came from Iranian nationals (4,305), followed by those from Eritrea (3,321), Iraq (2,805), Sudan (2,769), Pakistan (2,669) and Syria (2,539)<sup>17</sup>.
- In the year ending March 2016, asylum applications from Iraqi nationals more than quadrupled to 2,805, from 695 in the year ending March 2015<sup>18</sup>.

- In terms of Section 95 support (explained below), by March 2016, 35,683 asylum seekers and their dependants were in receipt of support (either in supported accommodation, or receiving subsistence only support), compared with 30,476 by the end of March 2015.
- While this number has increased since 2012, the figure remains significantly below that at the end of 2003 (the start of the published data series) at which time there were 80,123 asylum seekers in receipt of Section 95 support.
- Data on the numbers of asylum seekers and refugees in Northern Ireland is unavailable from UK statistics, given that it is aggregated with Scottish data. However, organisations such as the Law Centre in Northern Ireland have used a number of strategies to estimate in approximate terms the numbers of asylum seekers and refugees in Northern Ireland<sup>19</sup>.
- 'The proposal for a Refugee Integration Strategy for Northern Ireland' by NISMP/Northern Ireland Strategic Migration Partnership (November 2013) also indicates concrete data: information gathered by Bryson (2012) shows that 286 asylum applications were processed, and that there were 84 dependants.
- According to figures by NIHE (2013), 420 asylum seekers were provided with accommodation, of which they counted 97 families and 110 individuals.
- Further, since its opening in 2010, the Home Office reporting centre in Belfast, noted an increase of 60%. According to the support scheme set up by part VI of the Immigration and Asylum Act 1999, two support packages can be distinguished<sup>20</sup>; one is for those whose asylum claims are ongoing and the other support is for those refused asylum seekers. Section 95 is aimed at those (incl. dependants) with ongoing claims who are destitute or about to become destitute. The so-called 'Destitution Test' requires that people do not have 'adequate accommodation and not enough money to meet living expenses for themselves and any dependants now or within the next 14 days.' Changes to the Immigration Act in 2016 mean that such benefits will undergo a number of alterations.



- If the asylum seeker's case is exhausted, Section 95 support will end after 21 days. However, he/ she might be eligible for Section 4 support<sup>21</sup>. This might be different where the asylum seeker has a dependent child. Article 3 of the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR) also provides a legal ground to claim support based on section 95 for vulnerable asylum seekers<sup>22</sup>.

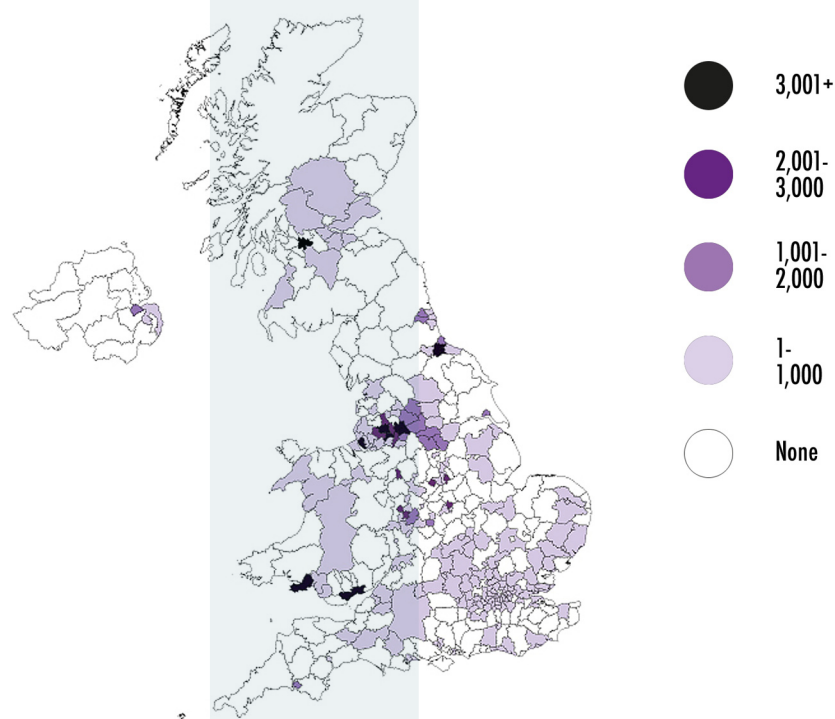


Figure 1 Asylum seekers in receipt of Section 95 support by local authority, per million population, as at the end of March 2016 (resource: National statistics 'Asylum', updated 26 May 2016).

## 1 Introduction

### 1.3.2 Northern Ireland data

The table above gives an estimation of how many asylum seekers were in the system and received section 95 in Northern Ireland.

The estimation of figures on refugees, and those who stay and are outside legal provision, is difficult. National Statistics (Home Office) does not specify the entries for Northern Ireland. Despite this lack of clear data, individual asylum seekers, e.g. families, arrive in Northern Ireland with the intention of gaining refugee status. They enter the general social services, as well as the housing and labour market, in different ways.

It is this journey that needs further attention when considering measures of how to respond to the diverse needs of distinctive cultural/religious and ethno-racial communities. However, the lack of precise data on asylum seekers and refugees in Northern Ireland remains a major issue, one which impacts on service design and delivery.

### 1.3.3 Devolved and Excepted Matters

According to the Good Friday agreement in 1998<sup>23</sup>, Northern Ireland became 'a devolved constituent region of the UK and a devolved legislature the Northern Ireland Assembly was established' (Geoghean, 2008: 129). Constitutional and security issues are under the control of the Northern Ireland Office, 'which is directly answerable to the HOME OFFICE and the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland rather than the Executive' (Geoghean, 2008: 129). In effect, national security and border control are excepted matters of the central government in London (Westminster); this can produce tensions with the devolved matters of, (for example), 'housing, health, education and employment'. In reference to the Scottish context, Tom Mullen and Sarah Craig (2016)<sup>24</sup> highlight that, 'provisions which, whilst intended to advance objectives of reserved policy areas, also have substantial impact on policy areas which are generally devolved areas.' Immigration control is, then, an excepted matter that complicates the role of governance and policy making for the Northern Ireland Executive. When changes are made to the immigration act, they impact upon service



providers and the voluntary sector in Northern Ireland. One such example is the perception that the Immigration Act 2016 seeks to enlist private rented sector actors as agents of immigration control. The consequences of this being that an immigration measure becomes a housing measure, as well as a licensing, social care and labour market measure.

In one of our interviews with a service provider, it was highlighted that Home Office policy has an ongoing impact:

*The Immigration Act 2014 I think is still ongoing, it was a tough one, it's a tough one because it stricter measures on, not only on asylum seekers, but it's touching everybody else like the landlords, like the banks, like the employers. There's you know, sort of fines imposed on them if someone stays in your house and they're illegal, if they find out you have to pay a fine. If someone needs to open a bank account, they have to have proof that they're allowed to stay, so it's been tough, we have seen there was a point when we had to see a lot of people coming in, because now landlords had to tell them to leave their houses.*

Integration policies, however, are devolved, and as this report evidences there is much that the Northern Ireland Executive can do to provision for and ensure the integration and inclusion of asylum seeking and refugee communities in Northern Ireland.

#### 1.3.4 Syrian Refugees

- In 2015, the forced mobility of Syrian citizens made international news and brought those who survived the journey across the Mediterranean to the shores of Europe.<sup>25</sup> The UK response was the Syrian Vulnerable Persons Relocation Scheme (Syrian VPR).
- While the issue of the Syrian resettlement programmes is of interest, the focus of this study is on asylum seekers and refugees in general, e.g. those asylum seekers and refugees who came to Northern Ireland outside of the Syrian Vulnerable Persons Resettlement Scheme (VPRS). Nonetheless, public debate

and sentiment towards Syrian refugees has highlighted the issues asylum seekers and refugees face more generally.

- This research did not engage with Syrians who arrived in Northern Ireland as part of the settlement programme as it was deemed, as yet, to be too sensitive to focus research on by the steering group. It is thus important to note that there are key differences between arriving to Northern Ireland as an independent asylum seeker and arriving as part of the VPR scheme. This is key given the amount of public representation and debate on the issue of Syrian refugees in the UK and Europe. While some of the asylum seekers, refugees and voluntary sector professionals we interviewed expressed concerns about a two-tier system, it must be stated that the VPRS scheme has had some positive impact on services for asylum seekers and refugees more broadly – such as English language provision.
- The very positive public attention on the arrival of Syrian refugees in Northern Ireland may also have an impact on how people see asylum seekers and refugees more generally. Perhaps, too, the learning from those involved in the VPRS in Northern Ireland may be applied to the development of a refugee integration strategy in Northern Ireland.

Our research approach was informed by the methodological construct of intersectionality. We used this as a lens to understand the complex needs of refugees and asylum seekers in Northern Ireland. The most relevant aspects being the overlapping social divisions which include: nationality, legal status, gender/ sex, sexuality, class, religion, ethnicity/ race; age and location. The feminist concept of 'intersectionality' provides a conceptual and methodological toolbox to capture the plurality of individual subjectivities whilst also shedding light on the structural order of social inequality. Through purposive sampling and an intersectionality lens, the researchers interviewed a diverse range of research participants in terms of nationality, age, gender, legal status, sexuality, class, and religion. The researchers had a period of 6 months for the project, with 4 months conducting the field research.



## SUMMARY NOTES

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*The EU border (or refugee) crisis has precipitated the need to consider how asylum seekers and refugees can be better integrated into their new societies.*

*Northern Ireland has seen an increase in the number of asylum applications in recent years. This is a relatively new phenomenon. It is also a recipient of programme refugees from Syria. As such, the development of a refugee integration strategy is a matter of priority.*

*The need for accurate data on Northern Ireland is imperative to inform better service provision, at present, data on asylum seekers in Northern Ireland is aggregated with Scotland.*

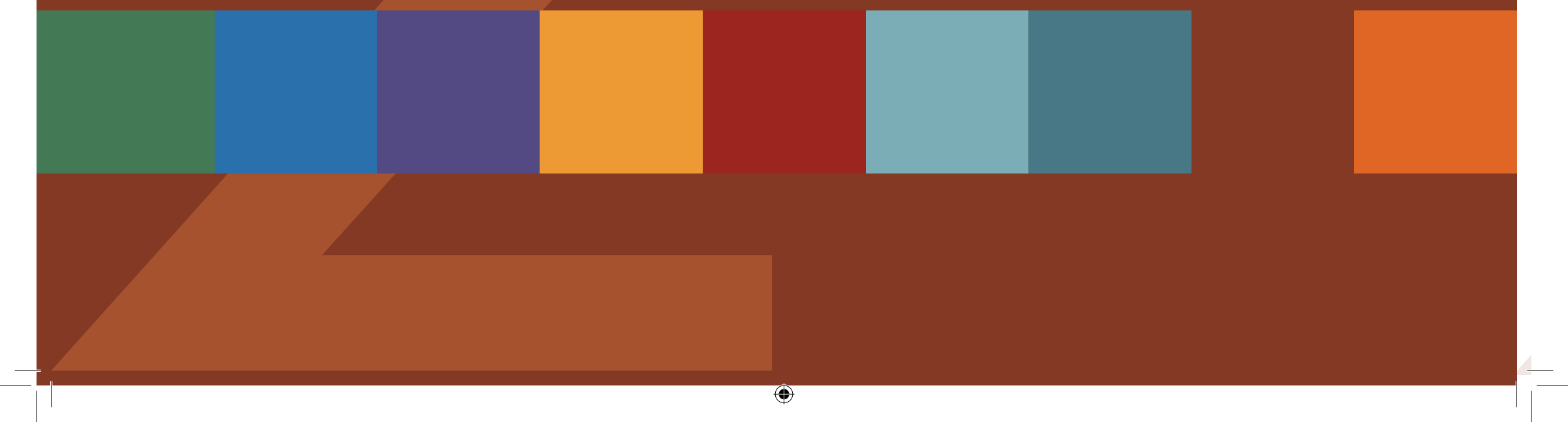




## 2 METHODOLOGY

### Doing Research in Northern Ireland

This research examined the views of asylum seekers and refugees, community (largely voluntary) organisations as well as various service providers and charitable organisations (listed in Figure 3). The interviews and research data gathered from service providers, as well as the short questionnaire we undertook in parallel, informed the encounter with asylum seekers and refugees. Voluntary sector and service providers working with asylum seekers and refugees were identified through their specific organisations and roles. Research participants from asylum seeking and refugee communities were identified through a number of key voluntary sector support organisations, and then further recruited using purposive sampling and a snowballing technique. In total, we interviewed 47 asylum seekers and refugees (two with citizenship) from ten different countries, and 38 individuals who work in service provision and the voluntary sector in Northern Ireland.





## 2.1 Mixed Methods

The research for this project utilised a mixed methods strategy. To achieve a baseline measure of asylum seekers and refugees' experiences in Northern Ireland, we conducted both qualitative and quantitative research. The empirical phase took place predominantly in Belfast as this is where the highest number of asylum seekers, refugees and service providers are located (McNulty, 2016). Belfast also has a larger number of voluntary sector organisations working with asylum seekers and refugees, and this facilitated contact with research participants. We also undertook some short field visits to Derry/Londonderry and Craigavon as there are a growing number of asylum seekers and refugees located there (McNulty, 2016).

Our research was primarily qualitative utilizing semi-structured interviews and focus groups but also making use of a short exploratory questionnaire to elicit key background information from service providers and civil society sector organisations working with asylum seekers and refugees in Northern Ireland. We consulted with a wide range of service providers and civil society sector and host community groups, as well as asylum seekers and refugees from different countries including-Somalia, the Sudan, Kenya, China, Zimbabwe, Kazakhstan, Sri Lanka, Nigeria, Iran and Syria. Asylum seekers and refugees interviewed have lived in Northern Ireland from a period of three months -ten years (with two having achieved naturalisation; full citizenship). We did not consult with programme refugees from Syria. However, the topic of programme refugees appeared repeatedly in our research, with both service providers, the voluntary sector, and asylum seekers and refugees expressing concerns regarding the development of a two-tier system.

In addition, after the second steering group meeting, we also included an extra focus group with young people (aged between 15 and 20 years) - five - of different ethnic-national backgrounds, who are the children of asylum seekers and refugees. Their experiences and expectations on how Northern Ireland's social and cultural environment should be more inclusive and offer more space for creativity will be discussed later in the report.

The research consisted of a number of key stages, which will be summarized below.

### 2.2 Stage One: Literature Review: Integration and the wider UK Legal and Policy Framework

The summary of the literature review (see details below) briefly outlines the main reasons for using evidence to inform policy and practice in the context of the integration of asylum seekers and refugees. We conducted our literature review on SCOPUS (an academic search engine) using a combination of different primary key word searches such as asylum seekers, refugees, health, mental health, education, employment, housing, integration, Northern Ireland, UK, Ireland, Scotland<sup>26</sup>. We also used Google Scholar and Google using similar search terms. SCOPUS results produced a diverse disciplinary array of academic articles on asylum seekers and refugees (particularly in Great Britain). As the report focuses on a number of different topic areas, in particular, housing, health, education and employment, we also conducted secondary searches which focused more narrowly on these topic areas. We predominantly used literature from law, psychology, health sciences, social sciences (in particular from sociology and anthropology) and political science. We also used a broad range of non-academic sources, in particular, reports written by government bodies and the voluntary sector. We accessed most of these reports through google scholar and search engine. As there is a dearth of academic and non-academic literature on the experience of asylum seekers and refugees in Northern Ireland, the steering group recommended that we use University Libraries in Northern Ireland to assess the quantity and quality of Masters and PhD theses on the topic of asylum seekers and refugees in Northern Ireland. Queen's University Belfast Library was used to access PhD and Master's theses on the topic of asylum seekers, refugees and integration in Northern Ireland. There are a number of Masters and PhD theses written about various aspects of the lives of asylum seekers and refugees in Northern Ireland. We deemed two of these PhD theses to be of good quality and close to our research focus in this report and so cite from them at various points in this study.

### 2.3 Stage Two: Questionnaire

Stage two concentrated on developing a short exploratory questionnaire (10 questions) which was distributed to civil society sector and voluntary organisations, service providers in the areas of health, education, work, housing and council good



relations officers in Northern Ireland. We worked in conjunction with TEO to fully develop the survey. While our primary methodological approach in this research was qualitative, we chose to send an exploratory questionnaire in order to gauge the broader context with regards to service provision to asylum seekers and refugees in Northern Ireland. The survey was used only to target service providers and the voluntary sector who work specifically with asylum seekers and refugees. We did not deem it appropriate to use a surveying tool to contact asylum seekers and refugees. We targeted service providers in the areas of health, housing, education and employment, as well as the voluntary sector in Northern Ireland. Specific individuals within service provision and the voluntary sector whose roles are connected to working with asylum seekers and refugees were identified and then contacted with the survey. The survey questions aimed to understand the depth of engagement both service providers and the voluntary sector groups have with asylum seekers and refugees in Northern Ireland. Predominantly, questions were structured in a way that they dealt with specific aspects of the Indicators of Integration framework. It also sought to understand in a preliminary fashion what kind of gaps exist in service provision to asylum seekers and refugees in Northern Ireland. The survey was initially distributed to service providers in health, education, employment, housing, and a broad number of civil society groups across Northern Ireland. At the stage of the second steering meeting, we reported a low response rate and it was then suggested that we re-send the survey and also send it to good relations officers in local councils. We also emailed reminders to the respondents. In total, 78 questionnaires were distributed. With a **low** response rate of 20 per cent the survey confirmed the need for stronger *qualitative* engagement with service providers and civil sector society groups in order to elicit and identify the key service provision needs of asylum seekers and refugees in Northern Ireland. It also signifies the need for a more extensive surveying technique to gather accurate statistical data on the lives of asylum seekers and refugees in Northern Ireland. Given the small pool of individuals who work with asylum seekers and refugees, we still managed to capture a large number of such individual's views on this topic through the qualitative part of this research. Individuals in service provision and the voluntary sector who work with asylum seekers and refugees in Northern Ireland gave generously and freely of their time to us when we conducted the qualitative part of this research. Thus, where researchers are dealing with a small grouping of people, there is always the risk of over-burdening them with too many methodological approaches within a singular study.

### 2.4 Stage Three: Interviews and Focus Groups with Service Providers and Civil Sector/Host Community Organisations

- The research team undertook a total of twenty-five semi-structured interviews with service providers and civil sector organisations in Belfast, Derry/Londonderry, Dungannon and Craigavon.
- The first set of interviews was substantially focused on service providers and host community organisations. Questions were structured from the Indicators of Integration framework, and focused on gaps in service provision within specific areas and also on the challenges of integration in Northern Ireland. The steering group also received a draft of the interview questions for review and comment. Interviews generally lasted 45 minutes to 1 hour. Interviews were recorded (with the exception of two where participants preferred not to be recorded, notes were taken in lieu of recording) and were verbatim transcribed by a professional company (due to time constraints).
- As a result of the qualitative nature of this research, interviewees' responses are given great weight in the report, as these interviewees are key stakeholders in the improvement of the lives of asylum seekers and refugees in Northern Ireland.
- We also conducted **two** focus groups with service providers and host community organisations (one in Belfast (10 participants) and one in Derry/Londonderry (3 participants)), and consider that these provided an opportunity for participants to have a degree of autonomy within the research process complementing the more formal questionnaire component and semi-structured interviews in which they participated.
- Generally, service providers and host community organisations participated readily in the research.





## 2.5 Stage Four: Interviews and Focus groups with Asylum seekers and Refugees Living in Northern Ireland

- We conducted 22 semi structured interviews with asylum seekers and refugees from a total of 10 different countries living in Northern Ireland. Participants came from Somalia, the Sudan, Kenya, China, Zimbabwe, Kazakhstan, Sri Lanka, Nigeria, Iran and, Syria. In Northern Ireland, the highest number of asylum seekers come from China, Somalia, and the Sudan. Through purposive sampling, we targeted a representative percentage of research participants from a number of the main nationalities seeking asylum in Northern Ireland. We also ensured that research participants had been living in Northern Ireland for different periods of time in order to gauge how views on integration develop. Research participants were living primarily in Belfast with three families and two individuals having lived/living in Derry/Londonderry.
- Interviews were semi-structured and aimed to elicit how asylum seekers and refugees engaged with service provision and more generally viewed their life experiences in Northern Ireland. We developed the interview questions in conjunction with TEO. Interview questions were also sent to the steering group for review and comment.
- Interviews generally lasted 45 minutes to one hour, and for ethical reasons avoided discussion of any potentially triggering or re-traumatising issues. With the consent of participants, interviews were recorded (two participants did not want to be recorded and so notes were taken) and were transcribed by a professional company (due to time constraints).
- 3 Focus groups were also conducted including a male/female group of asylum seekers and refugees (17 in total), a group of teenage asylum seekers and refugees (5), and a group of Chinese asylum seekers accompanied by an interpreter (3).

## 2 Methodology

- In total, we interviewed 47 asylum seekers and refugees in Northern Ireland. We did not interview anyone who arrived through the VPRS or through family reunion. A number of our participants, however, were hoping to apply for family reunion for their family members.
- Interpreters were used to speak to our Chinese participants and during the focus group with Somali asylum seekers and refugees.

## 2.6 Stage Five: Data Analysis

Analysis of both documents and interviews was thematic in nature (Miles and Huberman, 1994; Bryman, 2008), and utilised both inductive and deductive techniques. Some of the themes searched for in the data were pre-determined by literature relating to the focus of the research and the aforementioned domain/factor topical framework, while others emerged from the data itself on further interrogation. Such a process permitted patterns of data to be identified through reading and re-reading of text, allowing both descriptive and analytical accounts of asylum seekers and refugees lives in Northern Ireland to be developed.

An intersectionality approach also informed our analysis. According to Malischewski (2013), who conducted a small-scale study in Northern Ireland (on asylum seekers and refugees) the perceived homogeneity of groups poses one of the main challenges of this kind of research. She argues (2013: 6) that 'The Northern Irish case presents a dramatic example of social division, one in which the question of 'what' refugees and asylum seekers are integrating into is particularly poignant. Indeed, though sectarianism plays an overarching role in dividing society, other factors such as age, gender, class, race, and ethnicity also contribute to social positioning and division.' It is this argument of intersectional social divisions that informs our study of the particular situation and experiences of asylum seekers and refugees in Northern Ireland.



### 2.7 Ethics

The research complies with the *ESRC Framework for Research Ethics (FRE)* 2010 (updated September 2012), and we were especially sensitive about the potential for harm raised by the nature of the issues including identity, race relations and the performance of professionals and policy actors. The project was formally reviewed by the Ethics Committee of the School of Management at the Queen's University Belfast, which involved an independent peer evaluation before any fieldwork commenced. We also built in systems for monitoring ethics during data collection as methodologies varied in response to circumstances in the field. The research complied with University protocols for conducting research in conflict and post conflict contexts (including within Northern Ireland).

### 2.8 Presentation of Findings

It should be noted that, given the small pool of potential research participants and the report's audience in Northern Ireland, quotes are not assigned to specific service providers or host community organisations nor to named asylum seekers or refugees so as to protect the identity of participants. We do, however, name whether the participant was an asylum seeker or refugee and their country of origin. Northern Ireland is a small geographic space, and the asylum seeker and refugee sector is small, so we do not include full narratives from asylum seekers and refugees across the report as this would render the identity and story of our research participants very visible. The research participants in this report spoke to us freely and openly, and gave generously of their time, thus the researchers and authors of this report have an ethical duty towards protecting their identities.

### SUMMARY NOTES

*Mixed methods study into the everyday life experience of asylum seekers and refugees in Northern Ireland.*

*47 asylum seekers and refugees were interviewed in this study.*

*Participants came from ten different countries.*

*Service providers and civil society sector organisations greatly informed this research through one to one interviews and focus groups.*

*Interpreters were used in interviews with the Chinese and Somali community.*

*Intersectionality is the key methodological approach in this study.*

*The researchers have an ethical duty to maintain the privacy of and the identity of research participants in this report, thus identifiable material has been removed such as place-names, references to people's names etc.*



# *Integration*

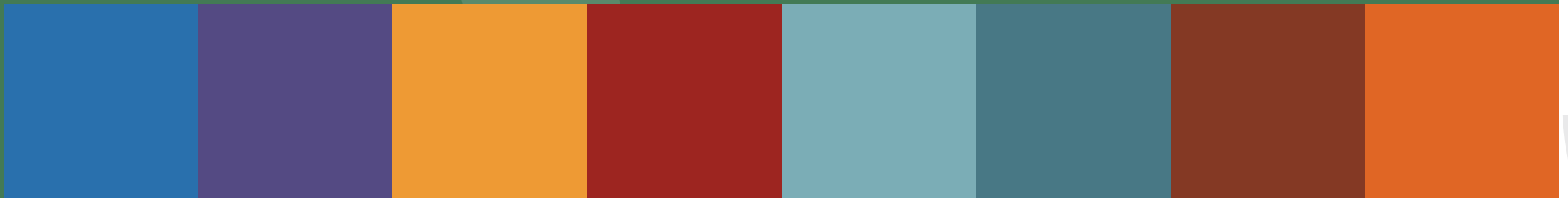
*has to begin the day  
somebody steps off a plane  
or a boat*

*and what tends to happen now  
is you really don't begin  
to put a lot of effort  
into that process*

*until you get  
your refugee status.*



### 3 LITERATURE REVIEW: Understanding Integration in Northern Ireland





## 3

## Literature Review

### 3.1 The History of Migration to Northern Ireland

Migration to Northern Ireland is not a new phenomenon. The last decade, however, has seen a larger number of economic migrants from the A8 countries (Poland in particular) as well as an increased number of asylum seekers and refugees. With respect to the latter, accurate numbers (as previously explained) are difficult to obtain. It is crucial, however, to recognise that Northern Ireland is now a culturally diverse region. It is also important to note that this cultural diversity has a much longer history than some might be aware.

For example, the Jewish community settled in Belfast in the 1860s. Northern Ireland society has also welcomed boat people from Vietnam (Maguire, 2004). Further, the Chinese community is one of the most important visible minority communities in contemporary Belfast<sup>27</sup>. It is this link to historical migration and the ways in which newcomers were accommodated that gives hope to a more positive vision of the integration of refugees, migrants and newcomers into contemporary Northern Ireland.

This historical perspective creates a broader awareness of how plural societies develop. Recognising, documenting and, teaching this history of cultural diversity is imperative for Northern Ireland society in order to begin to understand itself as diverse and accommodating to different ethnic, religious and national communities. Historical material is an invaluable tool in educating the next generation about cultural diversity in Northern Ireland.

Demarcating a space for understanding the history of cultural diversity in Northern Ireland in education and public awareness campaigns is key in the context of reported racist incidents (Haughey, 2014). We refer to this migration history as we regard it as important to understand how and to what degree Northern Ireland has become home to communities of many different nationalities, ethnicities and religions across centuries. This insight is most relevant for developing a welcoming space and culture for refugees and asylum seekers which is one way of combatting hate crime. Even if an asylum seeker or refugee's stay is temporary it matters (even in the short term) how they are regarded and treated. The annual Refugee Week, held in a number of cities in the UK and Ireland, has been very successful in Northern Ireland in generating interest and knowledge in Northern Ireland's asylum seeking and refugee community.

In addition, Northern Ireland shares the UK experience of accepting programme refugees through the VPRS. This should inform a public awareness campaign of what a diverse society means (the benefits of which are discussed later).

### 3.2 The Notion of 'Integration'

Understanding and aiding the integration of new communities into Northern Ireland should be a key goal and as such, we set out to understand asylum seekers and refugees' life experiences in Northern Ireland. With this in mind, we asked research participants a range of questions about their lives in order to track how both asylum seekers and refugees interact with service providers and host communities in Northern Ireland. We also set out to understand how the notion of integration is perceived and engaged with by members of asylum seeking and refugee communities, as well as by members of the host community. This report identifies a range of conceptual and practical difficulties associated with the concept of integration. As such it identifies solutions and pathways towards integration and inclusion in Northern Ireland that groups acting on the findings should consider.

The notion of integration is contested and multiple definitions abound in the scholarly and policy literature on the topic. This research is anchored in two key premises. Firstly, we understand integration as a two-way process (Ager and Strang, 2004) emphasizing a framework that understands and projects a notion of integration by focusing on both newcomers to Northern Ireland and members of Northern Ireland's host community. Furthermore, it is important to note that integration is a process which occurs in stages. Understanding how long-term integration is impacted on by the early stages of arrival and reception is important for defining an integration framework that begins on day one when an individual first seeks asylum.

Featured in a key Home Office publication (Ager and Strang, 2004), this framework suggests ten indicators of integration: employment, housing, education, health, social bridges, social bonds, social links, language and cultural knowledge, safety and stability, and rights and citizenship. The research in this publication captures asylum seekers and refugees' experiences within these key indicators of integration and calls for the need to understand such indicators in conjunction with the contextual





## Literature Review

3

and cultural processes informing them. The difficulties of defining and promoting integration in Northern Ireland poses added complexity for policy makers which begs the question – what are we asking people to integrate into?

According to the European Council on Refugees and Exiles' (ECRE) and (the Scottish Refugee Council) integration is a dynamic, two-way, long-term process that begins on the first day of arrival in the host society. This should be the key starting point for Northern Ireland (European Council on Refugees and Exiles, 2005), too. Ager and Strang (2004) note that while there is a clear lack of consensus on how to define integration- it should nonetheless be an important policy goal. In the UK, the language of integration has undergone a number of iterations, from race relations in the 1960s to notions of community cohesion and inclusion in more recent years. However, with the exception of the Scottish Refugee Integration Report, policy interventions in the UK with regards to asylum seekers and refugees have tended to focus solely on refugees. The UK National Refugee Integration Strategy (Home Office, 2005) states that integration should be seen as 'a process that takes place when refugees are empowered to achieve their full potential as members of British society, to contribute to the community and to become fully able to exercise the rights and responsibilities shared with other residents.' Unlike immigration law, integration is a devolved matter in the UK allowing for local contexts to emphasize the particularities of their own locality in the framing of an integration strategy- as discussed above. The integration needs of asylum seekers and refugees are currently addressed through the *Racial Equality Strategy (2015-2025)* and *Section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act (1998)*. Northern Ireland has seen, however, a number of proposals and reports for the development of pathways towards a more defined integration framework (see in particular the work of the Northern Ireland Strategic Migration Partnership (NISMP) in relation to integration and the challenges faced by asylum seekers and refugees in Northern Ireland)<sup>28</sup>.

To bring empirical evidence and the substantive arguments of various proposals together this research evaluates the ways in which asylum seekers and refugees, service providers and/civil society sector groups, and host communities define integration. Scholars and policy makers have broadly identified a range of barriers to successful integration. Spencer (2006) presents six mutually reinforcing factors that impact on integration, such as challenges with language and/or recognised qualifications, poor knowledge of the host community legal and welfare system, a lack of mobility, generic

service insufficiencies, hostile host community attitudes, and legal barriers associated with immigration status. In addition, scholars list explicitly racism, cultural barriers, period of time waiting for legal decision, and context (Mestheneos and Ioannidi, 2002) as strong barriers to integration. Critical in this consideration is an understanding of the ways in which asylum seekers are restricted, or indeed, *excluded* from participating in a given society which will impact on their long-term engagement and integration depending on how long they are waiting to be processed. We will come back to this issue later, as the situation of asylum seekers (waiting for a status decision, or having an exhausted legal case, but remaining in the country) is of particular concern in this regard. The issue of how post-migration stressors impact on asylum seekers and refugees' lives in the host community will be unpacked throughout the report. There is much research to indicate that the post-migration experience can lead to a profound deterioration of an asylum seekers or refugees' well-being (Carswell, 2009; Aragana et al., 2013)

In this study, we orient 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'.





### 3

## Literature Review

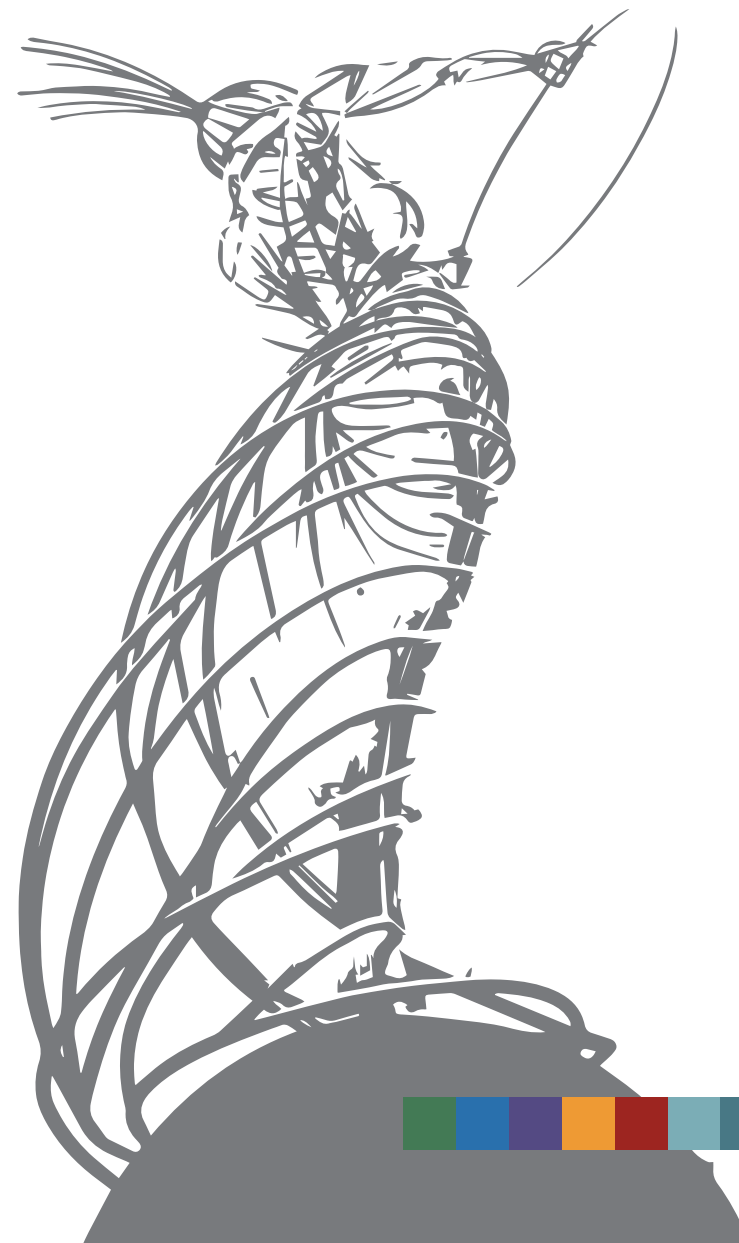
### SUMMARY NOTES

*Integration should be conceptualised as a two-way process.*

*Integration should begin on the day of arrival.*

*Employment, housing, education, health, social bridges, social bonds, social links, language and cultural knowledge, safety and stability, and rights and citizenship form the key indicators of integration.*

*The issue of historical segregation in Northern Ireland needs to be more fully considered in the context of the integration of asylum seekers and refugees.*





## 4 VIEWS ON THE GROUND: Integration and the Asylum Process

Integration is a complex concept but key for ensuring community cohesion. This report presents integration as a two-way process (Ager and Strang, 2004) beginning on the day of arrival. Different aspects of integration are important for different individuals and groups, depending on their personal backgrounds and professional roles. This section focuses on the asylum experience and the ways in which it impacts on people's pathways to integration. We then move on to discuss how asylum seekers and refugees understand and engage with the notion of integration.



### 4.1 Introduction

If we are to begin with the premise that integration begins from the first day of arrival, then a refugee integration strategy also needs to consider the experiences of asylum seekers in the context of the asylum process and question what can be done to alleviate the challenges of a rather complex and restrictive system. While we have stressed that immigration law is designed and implemented from the Home Office-Northern Ireland still has a critical role to play at the integration and community cohesion level.

Further, any efforts towards a refugee integration strategy will have important implications for host communities in Northern Ireland. The development of such a strategy in what is a period of heightened political and economic instability in a number of regions across the globe (including the UK with its decision to leave the European Union), means that putting notions of integration and community cohesion to the forefront to achieve a better, more equal society for all is now an urgent matter.

All of our research participants (asylum seekers and refugees) highlighted the challenges of the asylum application process and the negative experiences involved in attempting to understand the process, e.g. finding appropriate legal support, undergoing critical scrutiny in the interview experience, and living in unstable and unpredictable situations. In the section on health in this report, we advise that questions of the general well-being and mental health of asylum seekers and refugees should be of primary concern. Viewing well-being and mental health through a social determinants lens means that asylum seekers and refugees have to have appropriate housing and prospective opportunities such as employment and education (amongst others) in order to live well in a given society. As we indicate, however, this is often not the case, and people's pathways to integration are often destabilised by what are poor living conditions, destitution, and a sense of being unequal, even unwelcome in Northern Ireland.

Further, the experiences of the asylum process can leave a long-term imprint on some members of the asylum seeking and refugee community. Across the domains of our research, it is noteworthy to point out that there is a general gap in ensuring that all asylum seekers and refugees have access to all the information they need to

begin their lives in Northern Ireland. Asylum seekers have a range of needs, so an approach across services is needed to improve the general welfare of asylum seekers and refugees in Northern Ireland. Access to information is critical to open the gateway to successful integration. As such, all levels of government have a shared benefit in promoting the value of refugee integration.

### 4.2 Asylum Application Experience

#### 4.2.1 Arrival experiences

Northern Ireland is outside of the broader UK dispersal system, so asylum seekers and refugees arrive to Northern Ireland through a variety of routes. In-depth exploration of this issue was outside of the remit of the current research, however, this may be pursued in future projects. Quail (2016) (QUB) highlights some of the complex pathways asylum seekers and refugees traverse before their arrival to Northern Ireland. This research is of significant value in understanding the important role of social bonds and networks that asylum seekers and refugees form in Northern Ireland, particularly vital to early engagement with Northern Ireland society (Spicer, 2010). In this research, we asked people to speak about their encounters with immigration officials after their initial arrival. These experiences, as one might expect, vary dramatically and are dependent on people's migration journey experience, their country of origin, their language skills and 'social capital.' In the main, however, our research participants expressed their concerns about a number of elements within the asylum process.

All of our participants stressed the confusing nature of the asylum process and difficulties with legal support until guidance was found through the voluntary sector. A number of organisations were noted in the research as providing critical advice on the asylum process. Migrant Help is an organisation contracted by the Home Office to provide support on asylum issues. In Northern Ireland, Migrant Help has a physical office where asylum seekers can seek advice and support. Other issues included waiting time to have applications processed (and thus a sense of suspension or interrupted life-cycle), the interview experience, the sense of not being believed or challenged, and





## Views on the Ground

4

enforced poverty, even destitution. A number of our research participants experienced both destitution as failed asylum seekers and detention in Larne House, Northern Ireland and in Great Britain. Maguire and Murphy (2012) indicate that the impact of these negative experiences within the asylum process endure beyond the achievement of refugee status (and even into citizenship) - thereby diminishing the pathway to successful integration. It is therefore requisite to understand these experiences and implement changes where possible at ground level in Northern Ireland.

### 4.2.2 The Interview

Most asylum seekers must attend a 'substantive Home office interview' as part of the application process to achieve refugee status. The purpose of this interview is to collect evidence and to assess the credibility of the applicant, however, documentary evidence is very often missing. During the interview, there is an expectation of full disclosure of an individual's personal history and their reason for an asylum claim. Research indicates that decision outcomes on refugee status are linked to the ways in which individuals articulate or 'present' their 'stories,' in particular, their reasons for leaving their country of origin (Bögner et al., 2009). Non-disclosure or late information regarding personal histories can lead to asylum seekers being disbelieved, or accused of fabrication (Bögner et al., 2007). Non-disclosure can occur for a wide range of reasons including but not limited to: PTSD (as well as mental illness and memory problems) and an inability to speak about a particular experience, fear of authority (including the atmosphere created by the interviewer and even, the interview setting), fear of being judged (shame), cultural understandings of what should be spoken publicly and what should be kept silent (this can connect to the use of an interpreter from the individual's community), gender, and so on (Bögner et al., 2009). While we did not explicitly ask our research participants a question about their interview experience, it nonetheless appeared as a common theme in our interviews. Individuals within the voluntary sector described a pervasive 'culture of disbelief' amongst immigration officials (Souter, 2011). One of our participants had such a bad experience during his substantive interview that he subsequently fell into depression and had to seek treatment. He says:

“

*They didn't believe me; terrible things happen me in my country. Terrible things happen me on the way here and then they just end up not believing anything I say. I end up getting put into detention. (Iranian asylum seeker)*

This connects to the issue of how such interviews are conducted, and how they can be potentially re-traumatising for asylum seekers who have already undergone harrowing experiences in their countries of origin and on their migration journey. Interviews can last up to 8 hours and beyond, and our research participants report feeling interrogated about the minutia of their personal lives as well as the factual details about their country of origin. One research participant reports:

“

*Then I ended up going to the interview on the Monday and I was there all day, until 18h45, about 300 or 400 questions, irrelevant, asking me who's the president in my country, I was not a politician, I had just left high school, I couldn't care who was ruling the country. (...) So, they were asking me what's the colour of the flag of your country? (Kenyan refugee)*

In response to a question on how she deals with immigration issues an asylum seeker from Zimbabwe says:

“

*They were quite difficult because they'll be asking a lot of questions, some of the questions you don't even know how to answer them because you were not expecting to get such questions, such as they will want the date and this and that, it wasn't on my plan that they were going to ask that, so I was having difficulty in answering those questions.*

Another female research participant also an asylum seeker from Zimbabwe told us:





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*“Process was tough. The process was okay, but my interview was tough, but at the same time, I mean I've said then you know what, probably if I were the person doing the interview, I'd probably also ask the questions the way they were asked and I would probably react that way. I mean, how many people do they interview in a day, do you understand?”*

Another told us of the potentially re-traumatizing impact of the interview process as well as the inability of some asylum seekers to articulate their trauma:

*“The Somalis they come from the war-torn country more than 20 years, or two decades. (...). For example, I obviously have physical injuries and that is a testament. For example, when the interviews conducted by the Home Office there are versions of traumatic experience that some people cannot explain. They cannot cope with the environment. Of the questions they ask. So that's a challenge. But they will say, of course, we know that you had a difficulty but we have to speak to you and you have to tell exactly.  
(Somalian refugee)”*

The asylum system is highly gendered in the way political involvement and threats are perceived; also the assessment of the country of origin takes for granted Western standards when it comes to the question of how to prove national belonging. How country of origin information (COI) material is assembled and then used by asylum assessors is highly problematic and widely critiqued (see especially the work of Anthony Good (2015).

A female refugee who was visibly distressed as she spoke to us, described the interview process as absurd:

*“Yes and you know someone who never been to school who doesn't*

*even know the names of the village, who can't write it down. Who doesn't been visited all their life, how do you expect me to know all this and the rivers and the names and all that. It isn't make no sense to me. That's just what I want to add. (Somali asylum seeker)”*

Our participants also highlighted a lack of support once an application has been rejected. How the rejection is framed and communicated in written form is also deemed problematic. One participant describes it thus:

*“Because I got my refusal a few weeks after my interview, that was really a knock, a proper knocker. I mean my solicitor had warned me that 99% of the times it comes back as a refusal, but when I received that letter, I felt torn you know, it kind of broke me, you know reading that letter just broke me. You know when you're on your own and you read that kind of letter, that details and kind of like tears you apart and it just says everything that you said is a lie and this and that, it makes you really view experiences and at the same time, you start thinking, is this person that monstrous?  
(Zimbabwean asylum seeker)”*

A number of our research participants told us that were it not for the support from organisations in the voluntary sector that they would not have been able to endure the interview process. Lack of information around the interview process (of what is involved) and a feeling of being interrogated are two key themes which featured in our conversations with asylum seekers and refugees. While the Home Office has a number of documents around the training of immigration interviewers – such as the APM annex Protocol Governing the conduct of substantive interviews and the roles of interviewing officers, representatives and their interpreters – it seems that not all interviewers operate accordingly. Research participants suggested to us that there should be better support given to asylum seekers before they attend their substantive interview. Very occasionally, asylum seekers felt they received this support from their solicitor (but in the main this was not the case – a critical issue which we will discuss





in the next section). At present, much of this support as it exists is ad hoc and comes from the much over extended voluntary sector. Bogner et al. (2009) make a series of important recommendations on how to improve the interview experience which are both simple and practical (including changing the setting of the interview room to make it more welcoming and using gender specific interpreters where necessary). Schock et al. (2015) examined the interview experience of 40 asylum seekers and thus warn that without adequate supports in place to assist asylum seekers, interviews can have an adverse re-traumatising effect.

While the asylum process is under Home Office jurisdiction, it must be noted that this is often an asylum seeker's first experience of the UK State (and, in most instances, they will not understand that immigration law is an excepted policy area, so they will perceive it as emanating from the Northern Ireland State). As such, negative experience in the asylum process will impact on an individual's perception of and relationship to Northern Ireland. In terms of what can be accomplished in Northern Ireland, we recommend the refugee strategy explore the value of a system of information and support for asylum seekers before their attendance at an interview- this could form a part of a larger mentoring system.

#### 4.2.3 Legal Advice

A recurring theme in our interviews with research participants is the issue of legal support for asylum seekers in Northern Ireland. Asylum seekers and refugees describe their engagement with legal support as disappointing in the main. Inappropriate representation is detrimental to an asylum seeker's claim and those we interviewed (particularly those who have failed applications or fresh appeals) shared examples where they felt they had been given inadequate support by their solicitors. In particular, in the early stages of the asylum process, our research participants described a lack of support, or confusing advice from solicitors. Instances were given of solicitors not having done proper preparation in advance of interviews, or having given inconsistent or unclear advice. Ultimately, a number of those we interviewed did not achieve clarity on the asylum process with the help of a legal representative. One research participant, a Kenyan asylum seeker undergoing a fresh claim, highlighted the difficulties he had in securing legal representation:

“

*So I met (gives name of person working in voluntary sector) and she's the one who I asked –then she ask me where is your solicitor, I say I don't have a solicitor, because I've had two and none of them has been in contact with me. I've gone to Bryson twice; they haven't told me any solicitor is looking for me. I have asked them, they say you should have your solicitor's contact number, I said I had two and they ignored the subject. So when I went to the charity organisation NICRAS, I asked them, I asked her and she rang someone so I got an appointment within three days. So I had known my solicitor two days prior to my interview and I didn't know why I was going for the interview, so I needed somebody to explain to me, because I didn't know anything about asylum.*

Another asylum seeker says:

“

*Legal support was very limited. Most of the time I think you're on your own. You really need to work on your own to explain issues to the Home Office. The legal support most probably, it becomes visible when your case ends up with appeals. But for when it's at the initial stages, like money. You are on your own. You are told that you got an option of legal aid here and there but the Barrister or the Solicitor is not much of a help. Let me rather put it that way, not much of a help. (Zimbabwean refugee)*

A female asylum seeker from Somalia told us:

“

*It is difficult for me, because when I was new, no one was helping me, because I'm new. At that time, I was in shock and I didn't give them the right things, so I'm scared, I don't know the process. That is why everything I keep it.*





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The lack of engagement with asylum seekers cases by solicitors acquired through legal aid in Northern Ireland is therefore a recurring theme. While this should not be generalized, it is nonetheless a major issue which needs to be addressed. It must be emphasised, however, that groups such as the Law Centre Northern Ireland and STEP NI (South Tyrone Empowerment Programme) provide supports for asylum seekers and refugees. Until 2015, the Law Centre Northern Ireland had the capacity to give immigration advice and many of our research participants point to it as having made a great difference to them during the asylum process. STEP also runs an introduction to immigration advice course for those wishing to distribute level 1 immigration advice. Where asylum seekers and refugees have received proper and correct legal advice, it has made a significant difference to their experience of the asylum system in Northern Ireland. One of our research participants told us:

*“When I finally got help through the Law Centre things got a lot better. I was given good advice and began to understand things about my claim that no-body had bothered to explain before that to me. Yeah it made a big difference. (Zimbabwean refugee).”*

Unlike in Great Britain, where immigration practitioners must be registered with the Immigration and Asylum Accreditation Scheme, one of the major issues in Northern Ireland is the ability of any solicitor to practice immigration law without appropriate accreditation. For this research, we interviewed one private practice solicitor who deemed the lack of continuing professional development certification in immigration law amongst solicitors practicing immigration law as detrimental. The Northern Ireland Strategic Migration Partnership (Kerr, 2016) outlines how recent cuts to legal aid have impacted on the support offered to asylum seekers, in particular in their role in the substantive interview. Kerr's (2016) assessment dovetails with how our research participants articulate their engagement with the legal system in Northern Ireland as being sporadic and intermittent at best. Cuts to legal aid, and therefore, reduced or no entitlements for those wishing to appeal rejected cases, sets an individual and/or family on the pathway to destitution (it can also compound mental health illnesses) (Porter and Haslam, 2005).

Poor quality legal advice thus hampers asylum applications and adds an extra

layer of stress to what is already a complex process (Shannon, 2010; Muggeridge and Maman, 2011). It can also be responsible for deserving asylum seekers losing their claims. The voluntary and charitable sector is also constrained by OISC (Office of the Immigration Services Commissioner) regulations in that they cannot make recommendations for particular solicitors in Northern Ireland. In a comparative study by the Refugee Council of Ireland (Anderson and Conlon, 2014) looking at the merits of providing early legal advice in a number of settings including the UK, the council argues for the importance of providing early legal advice and of frontloading asylum cases with relevant material. The piloting of an Early Legal Aid Project in the UK showed the benefits of giving early legal advice to asylum seekers, but was not rolled out across the UK (Anderson and Conlon, 2014). Benefits included speedier and better asylum decisions, as well as the cultivation of trust between asylum seekers and the immigration officials.

Extending a similar pilot to Northern Ireland and beginning a process where immigration practitioners receive appropriate training and accreditation would be key to mitigating the current quagmire with regards to legal advice to asylum seekers in Northern Ireland. This will have long-term benefits to an integration process by attenuating the risks of mental health illness and destitution.

### 4.2.4 Detention – Larne House

We did not explicitly ask questions about detention in our research, but nonetheless, a number of our participants wanted to express how the experience impacted on them during the asylum seeking process in Northern Ireland. Resulting from these discussions, we deemed it appropriate to conduct interviews with representatives of the Larne House Visitor Group – a group who visits asylum seekers detained in Larne House to ensure well-being of those held there.

There are, as yet, no longitudinal studies on how detention experiences impact the life course of an asylum seeker who remains in the UK. However, some studies signpost how detention contributes to a decline in mental health, a feeling of alienation and exclusion from the host society as well as a sense of interruption to the life course (Coffey et al, 2010; Bosworth, 2014).







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The practice of detaining asylum seekers in the UK has increasingly become more commonplace. Typically, detention and deportation policies are seen as being apart from integration policy. However, as a number of studies have shown (Bathilly, 2014), a high number of those detained actually remain in a given territory, and thus become beneficiaries of integration policies. Given the ways that detention impacts on individuals and families' physical and mental well-being- ensuring those experiencing detention are well treated is important to effective integration (Keller et al., 2003).

As such, due consideration of detention experiences is pertinent to the development of a refugee integration strategy. At least four of our research participants discussed the experience of being detained in Larne House in Northern Ireland (which is a short term holding facility operated by Tascor for the Home Office), with two being sent on to detention centres in Great Britain, but subsequently returned to Northern Ireland. Two of our research participants experienced the direct provision system in the Republic of Ireland.

Larne House was also inspected by HM inspector of Prisons in 2013. This inspection resulted in a number of recommendations - particularly about allowing men and women separate accommodation and the ability to lock their own rooms.

A major issue with detention experiences is the way in which someone seeking asylum is made to feel like a criminal. The criminalisation of migration, as a number of scholars have highlighted (see Bosworth, 2014; Aliverti, 2012), subjects asylum seekers to dehumanising experiences and is ultimately, an infringement on the civil liberties of someone in need of asylum. A detention system for asylum seekers also generates a particular image of asylum seekers as 'criminal' in the host community (Hall, 2010). One of our research participants puts it thus:

*"I didn't know where I was going, I've never been in the city, I've just spent three days in a police cell and I couldn't understand it, was this the safety I came for, to be locked in a cell and be questioned and nobody seems to wonder why I'm here and if that's what they're trying to find out, I think they're doing it in the wrong way. (Kenyan Refugee)"*

People's detention experiences are thus characterised by uncertainty (see Griffiths, 2013) as one of our research participants describes it:

*"(..)We have a lot of people who are detained. Some may just try to go back to court, because the appeal process takes so long. So there's just this uncertainty throughout because the Home Office sends you a letter, you need to be deported back, and then you go to the lawyer, the lawyer goes to court and stops it, so it becomes like a game."*

This uncertainty extends to people being unsure of what is going to happen to them while being kept in detention – not being informed of how long they will be held or whether they will be transferred to Great Britain. One participant described his experience of detention in the UK as follows:

*"Well the main issue is the peoples don't know what is going on with asylum seekers, even asylum seekers themselves don't know. They hear 'oh we are doing all these things, we are going to take Syrian refugees' but then all these other things happen like people getting detained. The quality of detention is well it is like prison and detention in the UK is unlimited, no specified time to stay there. (Sri Lankan refugee)"*

How people are treated over the course of their detention varies between Northern Ireland and Great Britain. However, asylum seekers are often handcuffed (on arrest, when being brought to court, or when being transferred). Two of our research participants experienced this on transferral to Great Britain. One says:

*"Why did they have to put me in handcuffs (extends hands)? Why do they treat me like I am a criminal? I have done nothing wrong,"*







**only escape my country where terrible things happen me.  
(Iranian refugee)**

As immigration detention is an administrative procedure and not a criminal one, the question of why asylum seekers in Northern Ireland (and Great Britain) are placed in handcuffs without the completion of an appropriate risk assessment- needs to be answered (Potter, 2014; Aliverti, 2012). The research participants that we interviewed told us that they were well treated in Larne House and that the staff were generally supportive of their concerns. This appears not to be the case with transferral to Great Britain and detention in immigration removal centres. Despite being well treated, asylum seekers removed from asylum accommodation centres in Northern Ireland- are often not allowed to bring their belongings with them. If returned to their accommodation at a later stage, they find their belongings have been removed (two of our participants highlighted how this had happened to them personally). For impoverished asylum seekers, this presents another set of difficulties in that they have to source new clothing and footwear.

The Larne House Visitors Group offers active, entirely voluntary support to asylum seekers in detention at Larne House. Its main interest is in ensuring that asylum seekers' rights are respected and that they are in a position to communicate freely with friends and family outside of the detention centre. While the visitors' groups' views align with our research participants' views in that they are treated kindly by staff at the centre, they pointed out that the centre itself still feels prison-like and could be made more comfortable for those staying there. Improved conditions and access to information about status and removal are paramount for detainees to alleviate increased stress. Allowing asylum seekers the right to be active participants in their own cases is also crucial (such as being allowed to attend bail hearings etc.). At present, asylum seekers in detention are infantilised which subsequently has negative psycho-social impacts (Silove et al., 2001).

#### 4.3 Family Separation and Reunion

Many asylum seekers and refugees become separated from families and support

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## Views on the Ground

networks during the migration journey. Separation from family, in particular, is a well-recognised post-migration stressor but an under-researched issue in connection to the notion of integration (Cleveland et al., 2012; Carswell et al., 2009). Ager and Strang (2004) note that family reunion is a key aspect of integration. In this research, we did not explicitly ask people about the steps they were undertaking to apply for family reunification, but a number of the research participants commented on how being apart from their families was extremely painful. Refugees in the UK have the right to apply for family reunification (under Part 11 of the UK Immigration Rules).

Separation from family can therefore impact on the well-being (both physical and mental) of an individual as people often wait for lengthy periods of time before they have contact with family members (Cleveland et al., 2012; Carswell et al., 2009). This is compounded for those who do not know of their family's whereabouts and thus have grave concerns for their safety. Further, once family reunification occurs another set of complexities arise regarding the dependency of family members. Both the British Red Cross (Marsden and Harris, 2015) and the Scottish Refugee Council (Connell et al., 2010) point to the issue of family reunion as a critical pathway to integration. Further, campaigns such as the Red Cross 'Torn Apart Campaign' highlight the complexities and limitations of family reunification as it currently stands. It is important to highlight that family members coming to the UK through family reunion are not recognised as refugees by the UK and their stay is dependent on the family member with whom they are being reunited. This puts such individuals in a precarious position and many become fully dependent on the family member they are joining. Marsden and Harris (2015: 16) state:

{ ... }

*(...) the period immediately after family reunion can be another transition crisis point in integration pathways for refugees and their families when they are at a higher risk of experiencing destitution and homelessness or severe overcrowding. This period mirrors 'crisis points' that have been identified at other transitions, such as during the move on period after a person gets refugee status.*

The link between family reunification and destitution and homelessness is thus critical for an integration strategy to consider. The isolation and anxiety created by



family separation also impacts on the health and well-being of asylum seekers and refugees, thus presenting further challenges for integration. In Northern Ireland, legal aid is provided to assist with family reunion and the British Red Cross provides support to assist refugees with this process. However, during our research some members of the voluntary community sector indicated that not all refugees are aware of such supports and often incur large debt while trying to have their family brought to Northern Ireland. In short, family separation and reunion and its link to integration is a complex topic needing consideration in a Northern Ireland refugee integration strategy.

#### 4.4 Conclusion

While the issues that we raise in this section largely fall under the remit of the Home Office, there is a role for the devolved administration in providing support for asylum seekers as they engage with the asylum application process. Ensuring that legal support is provided in an appropriate manner and that immigration practitioners have appropriate expertise and qualifications in the area is paramount. So too is awareness and engagement with the ways in which immigration officials operate in Northern Ireland. The Northern Ireland Executive may wish to explore whether it has a role as a critical partner in preventing the mistreatment of asylum seekers and refugees. Creating an expert-led service which allows asylum seekers early legal advice and knowledge of their rights and entitlements would prevent asylum seekers from destitution and homelessness which impacts on all of society. While a number of organisations (such as the British Red Cross) do provide family reunion supports in Northern Ireland, family separation and reunion is a critical issue which requires further research in the context of Northern Ireland. Future initiatives like the Refugee Integration Strategy should consider how they can help address such issues.

#### SUMMARY NOTES

*How asylum seekers experience the asylum process impacts on their integration into a given society-this must be considered in a refugee integration strategy*

*At present, legal support for asylum seekers and refugees in Northern Ireland is poor, asylum seekers and refugees report conflicting and confusing advice, and very low level support from solicitors.*

*Many asylum seekers and refugees report a negative experience with their substantive interview.*

*There are clear issues with the practice of removing and detaining asylum seekers in Northern Ireland (such as handcuffing, permanent separation from belongings, and lack of clarity on their status) which need urgent remedy.*

*Key suggestions include an appropriate support and guidance system be introduced to guide asylum seekers through the asylum process.*

*Anyone giving immigration legal advice should have the appropriate qualifications and be registered.*

*Monitoring of removal and detention practices in Northern Ireland should be introduced.*

*Family separation and reunion is a critical aspect of integration processes but requires further research and support in the Northern Ireland context.*



*Why did they have to put me in handcuffs (extends hands) ?*

*Why do they treat me*

*like I am  
a criminal*

*I have done nothing wrong  
only escape my country  
where terrible things happen me*

## 5 VIEWS ON THE INTEGRATION PROCESS

The aim of this section is to examine the views of those involved in the integration process, including asylum seekers and refugees trying to adapt to life in Northern Ireland, service providers and members of the voluntary sector. As such, we primarily reflect on how our research participants define and promote integration. As expected, integration is constructed and imagined along a broad spectrum - depending on an individual's perspective and focus. The views contained in our research vary from practical constructions of integration to more philosophical reflections on social connections, belonging and identity. All of these analyses have their place in any debate on how an integration strategy should be constructed. When we asked participants for their views on integration, they often spoke at length about how they are either prevented from integrating to the degree they wish or how they developed their own personal strategies of integration to feel more fulfilled by life in Northern Ireland. A number of our participants told us they had not explicitly thought about the notion of integration in the language or terms by which we presented it to them.



## 5 Views on the Integration Process

We begin by examining the views of service providers and voluntary sector professionals on integration. This is key to defining a particular context of integration for asylum seekers and refugees. We will then engage with asylum seekers and refugees' views, and conclude by looking at some of what the voluntary sector is doing to create a better landscape for values of inclusion and community cohesion to emerge across all communities in Northern Ireland.

### 5.1 Service Providers and Voluntary Sector Views on Integration

Service providers and the voluntary sector's views on integration are obviously shaped to some degree by their professional interests and role. In this report, we also highlight asylum seekers and refugees' engagements with the domains of housing, health, education and employment, as well as their encounters with the immigration process. The service providers and voluntary sector professionals we interviewed all agreed on the need for a refugee integration strategy to be developed in Northern Ireland, although there were differing views on what the strategy should do:

*“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. (Health service professional)”*

*“I think it's important to have a policy on integration because if it's just left like that, it's nothing in place, then nothing would really happen. I think this integration would just include- you need the language, you need some form of education to be able to cope with maybe getting some jobs and you need knowledge of your local area where you are. So if something is in place to help refu-*

*gees access those services maybe, that if someone is being granted refugee status, maybe the first thing they might need to do, it's not by force, but if its available maybe, is to have this and then they have this maybe courses or whatever, then that will just you know, facilitate integration and something also that encourages intercultural, cross communicating with the locals. (Voluntary sector professional)”*

The notion of integration as a two-way process was frequently emphasized:

*“I think there are different theories of what integration is and I do like the idea of it being a two-way process. But I think this is simplistic- 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. That means the people know, for example, that a refugee knows that they're entitled to access benefits. But they also know, okay if I'm experiencing difficulties in accessing benefits this is how I go about addressing the problem, which might be you go to a CAB or you contact the Law Centre. (Voluntary sector professional)”*

*“I would say integration would be the method and then also the stairs by which somebody attains a level of comfort within their host community and get to a stage where they feel that they are accepted and are well established in their host community in relation to various different aspects. So housing, schooling for their children, training, employment, health, education, their own cultural background and how that both enriches and also impacts on those communities and reciprocity around that. (Housing sector professional)”*



## Views on the Integration Process

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The need for equality and mutual respect was mentioned a number of times:

*“ We have to respect people’s cultures, traditions, and their reasons to come here and we have to respect their languages. We don’t want them to become white Catholics or white Protestants. We want them to be what they are and recognise and value their contribution to our society. (Health sector professional)*

*“ A recognition that their difference should not in any way result in a less quality service than others, and that difference could be that they are a refugee or that they’re disabled or that they’re gay or something like that. (Housing sector professional)*

Many of those interviewed hold the view that integration should begin from day one when an individual arrives in Northern Ireland:

*“ Integration has to begin the day somebody steps off a plane or a boat and what tends to happen now is you really don’t begin to put a lot of effort into that process until you get your refugee status. (Voluntary sector professional)*

That it should be about belonging to a community, feeling at peace in a community:

*“ We would talk about a sense of belonging because, obviously, we work at a community level, so it’s about being part of the community that you live in and that if you live in that community, you are part of that community. Just as everyone else in that community you can decide to go into your own house and have no interaction*

*with anyone else if you want to or you can come out and you can educate and you can go to use all the local services, and just live your life in peace and quiet. I mean we have a couple of you know visions for us is that everyone will have access to decent, good, quality, affordable housing. To be able to have the peaceful enjoyment of that, that would be our aim in our communities. I think that’s integration. People can choose how much they want to be a part of that, or they can choose not to be a part of that, it’s entirely up to them. (Housing sector professional)*

The impact of an excepted immigration policy was also often mentioned, with some service providers commenting that this brought about additional challenges for Northern Ireland’s relationship with its asylum seeking and refugee community:

*“ Immigration and refugee policy is still driven by Westminster-the UK Government (...). So there is no, again, strategy in the devolved situations for dealing with BME communities, for dealing with asylum seekers and refugees and that is a policy gap. That is the policy gap that everybody operates in and it creates lots of grey areas for people. So that needs to be addressed. (Health sector professional)*

The need to have better data about who is accessing services and what their needs are was also broached. In order to plan, design and implement better services, the needs of service users should be fully taken into account. Within a number of services this collection of data for such internal usage is ongoing:

*“ In terms of accessing health service, we have just put in place a system which will monitor the ethnicity of anybody that attend our service. So we are trying to identify their ethnicity or their country of origin as they attend our service, but that is just for internal use. That doesn’t go to the Home Office, it doesn’t go to anybody else. (Health service professional)*



The issue of information needs and access to entitlements was stressed as a base line for integration. Key throughout this report has been the need to address very particular gaps and issues with service provision:

*“Well, in a community, I would feel that the people coming into that community would have access to all of the services that are open to the indigenous population as part of Health and Social Care [...]. But then also in a cultural and social sense, that people are accepted within society and can access all of the other economic, cultural, social things that the indigenous population enjoys. Whether its access to jobs or education or whatever, I think in terms of integration, what's key and what probably could be provided in a more effective way at the moment is access to English classes. (Health service professional)*

*“It becomes quite ironic to ask a failed asylum seeker who is not legally allowed to have a roof over their heads and money to sustain themselves how they are integrating here<sup>29</sup>. So they don't have a roof over their head, have no food to eat, how are they integrated? So that's something to look at. (Voluntary sector professional)*

During focus groups and one to one interviews, the issue of having a more uniform approach to integration across various sectors was repeatedly mentioned. Many people working on the issue of asylum seekers and refugees in Northern Ireland are of the opinion that much more work needs to be done to have a more structured and strategic focus on integration across sectors:

*“It's a whole systems approach and again, we would know from the evidence that to effectively improve ethnic minority and migrant health and wellbeing, that's what's needed, is a whole systems*

## 5 Views on the Integration Process

*approach- where it's working across the sectors. (...) like across employment, education, health, local government. (Health sector professional)*

The challenges of measuring integration or community cohesion is also an issue for service providers and voluntary sector professionals. The issue of how there can be a true measurement of integration when different aspects of it are meaningful in differing ways is a challenge. However, a number of individuals did not feel Northern Ireland was 'quite there yet':

*“Community cohesion indicators, well I don't think we've got there yet. I mean like, I think we would take our lead on that from the racial equality strategy. We would be looking at whether there is a good spread in ethnic minority services across the different elements of society. (Health service professional)*

*“So each time an asylum seeker gets their refugee status, it's like each person has to negotiate for themselves. Because we've never really sat down and thought about how it should all work, we don't even know if it's working well, we have nothing to measure things against. I think if we had a refugee integration strategy in place we could decide well what are the indicators? How do we know that integration is happening, that refugees are integrating, and then we could go back and measure it, whereas at the moment we're just guessing. (Voluntary sector professional)*

*“I am not sure that we have the right set of indicators as yet. I think we need to go back and look at a refugee integration strategy. We need to see. (Voluntary sector professional)*





## Views on the Integration Process

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Debates exist on the question of mainstreaming more broadly within the study of integration (see especially the Migration Policy Institute).<sup>30</sup> Our research participants echoed this idea as a goal within an integration strategy:

*I would like to feel that there would be, it would be possible then for them to access mainstream services, just the same as all the rest of the population, but they would have to be mainstream services that are appropriate to their particular needs as well. So it's about, its mainstream, but it has also been reviewed or checked to ensure that it is appropriate. (Health service professional)*

*I think long term we would like to see asylum seekers and refugees mainstreamed into government priorities. At the moment, I think it's fair to say it's still a fairly niche area, (...)the numbers here are so small in some ways it would be nice if rather than the refugee community having to come up with little projects to support members, if the members could be absorbed in existing projects. Existing education groups, or whatever. You know that they're perhaps not seen differently. A good example would be Sure Start, Sure Start is a service for pre-school children and it's great it's a national wide programme to help children get the best possible start in life. We need to ensure that asylum seekers are accessing that scheme, for example, rather than for us to set up our own scheme to help with young children. It might be necessary to have our own little scheme to begin with but then ultimately I think the aim needs to be to bridge the mainstream services. To get the asylum seeking children into the national Sure Start programmes, for example. (Voluntary sector professional)*

The issue of funding cuts and how that impacts on the development of integration projects is a very particular issue - this is coupled to a view that integration should begin at the local level in order to be effective, that there should be a balance between

integration focused projects and integration in its everyday evolution:

*In recent times, I mean several years ago, there would have been funding available to run projects that were specifically supporting integration. That funding is no longer available. So, for example, there's been projects that focused specifically on supporting the process of integration whether it be by facilitating links with the local communities, or helping with education training, helping with employment, workshops around the culture here. (Voluntary sector professional)*

*I think to support integration you need that sort of intensive work within local areas, it's not a top-down process. (Voluntary sector professional)*

The question of what we are asking asylum seekers and refugees to integrate into and the views on difference that can pose a challenge to integration were frequently mentioned:

*There are still certain areas where they don't have any respect for anybody who is of difference. They don't even respect their own. So like there is a big divide between Catholics and Protestants. Then on top of that they have other issues with migrant and refugee and the very well settled BME communities like Indian, Chinese, Jewish, Pakistani community who have been here from 1940s and they're very well settled. (Voluntary sector professional)*

Finally, a large number of voluntary sector organisations and services specific to asylum seekers and refugees are located in Belfast. The development of a refugee integration strategy could find value in exploring how the Belfast centric nature of





## 5 Views on the Integration Process

some services affects refugees and asylum seekers, this became very apparent in our interviews with service providers and asylum seekers and refugees living in Derry/Londonderry:

*“When it comes to issues under immigration advice or refugees and asylum seekers, I call Bryson Group, because Bryson seems to be more knowledgeable on what’s going on, so they would probably speak on the phone to the person. Or if it is something very personal we will try and get transport for them to go to Belfast and access the service, which is a shame because we have advice centres that are accessing public funding, while we are also taxpayers, and we cannot access that service. It is ridiculous for somebody to leave and go to Belfast, 75 miles away to access a service that can be provided here. (Voluntary sector professional)”*

There are many good practice examples of integration projects in Northern Ireland which could be revisited as part of an integration strategy. The voluntary and civil society sector has, to date, campaigned for and achieved a number of key outcomes for asylum seekers and refugees. Campaigns for free English classes for refugees, improved access to healthcare (especially for destitute asylum seekers), legal aid for family reunion, and an Executive Office crisis fund for vulnerable asylum seekers and refugees have all achieved successful outcomes reflecting successful collaborations between the sectors with support from government. Such collaborations highlight the potential in Northern Ireland for accomplishing successful integration for asylum seekers and refugees. In Northern Ireland, there is a growing number of grassroots ‘national’ organisations which organise along nationality lines and provide informal advice and support for their co-nationals. Many also engage in organising cultural events and creating a sense of community, a home from home. One of the main refugee led support organisation in Northern Ireland is NICRAS (Northern Ireland Community of Refugees and Asylum Seekers) and it provides immense support for asylum seekers and refugees in Northern Ireland from all backgrounds. There are a diverse range of classes, and integration programmes available in Northern Ireland. There are a broad range of English classes on offer (however, only a few which offer childcare), arts and crafts programmes, a well-known weekly friendship club (in Belfast), employment and

enterprise projects, women’s and men’s groups, youth groups and a number of drop in centres which offer free meals or food.

While not an exhaustive list, groups like the South Belfast Roundtable, the British Red Cross, the Shaftsbury centre (Lower Ormeau Residents Action Group) and Embrace are responsible for a range of projects which directly engage asylum seekers and refugees. A collective of organisations working on asylum and refugee issues in Northern Ireland called the Refugee and Asylum Forum meet frequently to address the challenges that asylum seekers and refugees face. The Refugee and Asylum Forum is an excellent example of how the voluntary sector in Northern Ireland works together to provide support for asylum seekers and refugees.

A number of faith-based groups are also engaged with asylum seekers and refugees offering English classes and parent and child groups (to name but two activities). Faith based groups range in denomination, and are from a mix of Muslim, Christian, Hindu and Buddhist orientations.

Recently, asylum seekers and refugees have become involved with the issue of homelessness and destitution (see for example- Housing4all), which as we will show is a particular challenge in Northern Ireland:

*“Like with my integration I’ve been working with a group of the destitute asylum seekers that have fallen out of the asylum system. That I got to understand like, when people say homeless here, they mean somebody that is staying at a hostel, whereas the homeless situation with destitute asylum seekers is a different situation, because they are not even eligible to go into the hostels. (Zimbabwean refugee)”*

Integration is communicated as a multifaceted concept with both practical and philosophical underpinnings. Both service providers and voluntary sector professionals point to the need to address the basic needs and rights of asylum seekers and refugees by remedying current gaps in service provision. The information needs and basic entitlements of asylum seekers and refugees needs to be better addressed through a cross sectoral and partnership approach to integration. Partnerships should engage



the views of asylum seekers and refugees. The issue of access to mainstream services should also be better addressed, perhaps even the development of some pilot projects which ensure the pathway to mainstreaming. Of course, there are issues to do with literacy and language needs which dovetail with such access issues, and the question of fully accredited English language classes tailored to the different needs that exist must be better addressed.

However, in the context of political uncertainty with austerity and Brexit, the question of how to manage the vagaries of policy shifts and potential funding cuts in the development of a refugee integration strategy must be considered. Finally, the complexities and challenges of Northern Ireland's local context must also be reflected on and ultimately, the need to ask the question- 'what are we asking asylum seekers and refugees to integrate into?'

## 5.2 Views from Asylum Seekers and Refugees

We outline in the main findings section a variety of spaces where asylum seekers and refugees regularly interact with services, other asylum seekers and refugees, and members of the host community. Asylum seekers and refugees should play an active role in how services are shaped in order to best meet what are quite diverse needs in an open and consultative fashion. We asked all of our research participants how they viewed the idea of integration, and we received diverse responses. It must be noted, however, that a number of participants had not heard of or thought of the notion of integration in explicit terms. Responses to this question ranged from the idea of living in harmony with one's neighbours to a very direct engagement and involvement in issues pertaining to asylum seekers and refugees.

As expected, asylum seekers and refugees were often more concerned with the barriers to integration which included but are not limited to ideas of tolerance, acceptance, housing, security, and educational and employment opportunities. The role of the host community in facilitating this was also expressed:

*“It means a lot, integration. To me, it will mean sharing with others what you are entitled to. Or sharing what you have or what others have equally. Integrate, be able to speak the same language, you'll be able to sit on the same table. But there is so much that needs to be done to be honest. Acceptance is the big thing. You might want to integrate but then the person you want to integrate with might not be as receptive, or accepting. (Sudanese refugee)”*

Repeatedly, the statement (articulated in one way or another) that integration is impossible without the secure provision of basic rights was communicated to us:

*“Because to get into integration you need to first to give people skills and the language they need. You can't just go to a job seeker every week and you sign on and they tell you find a job. What will you find a job for if you don't even, can't get basically any job because you don't speak the language. (Zimbabwean asylum seeker)”*

These responses connected to how engaged asylum seekers and refugees were with the various services or voluntary sector organisations operating in this space (for those living in Belfast there is much more on offer than elsewhere).

Views on integration and life in Northern Ireland were also dependent on the length of time an individual has been living here. Some nationality groupings with a longer history in Northern Ireland also tend to have better internal or community networks, which while beneficial in the short term for an asylum seeker and refugee, can sometimes hamper longer term integration with the host community. Brendan Quail's (2016, QUB) research highlights the role that social networks play in facilitating the integration of asylum seekers and refugees. His research points to the ways that relationships (first) with co-nationals, then other asylum seekers and refugees, and finally, members of the host community cohere to help an individual feel more settled in Northern Ireland. However, opportunities for asylum seekers and refugees to engage with members of the host community can be quite limited due to



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a range of issues (including but not limited to language, cultural competency and financial constraints).

Our research participants' engagements with available resources and supports varied dramatically. Single parents (either male or female) find it particularly hard to engage with activities on offer due to the lack of childcare opportunities and the constraints of time. Linked to this issue is the lack of opportunity in developing one's language skills. However, a number of parents told us that they were learning about Northern Ireland through their children. Nonetheless, this particular cohort is quite a vulnerable group in terms of isolation. One of our research participants describes it as follows (using an interpreter):

*“ So just from her own perspective, she doesn't feel part of Northern Irish community just yet, still feels outside. But because of her daughter, she's bringing her home information and helping her understand things, like Christmas and Halloween. She knows a lot about it. She came home and asked, can she go trick or treat[ing] during Halloween time. She obviously knows what it's about. [...] So she's kind of integrated more at the minute. (Chinese asylum seeker)*

Our research participant went on to discuss how she feels ashamed that she cannot give her daughter the same opportunities as some of the children in her class. To some extent, she explained that her feelings of 'inferiority' stop her from engaging more fully with the parents of her child's friends. However, for refugees who have sourced employment and whose children are well settled – Northern Ireland has become home:

*“ They love Northern Ireland. Whenever we go for holidays they want to come back. They like it here, they've grown up here. They are only dark on the skin, but inside, everything else is Northern Irish, that's it. (Ugandan former refugee)*

As refugees become service users, they develop opinions on services they would like to see. In this way, integration becomes a two-way process. One group of female refugees noted there is no 'women only' - swimming pool classes available in Belfast<sup>31</sup>:

*“ If you want to get a ladies-only swimming. They first of all say they won't do the swimming, they would do a ladies-only leisure class. And the Council spoke to another organisation who spoke to the local swimming pool here and they just never replied.*

This is an intersectional issue, with gendered spaces in physical activity connecting to a broader discussion that includes culture, psychological and gender identity concerns. These barriers prevent people who would otherwise use a particular social setting from doing so. Addressing gender issues with regards to public space is important for the longer term development of integration. In other cities in the UK and Europe, women only exercise and swimming classes are quite typical. This also highlights how an integration project should be multi-layered and also operates at the level of addressing basic needs through very practical, everyday activities.

A number of research participants highlighted that misperceptions in the public domain around asylum seekers and refugees was a barrier to integration.

*“ I do integrate with people around, like the local people around, because there are people that don't really know what's happening in the systems. That they're not aware of, like when you're telling your story, they'll be like surprised of things you know, they don't know where, how the systems work and how the systems are built up, how the decisions are made and all that. So when you get to tell them the story, it's like people will be sympathising with you, they'll be really surprised 'what, is it really here in Northern Ireland and that?' But so they, even I do integrate with people but they also don't understand how the systems work when it comes to the officials. (Zimbabwean asylum seeker)*



*“ You know the problem people sometimes they don't know why we are here. So if they get to know us they probably maybe they will be. (Somali refugee)*

*“ For integration, I find that people here are very reserved. It's not easy to, they're not easy to approach so as for friendship, I don't think I've got friends from here. I've got the people that I've met in different places through organisations but community wise I wouldn't say I've got friends from locally because I won't even know where to begin. I haven't met them. I haven't been to any local dos where you get to meet local people so it would be very difficult for me to say I've met any friends from locally. (Zimbabwe asylum seeker)*

This suggests key work needs to be done with members of the host community to battle the misperceptions around asylum seekers and refugees in Northern Ireland. Emphasis was also placed on integration as a two-way process.

This connects to the level of participation which asylum seekers and refugees are allowed in public domains, particularly politics, as one research participant suggests:

*“ But if we are serious about, if they want to settle with integration, 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, they access all the boards that are there that are making decisions, they are representatives of ethnic minorities when it comes to maybe Stormont, when it comes to leadership position, when it comes to Council making decisions, you know we need to have a representative there. (Kenyan Refugee)*

Engagement with the political sphere by asylum seekers and refugees happens in a number of other jurisdictions (see Maguire and Murphy, 2012 for examples in the Republic of Ireland). Such engagements have had a positive impact on how asylum seekers and refugees feel they are represented in a given society (of course this is not without tensions) and has long-term positive value for integration. There are some good examples internationally of positive discrimination and quotas in politics that could be mirrored in Northern Ireland. A number of our research participants who themselves were involved in a number of activist campaigns regarding housing stressed the need for better political representation for ethnic minority communities. Effective political representation can involve the government giving time to and commitment to minority ethnic groups as well as minority ethnic voices and perspectives in government, an example being the work of Anna Lo, the UK's first Chinese-born parliamentarian. Northern Ireland's political parties should be encouraged to adopt strategies aimed at including asylum seekers and refugees and ethnic minorities in politics.

### 5.3 Conclusion

In sum, asylum seekers and refugees addressed the notion of integration as a process that needs to firstly deal with the basic issues of housing, health, employment and education. When asked about how the host community should engage with newcomer communities, we were told that values of understanding, tolerance and inclusion were key to better integration. Many of our research participants see integration as being the joint responsibility of newcomer and host communities. As such, addressing basic rights coupled with better consultation of asylum seekers and refugees in the delivery of services is key. So too is better engagement of host communities with issues connected to asylum seeking and refugee individuals and families.

Further, engaging with particularly vulnerable segments of the asylum seeking and refugee community in order to combat isolation is much needed. Programmes which engage host communities or public campaigns around the issues that asylum seekers and refugees face are important. Asylum seekers and refugees also see the need for political representation to better reflect their needs. Northern Ireland has a good opportunity to take a joint approach as it develops its first refugee strategy.



## 5

## Views on the Integration Process

### SUMMARY NOTES

*Integration should be defined as a two-way process beginning on the day of arrival to Northern Ireland. It should address both the practical (ensuring all basic needs are met and rights are accorded) and the philosophical –addressing issues of identity, belonging, as well as values, tolerance, and respect.*

*Service providers and the voluntary sector need a more joined up approach to integration in Northern Ireland–better partnerships and cross-sectoral work needs to be developed.*

*Integration needs to take a whole Northern Ireland approach, as such the Belfast centric nature of some services and projects need to be examined.*

*The relationship between mainstreaming and integration policies needs to be better considered.*

*Better funding of integration projects is needed, in particular, projects which work with both host communities and asylum seekers and refugees.*

*Asylum seekers and refugees should be engaged in consultation and partnership during the development of an integration strategy.*



## 6 HOUSING

Access to suitable and affordable housing in a safe locality is a key component in helping any individual and/or family settle in a new country. Asylum seekers and refugees experience considerable disruption in their displacement from one country to another, therefore access to good quality, comfortable accommodation makes all the difference in their everyday experience of their new country, and is ultimately, key for overall community cohesion. Further, a good quality housing base enhances access to education and employment. Such housing may eventually become a home, a place of refuge from past traumatic experience.



## 6 Housing

### 6.1 Introduction

Housing appears as one of the more prominent themes in our interviews with asylum seekers and refugees. As detailed herein, external factors (e.g. available space; costs of housing) and the wider dynamics of housing impact on the wellbeing of refugees and asylum seekers.

Housing is integral to successful integration in any given society. The Dutch Refugee council (1999: 4) captures the importance of housing to integration, they note:



*A home impacts on a great number of aspects influencing personal well-being. A home is much more than a roof over one's head, a shelter from the elements. A home provides security, privacy from the outside world, a place to love and feel safe. It is this notion of feeling safe that makes housing such a key issue for refugees.*

Finding suitable and appropriate housing is the beginning point for people seeking sanctuary to remake their home, and ultimately, their lives (Rapport and Dawson, 1998; Franklin, 2014). Research documents the inextricable link between place, home-making and well-being for asylum seekers and refugees (Sampson and Gifford, 2010). As such, poor housing conditions in unsafe contexts can exacerbate and further damage the health and well-being of asylum seekers and refugees. Housing for asylum seekers and refugees should not take a homogenous approach given their sometimes complex needs but should consider that asylum seekers and refugees have had a range of cultural, social, political and personal experiences. Whilst the housing experience of refugees on the VPRS may often reflect this, our findings show that this is not the case for asylum seekers and refugees travelling independently to Northern Ireland.

The housing experiences of asylum seekers and refugees in Northern Ireland are not well documented (with the exception of a recent NICRAS report on destitution 2016). Housing for asylum seekers and refugees in Northern Ireland is a mix of private (including houses of multiple occupancy, flats or hostels) and social housing. Refugees can be housed in social housing, but many find accommodation in the private rental

market (Murdie, 2008). Through the Home Office's Commercial and Operational Managers Procuring Asylum Support Services (COMPASS) – SERCO is the main contractor for Northern Ireland (and Scotland). SERCO then subcontracts to Orchard and Shipman who in turn use the Northern Ireland Housing Executive to deliver both private and social housing to asylum seekers and refugees, creating a complex supply chain of housing providers. Under the COMPASS contract, housing has to be serviced and maintained in line with the Decent Homes Standards (accepted standards for social housing). The Northern Ireland Housing Executive through its Supporting People program funds EXTERN (an all-Ireland homelessness support agency) to run a Refugee Floating Support fund which aids asylum seekers who have been granted leave to remain or refugee status to transition to a more permanent relationship to Northern Ireland.

One key point to note is that this new commercial or managerial approach to housing asylum seekers has engendered a range of complex problems as shown by the 2014 audit of the ways in which the COMPASS contract has been operating<sup>32</sup>.

Accommodation for asylum seekers in Northern Ireland is funded through the National Asylum Support Service (NASS). Once an asylum application is granted, the individual or family must move out of the NASS accommodation during a 28-day notice period and transition to more permanent housing. This can be a complex process with delays in the delivery of national insurance number and subsequent benefits making the task of finding new accommodation difficult. Asylum seekers and refugees often have limited or no financial resources making the task of paying deposits for privately rented accommodation challenging. Further, for those whose applications have been rejected, destitution is a real concern given the withdrawal of all support and the non-eligibility of failed asylum seekers for homelessness supports. Emergency accommodation, in particular during afterhours, was also highlighted in this research as being problematic. A number of voluntary and charitable organisations operate in this space; for example, Extern, HomePlus, Bryson and Housing4all whose goal is to work towards ending destitution for asylum seekers in Northern Ireland (NICRAS, 2016) as well as more mainstream charitable groups such as the Welcome organization. The Northern Ireland Housing Executive also has a presence on the Northern Ireland Strategic Migration Partnership and is responsible for the Consultative Forum on Equality for Housing.





The issue of housing figured in all of our one to one semi structured interviews and focus groups with asylum seekers and refugees. We also conducted one to one semi-structured interviews with key service providers such as the Northern Ireland Housing Executive and Extern. Our interviews with the Northern Ireland Housing Executive showed staff who were passionate about questions of equality in housing for asylum seekers and refugees (as well of course, equality for all). Service providers have a keen awareness of the challenges in providing such equality and a strong commitment to developing appropriate pathways and solutions to inequality in housing.

On average, our asylum seeking and refugee research participants have had experience with 3-4 types of accommodation over the course of their time in Northern Ireland. The issue of housing - its condition and location - is a continuing source of stress for many of our research participants. Spending short periods of time in different localities and moving frequently also impacts on relationships to particular localities. This is set to the backdrop of an increase in homelessness in the general population in Northern Ireland and very long waiting lists for social housing (Fitzpatrick et al., 2014). Both asylum seekers and refugees expressed a range of issues with housing in Northern Ireland with a number feeling that they were unable to make a formal complaint about the conditions in which they are/were living, and others claiming that making any requests to have the property maintained was pointless or resulted in a lengthy waiting process before any of the issues were addressed. Many asylum seekers and refugees are simply unaware of tenancy rights and obligations and this is often compounded by language and communication barriers. One of our research participants working in housing service provision gave us this example:

*“So whatever they need, we can get it sorted for them. But, in general, there are probably other communication issues out there. Quite often it's not just about language translation. It's about showing people what they're entitled to and where the help is, how to access it, we have found situations where when you get that breakdown, it's horrible for people. A situation where a refugee who'd come in to Northern Ireland and we had to find somewhere quickly for him, and the next day he woke up in (place name omitted), he's looking out the door of a little rented house in (place-name omitted), wondering where the hell am I? It sort of brought it home to us, we need to do a lot more than just put a roof over somebody's head. (Service Provider).”*

*ted), wondering where the hell am I? It sort of brought it home to us, we need to do a lot more than just put a roof over somebody's head. (Service Provider).*

In short, a number of considerations need to be made in order to surmount the very real challenge of providing good quality accommodation to asylum seekers and refugees in Northern Ireland. A number of themes regarding housing emerged from our data analysis. In the main, our research participants were dissatisfied with their experience of housing in Northern Ireland, but concerned at expressing this publicly. Housing insecurity thus figured large in our interviewees' narratives.

As housing is an important anchor point for the development of community cohesion and integration, we posit that a range of issues needs urgent remedy. Not doing so will greatly undermine any efforts at ensuring a refugee integration strategy in Northern Ireland. This report, therefore, emphasizes that enabling refugees to access secure housing is an important pathway towards integration and community cohesion.

## 6.2 Housing Conditions and Suitability

*“Cold houses, old houses, abandoned houses, poor insulation, everything is just, I don't know what I would say now, it's like just a bad condition house, with, I don't know, it's pretty bad, especially when you go, when you claim the NASS accommodation when this, before you're refugee and it's a temporary house. But everything in there, there is nothing in there; there is no life in there. (Kenyan asylum seeker).”*

Our research participants live in Northern Ireland either independently or with their families. Depending on personal status and previous life experience, the allocation of suitable accommodation is key to an asylum seeker and refugees' integration journey.





During the course of our research, we spoke to both individuals and family groups. Strikingly, all of our research participants who are parents of young children, had issues with the standards of their allocated accommodation. The main issues which arose for families include accommodation size (difficulty of housing large families), general condition of property, anti-social behaviour in the neighbourhood, and landlords unwilling to maintain the property to standard (these also figure in lone individuals' narratives but much more frequently with family groups) and discrimination. The latter we will discuss later in a separate section on 'racism'. Below, we include a number of narratives from our interviews which highlight some of the challenges with accommodation for families in Northern Ireland.

The issue of living in a place where there is a lot of noise, even antisocial behaviour at night time, figures in a number of our interviews. For one of our research participants, a female Chinese asylum seeker with a husband and a young child, living in an apartment where there are loud parties every night is a difficult experience. Our research participant had been living in a small house with her husband and daughter, when one afternoon she was given two hours' notice to vacate the house after a brief inspection. She received a call at 3pm and in a rushed manner had to pack her family's belongings. Our research participant and her family were not allowed to return to the property to collect all of their belongings and to this day does not know why they were asked to leave the house so quickly.

This is how she describes it (through an interpreter):

*“So she got a call, one afternoon at 3 o'clock after the Home Office guys had come to see her house, and they told her we are sending a taxi to arrive at five – be ready to move. And you won't stay in your old house tonight, you're moving into your new house. So there's no advance notice, kind of forcing her without actually seeing the house or anything else to get out and move. So one thing was they were very speedy in some aspects but it wasn't the right one. She didn't even kind of pack, she only had a taxi. So she kind of felt pushed, felt forced as you would do. Just two hours' notice, but she had no choice, she had to go. ...There wasn't a specific reason why*

## 6 Housing

*they had to get out there and then, until this day she still doesn't know. That was the housing executive staff. Kind of a big rush, big mess. Things were there, fair enough, but not all of her own stuff.*

The new housing is in an apartment complex. Our research participant told us (through an interpreter) that her little daughter awakes every night and is quite scared at the level of noise. This is also disruptive to her daughter's schooling. Her daughter regularly requests to return to the first house, which she considers home. She tells us:

*“So when she moved to the new house, they had a lot of noisy neighbours (...) So she was in the middle flat, and above her, there were quite a few people who would have parties like three and four in the morning. And the key here I think is this one her daughter was really scared, because they kept going on and on, and there's no kind of stopping, louder music, dancing on the roof... And she said it wasn't herself actually that was too worried but she has to go to school in the next morning, and she didn't think it was the right kind of situation to be keeping her daughter.*

The main issue here is the imposed move to another area and flat, without taking the needs of a young family into account. There is a number of sub-issues herein which have also arisen in other interview narratives. Being moved with little or no notice is difficult for anyone, but even more so for those with young children. Not giving due notice to someone and respecting their right to claim their belongings is an infringement of rights with far reaching implications for families. It also points to problematic and disempowering communications between housing agents and asylum seekers and refugees.

Another research participant, an asylum seeker from Kazakhstan with a young child, told us that she was also moved with little or no notice after the landlady of her house started shouting through the letter box stating that she didn't know her house was being rented to asylum seekers. Her new apartment is small and unsuitable for



a young child. She also asked us 'if it was ok' to complain about this as she was afraid 'how it might impact her claim.' An asylum seeker from Somalia with two young children was also unhappy with the condition of her house. While she was also told she couldn't be moved, eventually, with little or no notice, she was asked to move. For this research participant, the outcome was good, as the new accommodation was much better, but the speed that this eventually occurred at was both confusing and stressful for her. She says:

*“But when I moved this way I thought it was just stress. But when I entered the house then it was fine, I get used. But moving this time, really until now, it's really, really stressful. This period now, really stressful. Because I'm leaving here now, I'm going to leave again, to move again and I don't know where I'm going. So okay I understand you know about moving is really stressful because you don't have your choice before an asylum, they just move you and you have to whenever they give you a place you have to go. You know?”*

This research participant and her children face yet another move as they have finally been granted refugee status and have to vacate the NASS accommodation they inhabit. This will have meant a series of moves for her in a short space of time, impacting on her children in a number of ways.

A former refugee from Uganda also points to how difficult multiple moves can be for family life. She says:

*“When I got the status, I had to go into a hostel. A family hostel, actually... So I stayed there for a few months and then I worked what they call a single let property So a single let would be provided by the Housing Executive but it's temporary. Nobody would ask you if you wanted to live there. So you still have your housing points, you don't lose any. You are in the hands of the Housing Executive*

*technically. And what happened after that time, the owner of the single let needed the house back. And then we had to go back into the hostel again. So it was a little bit hard to stabilize initially. It took us six years before we could get a permanent home, so we had a few movements.*

The flow on negative effects from multiple moves for families are particularly detrimental to children's well-being (Rumbold et al., 2012). Schooling may be impacted in that children may have to change schools or travel some distance to their school. Adjusting to yet another place to live and a new locality presents its own challenges for both adults and children. A broad perception exists amongst both asylum seekers and refugees interviewed that they have no control over where they might be moved to and have no right to complain.

For the lone individuals that we interviewed, the challenges of living in large shared houses and hostels were voiced. Our research participants articulated their concerns about living in poor housing conditions with people from very different backgrounds. Similar frustrations with communicating with the NIHE and landlords more generally exist as does a sense of personal insecurity in some interviews.

One of our research participants-an asylum seeker from Zimbabwe describes it thus:

*“To be honest most probably my worse moment has been the type of accommodation that I've been moved into ever since my movement from the detention centre. It's not the best of places but beggars are not choosers. Look the most difficult part is trying to raise your concerns with the Housing Executive, the people that are to support you and telling them that look, guys, the living standards here, or this and that, no one seems to give ear to that. They say you are there, you are there. That kind of, it's really a bad taste in your mouth. No, before the place that they put me was pretty okay. But afterwards, you know you are told that you don't have a choice of*



*where you are going. We will find you a place and we will put you there, whether you like it or you don't, you just have to be there.*

Another young Zimbabwean refugee told us of how when the ceiling of her bedroom collapsed that she had to wait some time to get it fixed, and had to be accommodated in her Pastor's spare bedroom for two weeks while this was being seen to:

*“You know I've just got ten years to live in there so, like, I think I've, it's the people that I live with that make me feel, you know. Like we do associate with each other, we do respect each other, like we've got different religions, we've got different cultures, backgrounds, but we do manage to work out differences and live along together. So I will, I haven't had any much difficulty with living, it's just the conditions maybe, like when it happened that I, the roof fell on me that other time, that accident that happened. I did phone the housing, executive housing and there was a little bit of delay in response, like maybe they didn't understand what I was referring to and they did not, yeah so there was a little bit of delay in response, but the caretaker did come along afterwards and the issue was sorted.*

Yet another research participant told us a similar story about the levels of mould in his room, and his sense that as an asylum seeker or refugee that he didn't really have the 'right to complain':

*“Yeah, well pretty much I guess it will be pretty much the same but you adjust the time, I also had difficulties with accommodation. I guess up until today where I was moved into a slightly better room within the accommodation that I occupy because the room that I was in was a bit smallish, crowded, and close to the kitchen. I had a lot of disturbances, especially during the night when some of the occupants would be cooking and I'm trying to sleep. Plus the*

## 6 Housing

*walls had mould in one side where I used to stay in a room that I used to occupy before today because I moved rooms today. So it's a bit of a problem really but I raised the issue with the Housing Executive awhile back and they said they could come and clean it, the landlord. I know it's really, as a refugee you don't have much right so you can't really complain or when you complain because of a certain situation it doesn't yield much response.  
(Zimbabwean asylum seeker)*

While this is disempowering on a number of levels, it also connects to the broader societal issue of a lack of suitable housing stock for the wider populace as well as the issue of how asylum accommodation has become commercialized. Delays in responding to asylum seekers are commonplace and some of this points to the challenges that the privatization of asylum has created.

The work of Jonathan Darling (2016) offers an analysis of asylum accommodation in the UK since the inception of the 2000 asylum dispersal process. It highlights how detrimental the commercialisation of the asylum process - in particular, housing - has been to both asylum seekers and to refugees, as well as to local service providers and voluntary organisations in particular areas. In Darling's study, he found what he calls a 'deferral of responsibility' within the provision of housing to asylum seekers - particularly when someone is attempting to lodge a complaint about their accommodation. Our research participants' narratives gave many examples of the challenges of communicating with housing agents, and much of this is a direct result of the complex chain of contracting and subcontracting. This is not to say, however, that solutions cannot be found and implemented at a local level in Northern Ireland.

### 6.3 Housing and Mental Health

Prior to arriving in Northern Ireland, many asylum seekers and refugees have experienced trauma and persecution for a variety of reasons. Experiences of displacement, persecution, abuse, trauma, and grief make asylum seekers and refugees



extremely vulnerable and impact on their ability to settle into a new environment. Research has shown that housing instability has a direct impact on an individual's well-being and mental health (see Colic, Peisker, and Tilbury, 2003; Spencer, 2006). It plays a large contributing role in post-migration stressors more generally- and is potentially a trigger factor for PTSD (Robjant et al., 2009). As we have shown, asylum seekers and refugees' housing experiences in Northern Ireland are characterized by multiple moves (3-4 times, sometimes more) in very short periods of time and uncertainty about housing decisions (compounded by a sense of lack of control). Asylum seekers (in particular) as new arrivals spend substantial periods of time within their homes (for a range of reasons- unemployment, fear, language difficulties). This can lead to feelings of social exclusion which can significantly impact psychological well-being, particularly in the instances of those who already suffer from PTSD. A number of our research participants linked their own sense of well-being and mental health to their current living conditions in Northern Ireland. One of our research participants, an asylum seeker from Iran, told us that since his arrival in Northern Ireland he has started suffering from depression. Having been detained in Northern Ireland and in GB, he has been housed in a large shared house in Belfast. Our research participant told us that he can't sleep and feels worried about his housing situation and asylum claim on a daily basis:

*"I feel depressed. I went to the GP and he diagnosed me with depression and gave me some heavy medication. I can't sleep at night in that house-it is cold and old and dirty. I live with men from different countries-single men from Iraq, Iran, Algeria. We don't all get along, we have different living habits and the place is dirty-so, so, so dirty. At night I am awake worried and I can't sleep until 5am or so. I am worried about everything. I don't like living in this house, terrible things happened to me back in Iran you know and I don't feel comfortable living like that."*

Our participant asked us if he could complain about his situation to the authorities, when we told him that it was legitimate to file a complaint if he was worried about his welfare and well-being, he shook his head and said he was too afraid- as it might impact on his asylum application. Likewise, another participant, an asylum seeker from

Kenya also expresses similar concerns with the nature of shared housing and the lack of activities for single men prone to depression. He says:

*"You have your own bedroom, but you share the bathroom and the toilet. Now different cultures, now the difference in the culture comes in when you go to a public place and you behave the way you would behave like you are in your own place. It's not nice do you know, because the bathrooms and the toilets, I know it's asking too much, but having your own space and you keep it clean, you keep it the way you want to, is much better. It's you know, it's a student kind of a lifestyle, I don't know why they would want men who have psychological problems, of which most of asylum seekers would have psychological problems, to live like that- to live in a shared accommodation. It doesn't work. I feel nervous about it a lot."*

We will continue the discussion of the issue of asylum seekers and refugees and mental health later in the report but herein it is key to state that one of the key social determinants of good physical and mental health is suitable and appropriate housing.

#### 6.4 Lack of Housing Stock

Some of the issues expressed here tie into the larger issue of housing in Northern Ireland more generally. Interviews with service providers indicated longer waiting lists for social housing and a general increase in homelessness:

*"There is huge pressure on social housing. Obviously, if we have 40,000 people on a waiting list, that's a lot of people who need accommodation, low cost, affordable accommodation. So there's a huge issue there to be addressed. If we have 9,000 people who*



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## Housing

*are homeless and a lot of those in temporary accommodation, there's a huge issue with that as well. We are aware of issues with in private rented sector, where there's issues around affordability. (Voluntary sector professional).*

One of our participants from Uganda also broached this topic with us, she says:

*“Housing is everyone's problem, and everybody needs a shelter. Having more houses. Belfast is becoming really busy. I think houses are becoming fewer. So if they can have, or even encourage the people to go in the countryside, I think there is more space and they can create big flats for single parents, or even single people. More housing is needed, people are waiting. People already have the trauma that's hurt them for a while. And then being in another place also, a new place comes with a bit of anxiety. I took time to get my blinds a little bit opened. I just close it all, and put my lights in the house all the time. It took me a while to start opening up, especially the initial years. But going into it, if you're going into a close-knit community, I think it's the best thing that you can do. Just to go and say hello to people.*

Particular segments of the asylum seeking and refugee population are impacted by low housing stock. Larger families and single men often end up in sub-standard accommodation or inappropriate living conditions.

### 6.5 The Spatial Dimensions of Housing

There is much research on the spatial dimensions of settlement for asylum seekers and refugees (see Franklin, 2014). The areas in which asylum seekers and refugees are housed impact on access to employment and health, as well as broader social networks with the host community and other members of the asylum and refugee seeking community. The spatial complexities of Northern Ireland are compounded by

its history. As most of this research was undertaken in Belfast, it makes sense to comment here somewhat on how Belfast as a city with high levels of spatial segregation can be a complex place for asylum seekers and refugees to 'integrate' into. Often asylum seekers and refugees are housed in lower quality housing in underprivileged areas with high levels of segregation. This is particularly problematic for the development of an integration strategy given we need to be sure what we are asking people to integrate into. We also undertook research in Derry/Londonderry and there, proximity to the border with the Republic of Ireland, adds a further layer of complexity for asylum seekers and refugees who may not know or understand that another legal jurisdiction is so close by. In the context of Belfast, where there are higher levels of NASS accommodation, South Belfast has become somewhat of a hub for asylum seekers and refugees and also a number of civil society sector organisations supporting them (see also Kerr, 2013). In particular, the spaces around the Queen's University district are vibrant and mixed with an international community settled in the area. In our interviews, our research participants expressed a preference to live in this area. Given the pressures on the housing system, this is not always possible and so asylum seekers and refugees find themselves living right across the city. When asked whether the history or legacy of the troubles posed any specific problems in their lives, our research participants answered with very mixed responses. A number suggested that they just treat everyone the same and don't like to think about the divide specifically, but others engage with the issue and its impact on their daily lives. One of our research participants articulated it thus:

*“It does affect me because, especially because now for me, I have a child with an Irish woman. It is, mine would be probably be completely different, because she wouldn't go to Protestant areas, which limits my movement with my daughter, to wherever I want to go and definitely, it affects me too much, because I used to and I stay in.....a lot. Like if I go looking for a house now, she's not happy because of where I'm going to take, do you know what I mean? Because, not because she wants to tell me which place I should go and get housing, she's worried when my daughter comes in there, it's going to affect her. It does affect me because I just find it very very wrong, do you know? (Kenyan Refugee)*





Our research participant B from Iran told us:

*“I don't mix with anyone in West Belfast, I just go in and out you know. I got friendly with two Christian Protestant ladies in one charity and they said now don't wear any of those colours on your tracksuit or that tracksuit in West Belfast again. So now I am worried about wearing the colours of the British flag around there. (Iranian Refugee).”*

Some service providers also noted the challenges that some of these issues presented to their clients, in particular around flag displays:

*“I've heard people say that sometimes when they go to a place and all the flags are up and all of that, that it's a real chill factor, they're a bit scared because they might think well that means there's paramilitaries operating here. Other people say they feel comforted by that because they see it and they know there's a community and they're very clear about what the religion is within that community.”*

There is very little research extant to substantiate the links between religiously segregated places and racism (see however, McVeigh, 2007). The media, however, have drawn a number of links between divided areas and an increase in racism - this popular perception means that some asylum seekers and refugees are fearful about being housed in certain areas even without ever having visited them. One research participant told us 'I am too scared to get to know my neighbours, I just stay in my house you know, getting depressed.' One of our Chinese research participants (mentioned previously) said she did not feel that segregation in Northern Ireland had had any impact on her personally as she was living in South Belfast, but that anecdotally her friends had expressed fears about living in one particular area, below is the interpreter's overview of how she articulated this:

*“So she has a lot of friends who were given houses by the government there. So they've actually had to kind of move in at night time where people can't see, so that they don't realize more Chinese people or other foreigners are living there. It is a dodgy area, I suppose you probably know yourself. She has heard of people having experiences like that where they don't want other people to know that they live there. It is embarrassing actually to hear this thing. So she's heard her friends to go parks and stuff for kids around that area. I mean they were told to get away, they were throwing stones at them and breaking glass in their windows and stuff, I've heard it before too actually, so she's okay at the minute, but other people have had bad experiences. And it was specifically that area that was mentioned.”*

The 'perception' that these areas are much more challenging to live in means asylum seekers and refugees sometime feel anxious about receiving housing in these areas, this is an idea perpetuated by host community members as much as anyone else. As one research participant articulates it:

*“We had a friend actually who was saying, who lived in north Belfast, his dad was really old. And he was saying to me if my area was okay for you, I would have given you my daddy's house for the time being until you get a permanent home, which was very kind of him. But then he said people might not receive you around there so I don't want to cause you problems. So he couldn't give us that house. And also he had a landlord who had a nice apartment in north Belfast which was manageable. Their rent was reasonable. But I did not want to change the school. And then he said the colour might cause a problem when the children come back from school. The colour of the uniform. Maybe nowadays it has improved a bit. But still people will ask you, I want to go and rent a house at this area, do you think I'll be safe. People will be con-*



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cerned where they go because they will know some areas might not be as friendly as others. (Sudanese refugee)

“The sectarianism would have been something very strange, very different. Where I come from we have countries which are literally divided as well with the tribes, but they are not serious issues. Not serious at all. No one will be attacked because of being a certain tribe for example. So that was strange, and you have to very be careful there. We had to go church. By telling them your name, they would figure out where I started. (Zimbabwean Refugee)

A refugee from Sudan, now here for a number of years, helps other asylum seekers and refugees on these issues, below he gives us a few examples of this:

“Some family, they gave him a house in..... Before they came in the people wrote that they don't need any stranger and the same day he went to his housing to have a key and went there and housing said, 'No, that is dangerous. I can't give you the key'. You may die just moving there- already people had moved from that house. So you go back to a hostel and say, 'I've lived in a house and you take me out from house to give me the house and now you say you can't and you will send me to hostel?' I will not go to hostel. That is one. I have another lady, they broke her window, and another lady some people tried to put fire in her house. In (name of place) it's a nice place.

It has been argued that equating sectarianism with a propensity towards racism is far too facile (see Chan, 2006). However, Neil Jarman and Rachael Monaghan (2003) make the following argument:

{...}

As sectarian residential segregation has continued to increase it is likely that some people have identified the minority communities as the new 'other' and turned their attentions away from the Protestant or Catholic minority towards the Chinese and Indian communities who are beginning to create new interfaces in some working class communities. This is not to argue that racism and sectarianism are exactly the same thing but that they have common roots in a society which does not tolerate difference, which is focused in upon itself, is insecure and which accepts violence and abuse as a broadly legitimate form of expression (Jarman and Monaghan, 2003:21).

While segregation patterns in Northern Ireland are lower in the 2011 census compared to 2001 there are many studies which claim that spatial segregation is a barrier to successful integration processes (Malischewski, 2013). In the UK more broadly, the increase in BME housing associations has given debate as to whether such housing associations address the very specific needs of the BME community or merely, compound issues of segregation. As with the host community, there may be specific examples where specialised accommodation is necessary as is often the case with aged communities. In the context of Northern Ireland, the case study of the Hong Ling Gardens Chinese Sheltered Housing Scheme in the markets area in Belfast shows that there are valid cases in some instances for providing special housing schemes for particular ethnic minorities (see Chan, 2006).

As indicated above and illustrated in the remarks of asylum seekers and refugees; the consequences of limited housing spaces and fewer places to which people want to move to and live in reflects the issue of spatial segregation and its broader impact. In many respects, many of our research participants, while not direct victims of sectarianism, have indeed become engaged with its history and reputation, and it is this that impacts on their everyday. In our view, it is most important to tackle these emanations of spatial segregation and anxieties about particular neighbourhoods as the stakes are ultimately too high.



## 6.6 Conclusion

Appropriate housing conditions should be considered when developing the core structure of any integration strategy for Northern Ireland. This chapter has highlighted significant problems within the provision of housing for asylum seekers and refugees. While the backdrop to our research includes reductions in public spending, the commercialisation of asylum accommodation and striking changes to the Immigration Act by the Home Office, there remains a strong onus on local government and the Home Office to remedy how housing is distributed to asylum seekers and refugees. Further, the issue of homelessness and destitution is of critical importance- which we will see in the next section. At present, voluntary sector organisations are overextended and it is this sector alongside faith based groups who are left unfairly to backfill the current gaps in service provision. Where housing for asylum seekers and refugees prioritises profitability and cost-cutting, this can impact on how the vulnerabilities,

human needs and rights of asylum seekers and refugees are recognised; this is something which future policy development must be wary of. Better training for front line staff is imperative (see also NICRAS, 2016) to ensure a stronger understanding of the issues facing asylum seekers and refugees (and indeed, on how to implement crisis and emergency payments for these groups). If Northern Ireland is to develop an integration strategy which conceptualises integration as beginning on the day of arrival, then how the implementation of a strategy can prevent destitution needs urgent consideration. Integration can only begin once the basic needs of all asylum seekers and refugees are met.







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## Housing

### SUMMARY NOTES

***Housing insecurity features as a major issue in the everyday life experiences of asylum seekers and refugees in Northern Ireland.***

***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.***

***Asylum seekers fear that making formal complaints will militate against their ongoing claims-informing asylum seekers of their right to make formal complaints in a democratic context is vital. When individuals have complained, they have been ignored or left waiting for extended periods of time.***

***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.***

***Emergency housing and, in particular, access to same with a 24hour/7day service is urgently required.***



## 7 DESTITUTION

Asylum seekers and refugees are extremely vulnerable to homelessness and destitution in the UK. The Immigration and Asylum Act 1999 defines a person to be destitute if they do not have adequate housing or a way of obtaining it, or they have adequate housing but cannot support other essential living needs.



## 7

## Destitution

### 7.1 Homelessness and Destitution

Asylum support currently amounts to £36.95 a week to cover essential living needs. There has been some substantive work done on this issue in Northern Ireland by NICRAS with the publication of its report 'The Effects of Destitution on Refugees in Northern Ireland' (2016), as well as the issuing of a policy brief on the issue of the refugee transition period and destitution by the Law Centre (2016). There is also a number of organisations working on the topic, including Extern, Homeplus and the campaign group Housing4all.

Homelessness and destitution amongst the asylum seeking and refugee communities occurs for many reasons, but there are key destabilizing factors in an asylum seekers' journey towards refugee status which may push them into destitution. Equally in our own research, destitution figured as a recurring theme. A number of organisations list a variety of reasons why destitution occurs including administrative delays, particularly around:

- the issuing of the biometric residence permit (BRP);
- the end of asylum support letter (NASS35);
- national insurance number (NINOS), and subsequently;
- general benefit provision;
- restrictions with legal aid;
- and problems with legal advice overall;
- the quality of asylum decision making;
- gaps in service provision;
- inflexible/weak support structures;
- lack of social networks;

- exploitation and
- a range of possible social and personal issues such as mental health issues, and violence.

Asylum seekers and refugees are made extremely vulnerable to exploitation in the context of destitution (see Stewart, 2005; Waite et al., 2013; NICRAS, 2016). Of our research participants, three had fallen into homelessness and destitution during their time as asylum seekers.

Asylum seekers are disproportionately vulnerable to destitution, in particular, during the 28-day transition period where they have to leave their NASS supported accommodation and find a new place to live. The British Red Cross report 'The Move on Period: an Ordeal for New Refugees' (2014) highlights the complexities of the 28-day period and calls for a lengthening of this to 40 days.

Further, failed asylum seekers who do not return to their countries of origin also fall outside the provision system, even being ineligible for homelessness supports. A research participant from the voluntary sector describes it thus:



*So the one good example is access to homeless hostels. Asylum seekers can't access homeless hostels here because the hostels are largely funded through public funds so asylum seekers can't access them. So it's pretty odd in some ways that you have the Housing Executive, which has a statutory duty to assist with homelessness and yet they can't assist asylum seekers who are homeless. So that's a huge, huge, gap.*

The 2016 Immigration act brings reforms to the asylum support system which will see failed asylum seekers with children losing asylum supports- thereby leaving them destitute. The Law Centre Northern Ireland argues that this policy will be detrimental and will shift the responsibility of meeting the basic needs of children to children's services in Northern Ireland<sup>33</sup>. This is ultimately only a form of 'burden' shifting which is at the same time a breach of children's rights conventions. While homelessness



supports are available, such as Extern's refugee floating support service which helps people during the 28-day transition period, there is still widespread evidence that asylum seekers and refugees end up in destitution across Northern Ireland. The voluntary sector works particularly hard on this issue but is left filling the gaps in service provision, and this is putting voluntary services in Northern Ireland under increasing pressure. In the main, they are doing such work with limited funding and largely on the basis of goodwill. One of our research participants, a Sudanese asylum seeker, describes her experience of being homeless with her two young daughters:

*"I go to housing, no house, me I am very crying. Yeah a lot of crying for long months, very depression and in my country, for Darfur, I don't know how this is not house okay, I'm very crying. I take my country, I'm coming here, here is not house, I'm crying, I'm two daughter, where are we going and they sleep in the street, sleeping in the Mosque for my prayer at the Mosque and the city church. But is not house, not good after that, NICRAS help me okay, I'm housed."*

A research participant from Kenya told us about his experience of being homeless for a number of years:

*"Second year, refused to take my case, this is how you end up homeless, your case is finished, you only have a fresh claim to pertain, so this means now evidence. My mom cannot be able to send the things or material from my country and that's literally what they're telling me to do. So I lost my support, I lost my house and I was on the streets. You know sometimes I would live rough on the streets. I have lived probably for what, two years on the streets rough, you know and its harder than living on the streets in my country because of the cold and there's nowhere that you're safe. Do you know, because you don't know where is safe, you were not born here. (...) Every time I was caught on the streets by the police, they asked me what is your name, where are you from, where do you*

*live, I'm homeless, go away. I just gone to the charities, I got my little food, during the day, I would sleep in the charities, during the night I will stay awake, so that my life went the other way back no, because there's literally nothing I'm doing."*

Both our participants' stories highlight the issues attached to being a vulnerable asylum seeker in Northern Ireland. While there are reforms necessary at the Home Office level regarding transition period time and asylum support, local service provision in Northern Ireland can still counteract the levels of destitution amongst asylum seekers and refugees, in particular, through working with the Northern Ireland benefits system to make the transition process effective and quick. One service provider claimed that the issue of destitution is the most urgent issue policy has to tackle, he says:

*"We could talk about the challenges people have when they're from one community and there are maybe two or three people of their country of origin in Northern Ireland and they feel completely isolate and removed. But for me, if nothing else, the link between destitution and mental health is for me the single biggest challenge and the single biggest threat and issue to anybody ever integrating into life in Northern Ireland. If we're moving from a position of which we want to integrate people into Northern Ireland and we want to do that on their day of arrival, I don't see how you can integrate when you are below any realistic poverty level, and you have completely chronic and acute mental health issues, how you are meant to survive. That's not taking into account what your circumstances were back home, the journey, the loss of family members, you know that's the big challenge for me."*

He argues 'that in the past, destitution was seen as a way to make asylum tough so people would eventually give up that means if this policy is continuing then any idea of 'integration strategy' will fail, anyway'.



## 7

## Destitution

He also describes the 'chaos' or lack of systematic work with social workers:

*“Yeah, you know so you find sometimes when you get the right person that the statutory sector, or the social work sector, of health sector, can be absolute brilliant for people and will go the distance and well beyond the distance to make things work and really prioritise the people and their needs. But then you phone the next day and you get somebody else, and there's a complete lack of knowledge or awareness about what they can or should be doing for people. That for us is immensely frustrating because then we end up almost duplicating a statutory service, which should exist, and we've enough work to be getting on with, without that.”*

There is a lot of work being done in Northern Ireland on destitution by campaign groups and the voluntary and charitable sector. Organisations such as the British Red Cross, Embrace, the Salvation Army, the Simon Community, the Storehouse, SOS Bus, and St Vincent de Paul, NICRAS and a number of food banks all provide important resources to alleviate the strains and hardships of destitution. As mentioned earlier in the report, TEO also provides a crisis fund which has been critical in alleviating short-term hardships for destitute asylum seekers and refugees. Nonetheless, there are still some critical issues which need to be addressed, particularly with regards to administrative delays and the distribution of benefits (NICRAS, 2016).

### 7.2 Failed Asylum seekers and Destitution

Failed asylum seekers are amongst those at risk of destitution. On having one's asylum application rejected one is faced with a number of decisions, amongst which the main expectation is to make plans to return to one's country of origin. However, many decide to appeal their asylum rejection and this places a failed asylum seeker in a complex administrative space which can push an individual or family into destitution. For some asylum seekers, whose country of origin is not a 'safe' country of origin, they

cannot be forcibly returned, and so find themselves without status and support in the UK. Once an asylum application is rejected, asylum support through section 95 (Part 6 of the Immigration and Asylum Act 1999) ceases after a 21-day period. Failed asylum seekers can apply for section 4 support within this 21-day period by evidencing that they are destitute or have taken steps to leave the UK. They then become eligible for an Azure card and accommodation assistance. An Azure card is a pre-payment card system which failed asylum seekers can use to purchase goods. However, it has been widely criticised by voluntary and community organisations across the UK. It is a highly restrictive payment system which is also often poorly understood by some of the retailers allowing its use. The British Red Cross have highlighted how restrictive a system the Azure card is in its study on how the card is used (Carnet et al., 2014). It must also be noted that some failed asylum seekers are afraid to apply for this kind of support, as they do not want to draw further attention to themselves, as was the case of one of our research participants who ended up homeless for a number of years in Belfast. The voluntary sector in Northern Ireland have highlighted how administrative delays in processing section 4 support further imperils failed asylum seekers, making them vulnerable to destitution and exploitation. We have highlighted in other sections of this report- how such engagements with the asylum process have a negative impact on integration processes- and as such, due consideration of how to combat administrative delays and errors for those prone to destitution is required.

### 7.3 Destitution and Exploitation

Failed and destitute asylum seekers and refugees are particularly vulnerable to exploitation by unscrupulous individuals. In fact, one study characterises failed and destitute asylum seekers and refugees as the 'hyper-precarious' (Lewis and Waite, 2015). The topic of the exploitation of asylum seekers (failed, and those in process) and indeed, even refugees- re-occurred in our research. While it is important to note that the issue of exploitation remained outside of the remit of the research- research participants from the asylum seeking and refugee community and individuals working in the voluntary sector- spoke about how vulnerable asylum seekers and refugees are to different kinds of exploitation, but, in particular, labour exploitation. Further, the 2016 Immigration Act introduces changes that criminalize illegal work. Where



asylum seekers and refugees feel they are without recourse; for example, they are complicit or the one that will face harsh punishment or deportation, they can become vulnerable to exploitation. This can be a challenge as an exploitative employer might be their source of information. Our research participants noted how they or other members of their community ended up in precarious situations due to the high levels of desperation they experienced while in the asylum system. Exploitation is also highly gendered and female asylum seekers often find themselves in difficult and dangerous situations when their applications are rejected. If failed asylum seekers have families, then such vulnerabilities are compounded (as the story of one of our participants noted in this section highlights). The link between destitution and exploitation is clear, and while there are organisations working on the issue in Northern Ireland, an integration strategy should consider how such levels of vulnerability and exploitation can be diminished.

## 7.4 Conclusion

Destitution is a growing issue in Northern Ireland as it is throughout the UK. Its links to issues of mental health and exploitation cannot be understated. As the 'hyper-precarious,' failed and destitute asylum seekers and refugees are in a position of extreme vulnerability. While excellent supports are in place in Northern Ireland, there is still an immense amount of work needing to be done to prevent destitution from growing at such an alarming rate. Individuals and families who feel that they exist on the margins of Northern Ireland society will not be able to embrace integration until their basic needs and sense of acceptance are met. In short, while destitution occurs because of a complex mixture of Home Office policy and administrative delays on the ground in Northern Ireland, an integration strategy needs to consider how destitution can be combatted in Northern Ireland.

## SUMMARY NOTES

*Destitution and homelessness amongst asylum seekers and refugees are major issues for Northern Ireland – a key issue here is allowing failed asylum seekers access to mainstream homelessness supports.*

*Asylum seekers transitioning to refugee status have been identified as being particularly vulnerable during the 28-day transition period. Benefits staff should be able to process payments without a national insurance number.*

*Administrative delays with benefits and section 4 support result in destitution and should be addressed.*

*All asylum seekers are open to exploitation, in particular from the labour market, but destitute asylum seekers are even more vulnerable to exploitation. This was a recurring theme in our research.*



*Cold houses, old houses, abandoned houses,  
poor insulation, everything is just,  
I don't know what I would say now,  
it's like just **a bad condition house**,  
with, I don't know, it's pretty bad,  
especially when you go,*

*when you claim the NASS accommodation  
when this, before you're refugee  
and it's a temporary house.*

*But everything in there, there is nothing in there;  
there is no life in there.*

## 8 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 their dealings with Northern Ireland 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).







## 8 Health

### 8.1 Introduction

Engaging with a new health-care system can be complex - particularly when cultural and linguistic differences are at play. In Northern Ireland, the health service is known as the HSC - Health and Social Care. It is free at the point of delivery and under the responsibility of the Department of Health. The HSC (of which there are six trusts-Belfast HSC Trust, Northern HSC Trust, South- Eastern HSC Trust, Southern HSC Trust, Western Trust and the Northern Ireland Ambulance Service) also has responsibility for social care services (home care, family and children, day care and social work). Public Health and Public Safety occupy their own domains under the DoH. Responsibility for general practitioners lies with the *Health and Social Care Board which sits between the Department and Trusts*. Both the Public Health and Public Safety Agencies have key roles to play in the context of helping asylum seekers and refugees navigate a new health care context and society more generally.

Many asylum seekers and refugees have travelled long, arduous journeys before their arrival to Northern Ireland-this has particular significance for their physical and mental health (Davies et al., 2006; Gerard, 2014). Asylum seekers and refugees are not a homogenous group. Their experiences range quite dramatically- as do their backgrounds and beliefs- this poses a set of issues for health service providers. More accurate data for Northern Ireland is needed in order to plan and design services more effectively.

Asylum seekers and refugees arrive to Northern Ireland through varying routes, but for those who are trafficked or smuggled, or who have spent long periods of time in refugee camps or detention where nutrition and sanitation are poor, a range of health issues arise (Zimmerman et al., 2011). Many have come from countries where there is a poor healthcare infrastructure or where that system has collapsed entirely. Depending on country of origin and the migration journey then, lower levels of immunisation and a higher level of communicable illnesses have been found, issues to do with sexual health and untreated chronic illness are also all to the fore (Sharara and Kanj, 2014). Screening programmes for asylum seekers and refugees tend to vary in strength and practice in Europe (Karki et al., 2014) but there are some best practice examples in Canada (Pottie et al., 2011; Hansen et al., 2016). In terms of mental health, a number of studies show that asylum seekers/refugees are at a higher risk of disorders such as depression, suicide, psychosis, and post-traumatic stress disorder

depending on their migration journey (see Mann and Fazil, 2006; Hollander et al., 2011; Kalt et al., 2013; Shawyer et al., 2014). However, and notably, studies have shown that it is post-migration stressors- and the period post-arrival- in which an asylum seekers or refugees' health is in most danger of decline (Schock et al., 2015; Kirmayer et al., 2011). Post-migration stressors include (but are not limited to) waiting for an unspecified period of time for the outcome of one's claim, the interview experience, poor housing and/or destitution, isolation and loneliness, loss and grief, ambivalent relationship with home, racism, and a fear of being returned to country of origin.

For this research, we interviewed service providers in the NHS and public health, as well as asking asylum seekers and refugees for their views on health in Northern Ireland. We asked all of the asylum seekers and refugees who participated about their access to health services as well as their general views on the health system in Northern Ireland. We did not ask people about their personal health issues as this was outside of the remit of our research- as well as being a potential trigger question. In both our one to one interviews and focus groups, we found that while people were happy to speak at length about issues to do with housing, education and employment they were less likely to give an in-depth answer on the issue of health. This can be interpreted in many ways. While our questions focused predominantly on questions of access or general perceptions, for cultural or indeed, purely personal reasons, many of our research participants did not like to engage beyond this. It is also likely (as one of our quotes below highlights) that people are measuring health standards in Northern Ireland to their experience in their own home country, which means that people's expectations are likely a good deal lower than members of the host community in Northern Ireland - given health standards across the developing world.

### 8.2 Access to Health

Access to healthcare is a complex theme, and ultimately, dependent on the range of resources an individual has available to them. The interrelationships between the social determinants of health -such as the relationship of housing, education and employment to health access - should not be understated. As the previous section of this report has shown, asylum seekers and refugees in Northern Ireland can often be placed in poor quality housing-sometimes leading to social isolation. The 28-day transition period places undue stress on asylum seekers transitioning to refugee



status, and many asylum seekers end up *homeless* (which, in itself, creates further health issues). These are all critical factors which impact access to appropriate health supports. However, access to health services for members of the asylum seeking and refugee communities in Northern Ireland has greatly improved in recent years.<sup>34</sup>

The Public Health Agency and the HSC have designated appropriate personnel to deal with issues connected to equality and ethnic minorities and developed some excellent resources and guidelines on these issues. All asylum seekers and refugees (including failed asylum seekers) are entitled to free health care and must register with a GP. The HSC has created a 'Welcome to Northern Ireland' video in different languages which explains the healthcare system. Further, the creation of NINES (Northern Ireland New Entrant Service) has greatly improved health access. The Northern Ireland New Entrant Service (NINES) was set up in 2012 to provide a regional holistic service to support the health and wellbeing of new migrants, asylum seekers and refugees entering Northern Ireland. NINES is a regional service, with bases in Belfast and Dungannon, which offers nurse-led health care, advice and initial health assessments for adults and children not already registered with a GP and is a first point of contact to the health service for new migrants, asylum seekers and refugees. It offers health promotion advice and information on how to register with a GP and access other services. Since its introduction, the team have sought to provide outstanding care for Black, Minority, Ethnic and Asylum seeking groups. This has allowed for the expansion and enhancement of existing TB screening service within Belfast Trust- including a comprehensive health assessment, health promotion and screening for communicable diseases. A client held passport has been developed in 5 languages to enhance communication between primary and secondary care. A direct referral system has also been established by NINES for clients to attend a Genito-Urinary clinic and Hepatology. Referral pathways for respiratory clinics have been established which allows for the fast tracking of NINES clients for chest x-ray to help in the early detection of TB. Material to assess entitlement to health care services has been made available on the HSC website and also sits in doctors' surgeries. This material is available in 16 different languages with the aims of translating it into further languages.

We asked our research participants about the process of registering for a GP and whether their information needs were being met. In the main, our participants

responded positively to the efficacy of this system. One of our participants, a refugee from Somalia says:

*“Not the whole service in England but it works on what you want, what you need, because sometime anybody go there ask them just I feel sick I want to see my blood pressure, my weight, my blood, and that. They don't have to say no, you understand, they will see how you are. I really like it, about health, they're very good, very helpful, because what you want, how you feel, you explain to the doctor and he will say okay you don't need that for now because you have this but you can come this time.”*

However, two of our participants commented that there had been administrative errors in terms of where their information was sent to and subsequently, a delay in accessing services. One of our participants, a Sudanese asylum seeker says:

*“Initially it wasn't explained to me and then, or maybe, I don't know, it's like when they change you from address to address, sometimes you find that they send a letter and then you've already moved. So I think that's where the delay comes in. Yeah, so maybe they will send a letter to the temporary address, while you've already moved to the new address and that's where like a sort of confusion, but otherwise, after I received the letter, I managed to go back and then they explained that you have to get a GP and then the first GP that I had, it was like groups of doctors, so every time you go there, a different doctor will attend to you.”*

While material is available which explains the healthcare system, a number of our participants said they think a better explanation of how the system interconnects is needed



and information around these processes should be made more widely available.

Information on after-hours services is also crucial to avoid excessive demand on accident and emergency services, again not all of our participants were aware of how these additional services function:

*“It would be good, if there was like a step by step guide for people, because I can imagine, if I was to have a toothache and I wouldn't know where to go or maybe my eyes would have a problem, I wouldn't know where to go. I mean, I learnt recently that if my child was to get sick at night, apparently there's a place at Mater, I think it's Doctors 24 or something that's always open, I didn't know that. I would have probably tried to soothe him or go to ER or something, but it's one of those things that I didn't know that are there, so I'm still to actually go and check the place out, so that I know, like its after hours, this is where I have to go. It's just one of those things that you learn as you go, but it would be good to have a step by step for people that come into the country. (Zimbabwean asylum seeker).”*

In general, our research participants have had very positive experiences with their engagements with GP services. Access issues appear to be a consequence of administrative errors or translation issues, where people do not fully understand the range of services on offer to them. This can be easily remedied with the development of a cross-sectoral and partnership approach to asylum seekers and refugees' health needs.

### 8.3 Health Literacy

Health literacy is the ability to engage with and understand information in a way that promotes good health. Asylum seekers and refugees' pre-migration literacy levels

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and their access to language training and interpreters post-migration are directly connected to the issue of health literacy (Wangdahl et al., 2015). Cultural views on health and health practices influence health literacy levels as well as health seeking behaviours. Health literacy can be simply functional in that an individual can engage with information regarding their health such as consent forms, medical labels (and so on). Conceptual health literacy goes beyond this in that an individual knows both how to access information regarding health and utilise that information in order to achieve better health outcomes.

A number of the service providers we interviewed asserted the importance of this topic in terms of better equipping asylum seekers and refugees to navigate the healthcare system and make more informed decisions on their own health and well-being. This intersects with concerns around the levels of literacy training as well as English language training being provided for asylum seekers and refugees in Northern Ireland (Boateng, 2015). Further, the role of health care professionals in nurturing health literacy amongst Northern Ireland's asylum seeking and refugee communities is key. For this to occur, health care staff have to be fully equipped in terms of their knowledge regarding asylum seekers and refugees. A research participant from a voluntary sector organisation who works promoting awareness on health issues told us this:

*“When people are very superstitious. And superstitious belief about certain things rather than think okay, you're suffering from sickle cell. So it's things like that. And people having a taboo around things like mental health because it's bad for family. We might get kicked out of the family. So all this taboo, all the awareness that needs to be raised with people coming here has to be addressed. Get tested for diabetes because you're from another region, get tested for breast cancer because maybe they don't want to get tested because it's a male doctor or something. They think a male and therefore they don't want them examining your breasts. Or if you're from a Muslim culture. So all these other issues are important.”*



In spite of addressing the ongoing training needs of health professionals with regards to ethnic minorities, service providers interviewed claimed that there is a great variation in terms of how staff engage with these issues, in particular with asylum seekers and refugees. Better engagement between literacy programmes and English language training and health contexts is also needed to give asylum seekers and refugees better competence in understanding Northern Ireland's health care system. Toolkits and curriculum which draw together English language as a second language instruction and health or wellness literacy are readily available online and a possible pilot based on this material could easily be developed and funded in Northern Ireland as part of an integration strategy (see for example the Queens Library Health literacy for ESOL learners <http://www.queenslibrary.org/services/health-info/english-for-your-health/teacher-beginner-level>).

Working with asylum seekers and refugees directly to engage with them around cultural beliefs on a particular illness and approaches to illness is also key. Internationally, there are a number of good practice examples of community engagement and health literacy projects with asylum seekers and refugees. In Australia, a group called Enliven documents such important projects with specific nationalities in the state of Victoria (see <http://www.enliven.org.au/refugee-health/project-resources>). In Canada, the 'kids new to Canada' health literacy project provides an excellent example of what can be achieved with youth refugees and migrants (<http://www.kidsnewtocanada.ca/culture/Literacy>).

At present, some members of the voluntary sector engage with these issues, but we recommend a more comprehensive approach which works across sectors to address these issues.

#### 8.4 Interpretation and Translation Services

Connected to the issue of health literacy is the issue of interpretation services. In Northern Ireland, service providers interviewed have pointed out that there are issues with the way in which interpreting services are used incorrectly by healthcare staff. While this free service is widely used, staff sometimes use a telephone interpreter where they should have somebody physically in place (and vice versa). Further, there

are instances of where family members are asked to interpret or a husband is asked to interpret for his wife. Incorrect use of interpretation services – in particular the use of family members, e.g. children – can lead to a range of problems such as misdiagnosis, inappropriate treatment and medication errors, and avoidable readmissions. The use of family members may compromise a patient's ability to be honest (and in situations of domestic violence, even their safety) (Ho, 2008). There is also the issue of gender, where a female may not feel comfortable using a male interpreter from her community and vice versa. A number of our research participants said they had used interpreters during their encounters with the health care system, but all reported positively about the experience. Service providers have indicated that ongoing internal training of the issues to do with health literacy and interpretation regularly occurs.

#### 8.5 Mental Health

Mental health problems present a significant challenge to the Northern Ireland health care system (see Radford et al, 2015). The Stronger Together Network supported by the Public Health Agency (PHA) has started to address the general issue of the mental health of Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) groups in Northern Ireland through a three year mental health pilot project which led to the initial publication of a report entitled 'Walking this thin line': Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) Experiences of Mental Health and Well-being in Northern Ireland which provides baseline information for the shaping of this pilot project. A final report will be published in 2018. The aim of this PHA funded project is to pilot a service to support and promote the mental and emotional wellbeing of minority ethnic communities in Northern Ireland. The authors of the report, Katy Radford et al., identify a range of issues and make a broad number of recommendations which dovetail with the concerns in this report. They argue for an increase in mental health promotion, building of social supports and the reduction of stigma, the diversification of the health service, and improvement in access pathways (amongst others).

Asylum seekers and refugees are particularly vulnerable to suffering from mental health problems given the stresses of the migration journey and the experiences of being an asylum seeker in a new society. Post-migration stressors have been closely linked to mental health problems (see Radford et al., 2015). All of our research participants



(both asylum seekers and refugees) told us that the challenges of the asylum process were particularly difficult and used words such as 'despair,' 'hopelessness,' and 'fear' to describe how the process made them feel. As we have discussed, the interview process attached to an application for asylum was described as 'intimidating,' 'scary,' and 'traumatising,' by a number of our research participants.

We were told by both the voluntary sector and asylum seekers and refugees that a 'culture of disbelief' was pervasive in encounters with immigration officials, such a sentiment compounding any issues with PTSD (Souter, 2011). Coupled with sometimes poor housing conditions, no work rights (or no work opportunities), and separation from family and friends, many asylum seekers and refugees feel isolated and become more vulnerable to mental illness (Silvoe, 1997). In fact, research shows that the risk of mental illness amongst asylum seekers is increased in countries where they do not have the right to work. (Fazel, 2015)

Radford et al. (2015) also make a recommendation for further research into the experience of sectarianism for asylum seekers and refugees. How and whether issues of sectarianism and racism impact the mental health and well-being of asylum seekers and refugees is indeed a broader question. The post-conflict experience of Northern Ireland with its broad range of supports and expertise, however, could be utilised in a positive manner for asylum seekers and refugees. There is a strong evidence base in Northern Ireland for dealing with trauma in relation to the troubles, with such a range of expertise, we believe that such resources could be extended and diversified to deal with asylum seekers and refugees- many of whom are also fleeing conflict (Duffy et al., 2007). This could also help the sensitisation of communities in Northern Ireland with regards to increasing awareness of the experiences of asylum seekers and refugees. At present, Northern Ireland lacks expertise around treatment for torture. A focus on training could develop this very specific expertise (SPIRASI in the Republic of Ireland provides a good model for an organisation that deals very specifically with this kind of violence). Any approach to dealing with the mental health of asylum seekers and refugees must therefore respect their experiences of trauma, loss, and suffering.

### 8.6 Conclusion

Prompt access to health care for asylum seekers and refugees is key because it mitigates the need for costly interventions later (Correa-Velez et al., 2005). This is particularly the case with mental health. It is vital for successful integration and community cohesion as it builds resilient individuals and subsequently, resilient communities. At present, asylum seekers and refugees do not have a strong enough voice and presence in the different health domains, and this can be remedied by diversifying the health service at a number of different levels. Literacy, language skills, and interpretation processes all have a place in this diversification project. While the HSC and the Public Health Agency in particular have made a number of resources available to improve access and knowledge regarding the health care process in Northern Ireland, some asylum seekers and refugees feel further steps can be taken to ensure better communication of rights and entitlements and the overall structure of the health care system. While training and awareness programmes regularly take place for health care staff, this needs to become more strongly embedded in the culture of Northern Ireland's health sector. Finally, Northern Ireland's response to the challenges of mental health issues for asylum seekers and refugees should centre on building resilience and fostering wellness.



### SUMMARY NOTES

*In general, asylum seekers and refugees report a positive experience with health in Northern Ireland. While access to GP care seems to be effective, a number of asylum seekers and refugees report some confusion with how to access health services. Understanding how the overall health system works was also explained to be a challenge –these information gaps need to be addressed.*

*Service providers report data gaps with regards to asylum seekers and refugees' particular health needs-further research needs to be completed in this area for better overall service design.*

*Better training with regards to the use of interpreters in health settings is needed.*

*Health literacy presents a challenge to asylum seekers and refugees for a broad range of reasons, as such, literacy provision and health literacy provision need to better intersect.*

*The mental health and well-being of asylum seekers and refugees is of urgent concern in Northern Ireland. At present, the very specific needs of victims of mass trauma and torture need to have a dedicated service.*

*There are substantial research gaps in the area of health for asylum seekers and refugees in Northern Ireland, including female sexual health and maternity, as well as asylum seekers and refugees living with disability.*

*How to build resilience and well-being into asylum seekers and refugees' everyday lives should be an important focus of mental health services.*



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## 9 EDUCATION

The right to education forms a key part of any integration strategy. Education figured in our research in multiple ways and our research participants come from very varied educational backgrounds<sup>35</sup>. Adults spoke about how displacement had abruptly interrupted their education and employment pathways, and how fundamental its reacquisition is to gaining a foothold in Northern Ireland.







## 9.1 Schooling

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, 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 learning journey (Steele, 2008).

For this research, we did not interview asylum seeking or refugee children - but instead, asked those individuals with children about their experiences with education in Northern Ireland. We asked individuals to reflect on their own personal engagement with education. We also conducted a focus group with older teenagers (16-20years old) in order to gauge their life experiences in Northern Ireland.

Our research participants gave mixed responses on their views on education and training in Northern Ireland. In general, adults expressed satisfaction with how their children were engaging with the Northern Irish educational setting and their peers:

*“I think he’s part of a community there, my child is very loud, but he’s happy at his school, the principal has an open-door policy, when he started there, the kids were curious, I mean he’s probably one of a, only black or first black children at his school. So kids want to touch his hair to feel what was going on and he didn’t like it, he’d come home and say mommy, they were touching my hair, cut my hair and we cut the hair and they still touched to feel what’s going on, why is it bald. So I told him you know what, it’s going to die down at some point, people are curious, they want to feel your hair, so if you like, maybe you should let them feel and then you can feel theirs as well, you know just don’t be shocked out of your skull. It took him a few weeks, but I think, you know children are also resilient and yeah he’s okay, he’s got friends, I mean he’s got afternoon clubs that he does at school. (Zimbabwean asylum seeker)”*

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However, a number of issues were highlighted. As mentioned previously, frequently moving house is an issue for asylum seekers and refugees. While children have free access to education in Northern Ireland, this can compound an already substantial educational lag. A number of service providers and voluntary sectors also noted that the unpredictability of housing moves may mean a child may end up having to walk to school through a segregated area dressed in a school uniform which may draw unwanted attention. One participant noted:

*“All this moving around really impacts on my children and their schooling, but no one thinks about that (Sri Lankan Refugee)”*

Another told us of how after having been moved, she continued her son’s schooling in the first location she lived in- but now facing another move-she was finding this particularly stressful:

*“Then it’s really tough time because it’s depressing. Because I don’t know what is going to school, my son, I tried my best to take him to school as I’m telling you I get very bad experiences in the buses. It’s very hard for me to take him in the morning, it’s windy, it’s raining, whatever, to take my son to school and bring him back. But I don’t know what’s going to happen. (Somalian asylum seeker)”*

A number of issues interconnect to the parent’s ability to speak English. Some of our research participants told us they feel nervous about communicating with their children’s teacher and as such feel at a disadvantage in that they don’t understand what is fully going on with their children’s education. This also extends to the parent feeling unable to fully help their children with their homework. However, a number of different groups organise homework clubs for children, with one run by Horn of Africa Peoples Aid NI being worth particular note. In an interview with HAPANI they note:



*“How these people will integrate into society and we believe that the education is the key to integration and success of the future generation. That’s why we use sport as a tool of integration and education as an empowerment on the refugees and give them an ability to have, become rather independent instead of being dependent on us or others.*

The lack of understanding of the experiences of asylum seeking and refugee children was also noted by a former refugee (now UK citizen), and the point made that the segregation of these children can have a negative impact:

*“Young people, will go to schools, I don’t want to say but from my opinion, children need the time to adjust. Not necessarily because they can’t speak English or because English is not their first language. We put them in a certain group of slow learners. That labels them and puts them in a corner already. And then they will lose their self-esteem that way. (...) Put them together, and give them the support, they will move on, unless if they can’t speak at all.*

The issue of discrimination and racism was highlighted a number of times, but this was generally pointed to as occurring outside of school hours – on the bus to and from school- or, elsewhere. However, during the focus group we ran with older teenagers, 3 of the 5 participants told us about their experiences of racism in school, with two moving schools due to the experience. The teenage participants tended to diminish their experience of racism by saying it was ‘just one or two ignorant individuals’ and told us that in the main, they felt supported in their environments and felt at home in Northern Ireland. All of the participants in the focus group said that they would describe their identities as ‘Northern Irish.’

*“Yeah, I would say this is home, like I want to travel and do exciting things, but Belfast will always be my home. I see myself as Northern Irish. (15-year-old male)*

*“When you are the only black people in the school you really stick out, but mostly I feel like I belong here, like this is the place that will always be my home. (17-year-old male)*

One of the participants, however, stated that he moved schools as his experience of racism and bullying was not investigated by the Principal at his school.

*“I had to move school because the teachers they wouldn’t believe me, no one believed that I was being bullied. I’m not sure if it’s racism or just a few ignorant people. I think it’s a few ignorant people. (16-year-old male)*

Notably though, in the main, the majority of our research participants felt their children were supported at school and were settling into life in Northern Ireland well.

## 9.2 Adult Education

Adult education for asylum seekers and refugees promotes personal development, social inclusion, active citizenship, and engages individuals on the pathway to integration. Primarily, the issue of adult education in this research focused on the issue of language training which we deal with at length in the subsequent section. However, other issues arose in the interview material such as a confusion over what



kinds of educational opportunities were available to asylum seekers and refugees. The question of paying for certain courses also figured, with confusion about what was on offer for free. One participant says:

*“ So I was told that I can do the course part-time, which I find very weird, if I can't do it full-time, full-time is supposed to be for free, but part-time you pay and I'm still doing it, so I don't get how that works. But I've been told you can do it part-time, which is going to be a challenge for me, because part-time means I have to attend at night, I don't have childcare, so that cuts it off altogether, because I can't afford £400, £500 for education. So that's where it leaves me. (Zimbabwean asylum seeker)*

For some asylum seekers and refugees whose college education was interrupted, University fees can be prohibitive but many find other courses to engage with in Northern Ireland. One Syrian participant (refugee) told us:

*“ I was in the middle of my University education when I left. I won't go back to that now; my family need me to work and send money. I have had the chance to do some practical courses and learn a trade here, so that is what I do now. (Syrian Refugee)*

For others, who arrive with education but without proper documentation of such, the lack of recognition of their qualifications is frustrating. This issue arose in a number of conversations.

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## Education

*“ That's a big thing. I came with some skills of course. But the skills including what I had, my qualifications, my GCSEs. They don't count those here. So I needed to go and start again as if I had never studied English or Math, start again. It takes a while as well. (Former refugee/citizen)*

*“ I'm a professional in my own right, it was just a matter of integrating and knowing how things worked, to be honest and for me it was time on my hands that I needed to use and I thought you know what, I don't have a single certificate that's from back home and probably if I did bring all my certificates, they'll be worth nothing anyway, so why not build myself up while I'm here. So at least now I have got certificates with that you know and I continue to educate myself, again. (Zimbabwean asylum seeker)*

Using the appropriate structures to generate a recognition of pre-existing qualifications is necessary for the integration of asylum seekers and refugees who have particular professional qualifications. A feeling of being undervalued or being unable to work in one's professional area can undermine larger efforts of integration. To conclude, asylum seekers and refugees are generally happy that there is a range of courses available in Northern Ireland (particularly Belfast). Information connected to these courses needs to be more readily available, and efforts made for those with particular professional qualifications to be able to engage with those professions or do refresher courses in Northern Ireland.



### SUMMARY NOTES

*In general, individuals report satisfaction with educational opportunities in Northern Ireland, however, some barriers exist such as literacy, language and communication issues, social exclusion, prejudice and racism.*

*With regards to primary and post-primary schooling, participants also report satisfaction with the exception of a few issues, as outlined above. The institutionalisation and better funding of existing supports such as homework clubs should be facilitated.*

*Schools receiving larger numbers of asylum seekers and refugees should receive specialist training on addressing these populations.*

*Adult asylum seekers and refugees stress that there are information gaps with regards to the educational opportunities available to them in Northern Ireland-a more comprehensive educational plan for asylum seekers and refugees is needed- as well as a database that monitors educational attainment and later, access to employment.*

*There is dissatisfaction with how recognition of previous educational qualifications is handled in Northern Ireland-acceleration of the process of recognising qualifications is necessary.*

*For asylum seekers and refugees whose tertiary education has been disrupted, the development of scholarship pathways to University supported by University and Industry partnerships.*



9

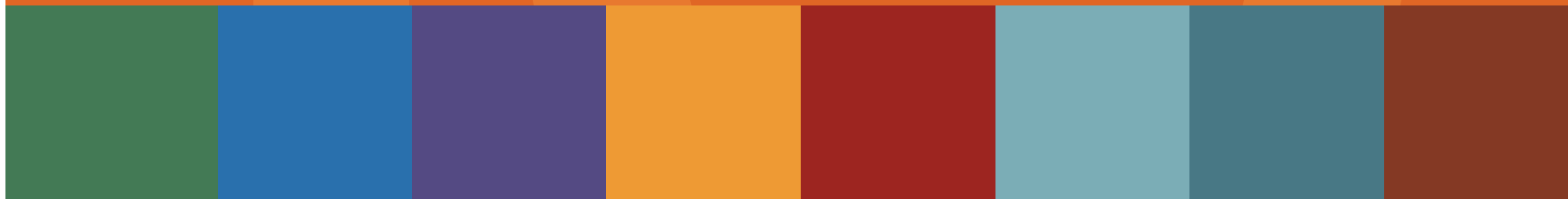
## Education





## 10 LANGUAGE

The challenges of learning English and access to English language classes figured prominently in our research. Undoubtedly, deeper knowledge and understanding of the English language is requisite for any newcomer to an English-speaking country. Firstly, general competence in English is necessary as well as the possibility of further training.





## 10 Language

### 10.1 English Language Training for Adults

In several interviews with service providers, but also with refugees and asylum seekers (one to one and focus groups), the theme of English language provision featured. The ability to attend and access English language classes on a regular basis was foregrounded in our interviews. It was presented to us foremost as a problem of intersecting *gender, age, race and social class dimensions*: for instance, for both women and men, lack of child care was mentioned as a major barrier. One Somali woman with refugee status described her situation as follows:

*“My experience had been, I’m now in this country more than 7 years and still I’m not able to communicate English language. If I got the proper support at the first stage, by this time I would be able to communicate fluently in English but I haven’t got that opportunity. Also other women, similar situation... Then also the social security said to find job, find job, all the time. But we’re not equipped to get the job. How can we get the job if we cannot communicate the local language? Everywhere when we seek a job or looking at a job everyone ask us, speaking to us, and then we were not able to communicate. Then that’s it, they will not offer us any jobs.”*

During one of our focus groups with 17 individuals, only 2 had adequate English skills to navigate society and qualify for the job market. In addition, learning the language poses additional challenges as some of the women could not read and write (illiteracy).

While there is a range of English classes on offer, it was not clear to many of our participants that classes are free. The women we spoke to believed they had to pay for classes. Crucially, the location of the classes is also an issue as people do not have the ability to pay for public transport.

One research participant, a Somali refugee, commented on the accessibility of services and how essential it is to speak English:

*“In this country, if you don’t go to look for the services yourself, you won’t find them. Nobody is going to come and knock on your door, and ask you will you need this, or do you want to go to school. Nobody will ask you. You’ll need it but how can you do it if you can’t speak the language. It’s a big barrier indeed.”*

This echoes the concern with the ways in which the information needs of asylum seekers and refugees are not being met. While there are many language classes available, asylum seekers and refugees appear not to be fully aware of their existence or how they can access them.

A volunteer from the Food Bank also stressed the importance for refugees to progress in English language:

*“Language is a big one. We do try to refer people to English classes and other support, to the international meeting point which is on the Lisburn road, which is like a drop in.”*

However, the volunteer confirmed that those in need are often reluctant to request help due to a sense of pride.

*“The language barrier as well, trying to get appointments, everything sorted, even if you were allowed to apply for jobs application forms.’ But: ‘Many of our clients have been professional people. People like doctors, lawyers, accountants, whatever and they are reduced to, how they see it, begging.”*

We also interviewed teachers of English for this research. We spoke to teachers who are also working with VPRS refugees from Syria. The teachers highlighted that the overall scale of language provision and readiness to care for and support Syrian





refugees, locally, was very engaged. Before the group of Syrians in May 2016 they offered language classes to EU migrants and international students.<sup>36</sup>

Also, the arrival of Syrian refugees confronted some of the English teachers with culturally loaded gender prejudices: initially, they were asked to teach English in two separate groups, women only and men only. At the request of the refugees themselves this was changed. It is here, that integration has to take seriously the individual human being with specific skills, needs and potential. Other service experts describe their institutional effort to respond to asylum seekers individually:

*“ We do a skills analysis when someone comes in and we look at what they did, what they didn't do, what courses could benefit them to allow them to practice whatever their profession was in their home country. I find that gives people a bit of self-respect but I also think that's good integration (...) people are coming, bringing back into the system. It just gives it an era of self-respect and contribute. Plus that's what they want to do. They don't want to come and take, they want to come and contribute. I think that's a really important part of integration orientation for when people first arrive. Whether they were a cleaner or a doctor, it doesn't really matter it's about developing those skills. (English Language Teacher)*

An asylum seeker from the Chinese community spoke about the problems of discontinuity, motherhood/child care and the lack of conversation classes in formal English language training.<sup>37</sup>

*“ So she did get some English classes, again organized through the Chinese Welfare Association for free, where one of the Belfast MAX teachers came up and taught them English in Chinese Welfare – it wasn't too bad. So she went to classes for a while, maybe up to a year. It was different choices like morning, afternoon or evening, or whatever. And when she had her daughter, she wasn't really able*

*to take part as much. The morning was the one that suited her best because she would have been up at school and stuff. Afternoons didn't suit her at all because her husband would be at work as well - she'd be home. She kind of stopped going for a while.*

The chances of non-English speaking asylum seekers and refugees to receive a regular and qualitatively high level of language training on the one hand, and also language programs and intercultural communication and professional skills, on the other, depends predominantly on location (space), class, gender and age. Some schools provide parents with extra English language tuition. One research participant, a Somali refugee, tells us:

*“ NAME OF SCHOOL is primary school and my kid is going to that primary school. They provide me with, for me, one day to go to English class in the school. Then also my daughter have extra training for four days a week.*

We also found, however, that there are many women who primarily stay at home, isolated, and with no access to language training. In sum, English classes are widely available for asylum seekers and refugees in Northern Ireland. However, there is a range of barriers which prevent access for some – in particular, poor circulation of information detailing access to the classes. Other issues include the challenge of paying a daily bus fare and lack of child care.



## 10 | Language

### SUMMARY NOTES

*In general, individuals report satisfaction with English classes when they do attend, however, a range of barriers exist such as childcare issues and travel costs.*

*Information about accessing English classes appears to be piecemeal and not widely available.*

*There is a need for a strategic plan regarding the provision of English classes where accreditation and standards are brought into line.*

*Asylum seekers and refugees who do not learn to speak English remain very isolated, in our focus group we met with women who had been living in Northern Ireland for as long as 9 years and they still do not speak English or know where or how to access classes.*

*Dispersing information regarding English language provision is crucial.*

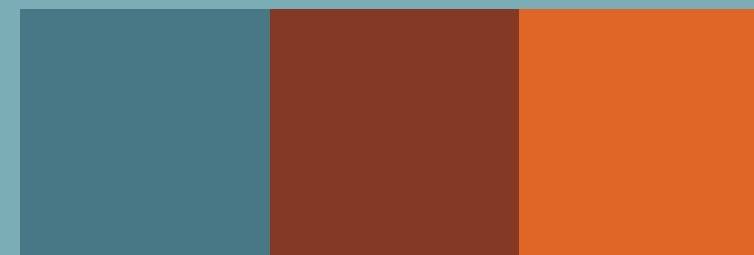
*The establishment of an English language forum for all language providers would be a useful mechanism by which to address standards, gaps and information needs.*





## 11 EMPLOYMENT

Employment is integral to successful integration for asylum seekers and refugees. In the UK, asylum seekers do not have the right to work, and this issue was mentioned repeatedly in the context of our research (Phillimore, 2006). Of course, granting asylum seekers the right to work will have a positive impact on the integration process.





### 11.1 Introduction

Currently, individuals have to wait until they are granted refugee status before they acquire the right to work. Both asylum seekers and refugees, however, can volunteer but information regarding volunteering from the Home Office is not always clear (see Refugee Action, 2013). However, refugees face significant barriers to full labour market participation and integration. In the previous section, we signposted issues such as educational and employment gaps due to forced displacement and time in the asylum process, the non-recognition of qualifications (due to a number of issues, including lack of appropriate documentation), language skills, and trauma. Better support and monitoring of educational opportunities for asylum seekers is requisite to enable integration into the Northern Irish labour market. In Northern Ireland, GEMS Northern Ireland offers a range of training supports which asylum seekers and refugees can access. The Department for the Economy's Steps to Work is also an important resource. There are a number of studies which examine the integration of 'migrant workers' more generally into the labour market (see Equality Commission 2010), but a more substantive study is needed on the specific issue of refugees and the labour market in Northern Ireland. At present, there is an acute lack of data. Further, of the research participants we spoke to the majority remained unemployed, with only a small number working in catering, the voluntary sector and a number of services in Northern Ireland.

### 11.2 Barriers to Employment

Asylum seekers in the UK are subjected to long periods of waiting to hear the outcome of their cases, this of course, negatively impacts on labour market integration. Data on how long people wait is difficult to obtain as the Home Office Research and Development Office only publish statistics regarding decisions which are target driven in orientation. Many of our research participants report that this is often a great period of instability and uncertainty regarding one's life-course. Housing is temporary and working rights are not accorded. One recurring theme that emerged during our research with asylum seekers and refugees is how vulnerable to labour exploitation

some asylum seekers are while waiting for the outcome of their claim. For those with failed asylum applications who cannot be returned to their country of origin and end up destitute, the question of exploitation figures large. In the case of some individuals, this waiting period can also mean a long period of time separated from family. This is frustrating on a number of levels, and people feel 'stuck,' out of sync with the normal routines of everyday life. Some feel under pressure (particularly fathers and young men) to support their families both in Northern Ireland and in their country of origin. Many feel that 'normal' life is not attainable while inhabiting the precarious status of asylum seeker. A number of our research participants conveyed to us that they had a range of skills that they could contribute to Northern Ireland- should they be allowed to work. The notion of 'leave to remain' was also discussed by a number of participants, who believe that while this gives an individual some security, it is still a precarious status with an unknown future outcome, one which works against the principle of long-term integration. Refugees who had spent a long time 'waiting' to get their status told us that they now feel that they had to retrain, find new skills:



*So they just end up, just being there and the young ones, they are already frustrated by the system and you take for, over five years to have your life moving on. So that affects so much. So what they're doing is they're wasting the young and the old are wasting themselves, because there is nobody to help them and they don't even know where to go and find help. You can be lost; some people are getting lost, up to some ten years, doing nothing.  
(Kenyan refugee)*

Further, they felt there was a stigma to admitting that they were refugees and this would also be a barrier in gaining employment. In terms of employment access, there is a complex mix of perceived barriers and actual barriers which work together to prevent refugees from applying for particular positions. Others' feared that the long gaps on their CVs would impact on their chances of getting employment. One research participant described it as follows:



*“So why would you want to come and relax, you know? But then the government tells you, no you are doing this, you know you’re right, being stuck there for ten years. See even if they give you after then ten years, or you get successful over ten years, you have played up, your mind has gone long, you don’t even know what to do next, you know. I could tell you, like for myself, spent six years with all that struggle, right now I can’t comprehend in my head what shall I do, shall I go and work, I don’t have qualifications. I have applied for over 50 jobs, none of them has come back. Because my CV is the size of a boil, but if you look there are the science, school, where will I study, by the time I’m 40, whose going to employ me, how long will I work? Will I then start buying a house, when I’m 80? Life doesn’t plan, no matter how much you try and squeeze it, it’s just too hard, do you know (Kenyan Refugee).”*

This transition period is an issue that has to be examined. Studies in other countries have shown that this is also the period where asylum seekers might have positive expectations about their new life in a new country. Should asylum seekers be allowed to work this would improve everyday life at a number of levels. Having the ‘right’ to work and earning a living is empowering financially but is also a matter of pride. Views on work and who should be the breadwinner of a household are both cultural and gendered and this can place further strain on families seeking asylum (often pressure is placed on the males of the family, particularly younger males to find work).

Any change to the defining legislation (Immigration Act) is an excepted matter of the Home Office: there have been a number of debates about amending article 57, Immigration bill 2015/2016 and giving asylum seekers the right to work after six months, but these campaigns have thus far been unsuccessful.<sup>38</sup>

Our interviews indicate that there is not only a close link between language skills and the possibility of finding a job (which is most relevant to refugees) but further that the focus and anticipation of a particular religious belonging ties into job market chances. One female refugee from Zimbabwe highlights:

*“I practice Catholicism. It’s not a problem for me to have loads of friends from other communities, so it doesn’t bother me at all. But I would be a bit careful when I’m saying to another person my religion. Or if I’m applying for work, I must be like should I say it, should I not.”*

What is most crucial here is the uncertainty that characterises her experience. As a newcomer to Northern Ireland society she cannot automatically read societal codes and thus, a lack of certainty in manoeuvring group boundaries impacts on her confidence in finding a job and feeling accepted. As this report has highlighted, one of the major blockages to the integration of asylum seekers from day one is the legal framework. Without a work permit individual asylum seekers are doomed to boredom or, perhaps, even occupy an intermediary grey zone by accepting illegal jobs.

Other interview partners described in detail what it means for them not to be able to provide independently for their families. As emphasised above, particularly, men feel desperate and long to have a ‘normal life’ back in this regard.

If they are parents, it also means that they feel ashamed of not being able to provide for their children, as well as having personal dreams that are hard to fulfil. As one of our research participants, a Somali asylum seeker put it:

*“Well basically as a single father I say thank God that my son is attending school now, but for me I have a lot of restrictions. Things I think I can do myself and changing my situation, I can’t take any step because the difficult facing as a single father and then also without status. That is a barrier for me. So I have that difficult experience on my daily life....”*

*I’m athletic, I run. ...I thought I will have something to contribute myself and I can support myself, and nobody helped me to achieve the things, which is my ambition, such as a runner in this country, and succeed in life. But the difficulty I have here nobody support me.*



## 11 Employment

Another woman with refugee status shared with us that she ran a business in her country before coming to Belfast, Northern Ireland. Given the opportunity and the means (e.g. Microcredit)<sup>39</sup> she might be able to set up her own trade business in Belfast.

*“We had a shop like retail, such as clothing and food, different like kind of grocery. We don't have money, no financial support, and we don't have the money. With some financial support and at the same time learn the language, I would have integrated in society and started my own business.”*

Asylum seekers, as we have stated, are not allowed to work legally. But even with female refugees there is a contradiction between granting them a legal right to stay and a lack of effort to integrate them into the local labour market.

### 11.3 Training Projects

Waiting for employment or the right to work is a waiting that deskills, demotivates and can be harmful to the well-being and mental health of asylum seekers and refugees. However, the voluntary sector in Northern Ireland offers a range of interesting projects geared towards asylum seekers and refugees which work towards alleviating some of the burdens of this waiting. While a number of those we interviewed were not aware of the existence of some of these projects, others were actively involved. Some mentioned projects that are no longer funded, and others reflected on the value of projects which they still engage with. While we cannot mention at length all of the projects in existence in Northern Ireland, some were spoken about more frequently than others in the interview context.

As part of this research, we also interviewed people from the voluntary sector who were actively involved in some of these projects. In the context of Belfast, the Belfast

Friendship Club emerges as an important site of friendship, engagement and hope. It is a site where people move beyond co-national networks and engage with people from a range of different nationalities and professional strata. It also emerges as a site where people can find advice and support in an informal capacity (see Robin Wilson, 2012). Organised through the South Belfast Roundtable, it has become an important feature in the lives of many asylum seekers and refugees in the Belfast area.

Many organisations provide the opportunity for asylum seekers and refugees to volunteer. A number of the research participants in this project commented on the value of volunteering to their well-being. Other projects organised by the South Belfast Roundtable which merit mention are the global kitchen project which offers skills building and training. The Social Enterprise HUB has also become an important site for groups of refugees working to develop social enterprise projects. Projects provided by groups such as ArtsEkta are also important sites of skills building in the area of arts and crafts (further the link to the therapeutic value of engagement with the arts and crafts should not be understated). As one of their volunteers states:

*“I was the first one to initiate the programme of refugee and asylum seekers, and their health and inequalities through medium of arts. So it was just sort of giving them those basic skills which when they come here they are so traumatised (...) So what we thought was that really it would be to empower the women and even to get them their mental stability right. We bring them all together under one roof and talk to them and give them the basic skills, which is basic skills from their native countries where they come from, of sewing skills and stitching skills and all that sort of stuff. They can buy or they can go to second hand shops and get second hand clothes or go to other places. They can cut and they can sew and do their own mending. That means that they have some clothing at least to keep them afloat. They don't have to worry about buying clothes.”*



The Inclusive Neighbourhood project which ran from 2009-2011 was also mentioned frequently by service providers, the voluntary sector and a number of refugees. This project provides an ideal model for how an all-encompassing integration project might function, thus providing a range of skill sets for asylum seekers and refugees as well as members of the host community.

## 11.4 Conclusion

The issue of access to the labour market is a critical one for refugees living in Northern Ireland. For asylum seekers, better pathways to employment need to be implemented through more systematic supports which the Department of Employment and Learning should take responsibility for. At present, without voluntary sector and faith based supports, asylum seekers and refugees would struggle even further. The employment outcomes for the majority of refugees in Northern Ireland thus remain problematic.

## SUMMARY NOTES

*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.*

*Waiting to get status is particularly detrimental to people's well-being. While the voluntary sector and faith based groups provide good supports and training opportunities, a more joined up approach to training needs to be overseen by the Department of Employment and Learning. Early bridging courses should be introduced.*

*The ability to volunteer is important for the well-being of asylum seekers and refugees, however, clarity is needed around the rules of volunteering.*

*Access to work is gendered-this is true of the mainstream population, but our research shows the challenges that fathers and young men face in providing for their families in Northern Ireland and their country of origin (this is of course cultural). Women too face particular challenges with lack of childcare- and even, role reversal.*

*Asylum seekers while waiting for their status become extremely vulnerable to labour exploitation.*

*At present, the voluntary sector provides some excellent good practice examples of training programmes, these should receive additional support and be rolled out more extensively in Northern Ireland. Social enterprise models with asylum seekers and refugees have had great success (see Craftspace in Birmingham) in other contexts and should be piloted more extensively in Northern Ireland.*





*It is difficult for me, because when **I was new**,  
no one was helping me, because I'm new.  
At that time, I was in shock  
and I didn't give them the right things,  
so I'm scared, I don't know the process.  
That is why everything I keep it.*



## 12 RACISM, DIVISIONS AND PREJUDICE IN NORTHERN IRELAND

The ways in which racism, prejudice and sectarianism impact on the lives of asylum seekers and refugees in Northern Ireland should figure in any larger conceptualisation of integration.





### 12.1 Introduction

The research participants in this study frequently linked their sense of alienation and marginalisation from experiences of racism and prejudice to the challenges of fully integrating into Northern Ireland society. Further, there is a perception amongst asylum seekers and refugees that ongoing tensions in Northern Ireland impact on their everyday life experiences e.g. in particular, being confronted with spatial segregation. While measuring racism and sectarianism or the links between them was outside of the remit of this study, our research participants nonetheless equated the two when speaking about housing, schooling and employment. The issue of how or whether racism and sectarianism connect is the subject of ongoing debate. The statement by the UN Advisory Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination (2011) and Council of Europe (2011) on racism and sectarianism is worth considering in this regard. They state that “(treating) sectarianism as a distinct issue rather than as a form of racism (is) problematic, as it allows sectarianism to fall outside the scope of accepted anti-discrimination and human rights protection standards.” (Cited in Bell and Mc Veigh, 2016: 24). In a recent academic paper by Bell and McVeigh (2016), conducted on behalf of the Equality Coalition, the authors examined the tension between racism and sectarianism in Northern Ireland. They highlight that some of the more problematic issues hinge on the notion of ‘ethnicity’ in a UK context, which ‘defines ethnicity primarily in terms of “colour” – thus 98% of Northern Ireland residents are defined solely as “white”’ (Bell and McVeigh, 2016: 24; see also for a critical debate on ‘race’ and ‘ethnicity’ Vieten, 2011). As they argue, ‘this does nothing to capture the ethnic complexity of Northern Ireland and nothing to help construct policy and practice on ethnicity.’ These are broader context issues which are akin to the border politics on the island of Ireland as it pertains to the lives of asylum seekers and refugees- this research cannot seek to resolve. Nonetheless, a refugee integration strategy should consider the implications of these issues for the long-term integration of asylum seekers and refugees in Northern Ireland.

### 12.2 Anti-Racism efforts in Northern Ireland

While the UK is a signatory to the Convention for the Elimination of Racism and Discrimination (CERD), hate crime and racism continue to rise. In Northern Ireland, there

is a history of working to combat the negative imprint of sectarianism and racism, and more recently, there are a number of anti-racism groups (in particular at the grassroots level) in operation- for example, the West Against Racism Network, The Equality Commission, Human Rights Commission. Likewise, many members of the Northern Ireland voluntary sector provide anti-racism training (such as the former NICEM and CRAICNI). Within government, good relations units and the Racial Equality Unit also work to find ways to eliminate racism and discrimination in Northern Ireland. There is, however, a dearth of research documenting such anti-racist movements in Northern Ireland and in particular, its link with integration. Whilst in depth engagement with these groups was outside of the scope of this study, the claim that the work of anti-racism activists is beneficial to newcomers, and indeed, to all of Northern Ireland’s inhabitants, was a recurring theme in the research. Thus, while the Northern Ireland local context continues to experience division and community tension, there is much positive work ongoing to combat prejudice and racism. However, we note that it is an area which needs further research.

### 12.3 Homophobia

The level of discrimination towards LGBT people varies significantly from context to context. However, in some countries, LGBT people can find themselves facing a prison or even death sentence. To date, the experiences of LGBT asylum seekers and refugees is little researched and poorly understood in the UK (with the exception of a number of studies but most significantly one in 2011 on LGBT asylum seekers and refugees in Scotland) (see Cowen et al. 2011). However, a number of organisations such as the UK Lesbian and Gay Immigration Group, No Going Back, and Reach Out provide guidance and support for LGBT asylum seekers and refugees in the UK. Out of our research cohort, three of our participants (one female and two males) openly described themselves as coming from an LGBT background and spoke about how their lives had become unliveable in their home countries because of their sexual orientation. Cowen (et al. 2011) show in their study of LGBT asylum seekers and refugees in Scotland that LGBT asylum seekers and refugees often face a culture of disbelief when using their sexual orientation as a case for asylum. Further, decision making on LGBT claims has been deemed to be of poor quality and often insensitive to the issues LGBT asylum seekers and refugees face in their home countries (Cowen





## Racism, Divisions and Prejudice in Northern Ireland 12

et al., 2011). In this study, the LGBT asylum seekers and refugees that we interviewed spoke not just about their treatment in their home countries but the challenges they face in Northern Ireland as openly identifying LGBT individuals. In particular, our LGBT research participants highlighted the complexities of housing for LGBT asylum seekers and refugees. One of our research participants pointed out that being housed with people from strong religious backgrounds where LGBT rights are not respected is problematic. One of our participants describes it thus:

*“Yeah, maybe if they do like maybe find personal, like special people with personal backgrounds, because sometimes it's uncomfortable you know, when you're mixing people, especially with different cultures, especially religion, because those like are sensitive issues to people. Because some, everybody's got their own beliefs. So sometimes you find that, or something like that, so things like that. Maybe they can try and find out what people will prefer, before they send them. Especially when you find people that have got maybe, it's not attitude, like not really attitude, I don't know what words I can use. Like if people have got different, like sometimes, is it personalities that normally clash? Yeah, so maybe personalities that clash, it's difficult to be living in such an environment that you'll be always like saying, oh stop fighting or maybe you will always be locking yourself in the room to avoid noise.”*

Our research participants from an LGBT background had fled their countries of origin also due to a fear of persecution due to their sexuality. To find themselves once more in fear in their new host country due to their living conditions has far reaching implications for their everyday lives. In particular, one of our research participants expressed a concern about the ongoing damage that the constant worry of being housed with a group of young men, some of whom had strong views about gay men, was doing to his mental health and his general well-being. For LGBT asylum seekers and refugees, social isolation from the larger community of asylum seekers and refugees can further compound an already challenging experience.

There is thus a need for the very particular concerns of LGBT asylum seekers and refugees to be considered – particularly in the contexts of legal advice, housing and health. As previously stated, there are few research studies in this area and Northern Ireland could benefit from further insights into this particular group of asylum seekers and refugees. Increasing awareness of the particular needs (including specialist legal advice on LGBT and gender identity claims) of LGBT asylum seekers and refugees within mainstream and LGBT organisations in Northern Ireland should also form part of a refugee integration strategy.

### 12.4 The Island of Ireland – borders

*“No, it's not well known, most people who'd lived abroad wouldn't know that Northern Ireland is the UK, it is part of the UK, they wouldn't know that, they just think Ireland is Republic and all that.”  
(Zimbabwean Refugee)*

Since the Good Friday agreement in 1998, the political state border between the UK/ NI and the Republic of Ireland became a non-guarded soft border. Crossing by car, coach or train, one notices that you are entering another country only by the change from miles to km; or from bilingual signage (Irish and English) changing to the single use of English. However, for asylum seekers and refugees living in Northern Ireland, the border presents a number of issues. Some might not be aware of its existence or its status as a national border due to a lack of understanding of the history of the island of Ireland. Not knowing or being aware of the other national jurisdiction (e.g. Republic of Ireland) leaves refugees in a legal limbo as they might unconsciously cross the border (e.g. which has criminal law consequences). Having to secure travel documents and a visa for a crossing that others take for granted can be more costly and complicated.





The complications of border crossing can also stop refugees from taking part in social or community events or cost them particular employment opportunities, which may involve regular border crossings. Asylum seeking and refugee children may not be able to go on school trips or join in sporting events with a cross border focus. This is particularly an issue for asylum seekers and refugees living close to the border in areas such as Derry/Londonderry. With Syrian refugee families also being settled in the border areas, this issue becomes more important as a matter of social and cultural integration.

The referendum vote on 24 June 2016 could alter this border experience, although we do not know yet in what ways. Changes to how movement across the border is managed could affect asylum seekers and refugees living at the border and at present, this uncertainty means no all-island solution can be found to improving the lives of asylum seekers and refugees wanting to move freely between the two jurisdictions. The border between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland, thus, exists for some asylum seekers and refugees as another challenge and layer of anxiety in their everyday lives as people seeking refuge.

### 12.5 Outlook: A Sense of Belonging and Future Hopes

This report highlights the complexities of living life as an asylum seeker and refugee in Northern Ireland. The people who participated in this study differed in terms of age, class, sex, country of origin and family status- and accordingly, had a very mixed range of hopes about the future and their relationship to Northern Ireland. For asylum seekers, as we have shown, the complexities of being caught in a complex asylum process with an unknown outcome engendered a sense of despair and anxiety. As such future plans are difficult to make, but many of the people we interviewed, in particular those with families, have aspirations to continue living in Northern Ireland.

Homesickness, uncertainty about status, alienation and loneliness combine for some of the research participants in this report to make them feel unsure of their relationship with Northern Ireland. Of the refugees interviewed, one is currently living

in GB with no plans to return to Northern Ireland. Three others had left Northern Ireland and attempted to settle elsewhere in the UK, but subsequently returned, citing Northern Ireland as their home now.

For asylum seekers and refugees with younger children in school, many told us that their children were so settled and generally content in school that they could not envision leaving Northern Ireland. Three of our research participants with families, however, had moved from Derry/Londonderry to Belfast in hope of better employment opportunities, two also citing that they had a bigger co-national community providing support in Belfast. However, for the young single refugees with no family attachments in Northern Ireland, future plans in Northern Ireland were often discussed in a contingent manner with two participants telling us that they desired the excitement of a big city like London. In the main, however, both the asylum seeking and refugee research participants in this study hoped that in spite of the many obstacles such as unemployment and poor housing, that they will eventually be able to make comfortable lives in Northern Ireland.



### SUMMARY NOTES

*Racism presents as an ongoing issue for asylum seekers and refugees in Northern Ireland. The perception that there is a link between sectarianism and racism is widely held. More research is needed in Northern Ireland to ascertain the full relationship between sectarianism and racism, and its potential impact on integration.*

*LGBT asylum seekers and refugees have little support and often end up housed in conditions which replicate their experiences in their country of origin. Better support is needed for LGBT asylum seekers and refugees in Northern Ireland. Targeting of organisations that can provide specialised support for LGBT asylum seekers and refugees is needed.*

*Asylum seekers and refugees need to be made better aware of the existing supports that help against discrimination and racism.*

*Asylum seekers and refugees feel uncomfortable reporting incidents of racism or discrimination, a better reporting mechanism should be put in place.*

*A public awareness campaign on asylum seekers and refugees could be a valuable project to attenuate current misperceptions about asylum seekers and refugees.*

*In the main, the research participants in this study aspire to remain in and make a life in Northern Ireland thus further substantiating the need for a long-term integration strategy.*



*I didn't know where I was going,  
I've never been in the city,  
I've just spent three days in a police cell  
and I couldn't understand it,  
**was this the safety I came for,**  
to be locked in a cell and be questioned  
and nobody seems to wonder why I'm here  
and if that's what they're trying to find out,  
I think they're doing it in the wrong way.*



## 13 CONCLUSION

This report has highlighted the challenges asylum seekers and refugees face in their everyday lives in Northern Ireland. The report used Ager and Strang's (2004) 'Indicators of Integration' framework to research and document how a refugee integration strategy might be developed in Northern Ireland. All of the participants in this research argue that contemporary Northern Ireland needs to develop and implement a refugee integration strategy. It was generally agreed that integration is a *process* which should begin on the day of arrival for an asylum seeker and refugee. This should be a strategically managed process which sees integration as multi-layered (and indeed, multi-levelled) with important outcomes envisioned for its ongoing development and productivity. Integration for our research participants has practical, psychological and philosophical foundations, and it was generally posited that an agreed set of indicators with which to measure the positive outcomes of an integration process in Northern Ireland is very much necessary.



## 13 Conclusion

Northern Ireland society with its complex history of division and borders presents its own distinct challenges for the development and implementation of a refugee integration strategy. This is further compounded by the complexities of devolution in the context of immigration law. Further, changes to policy and the Immigration Acts in 2015 and 2016, coupled with the mass movement of people due to conflict, makes the issue of asylum seekers, refugees and integration a fast-changing environment that affects a wider group of people. There are also opportunities for an integration strategy to take advantage of. In Northern Ireland, there is a very vibrant voluntary and civil society sector working with asylum seekers and refugees. A range of government supported projects have also strengthened the process of support and integration for asylum seekers and refugees, but as this report highlights much work remains to be done. With the UK developing a VPRS, and Northern Ireland becoming a recipient of Syrian refugees-the topic of asylum seekers and refugees has received renewed attention both at government level and in the public domain. This focus on the complexities of being an asylum seeker and refugee in the UK, and locally in Northern Ireland shows that it is a key moment to develop and implement a refugee integration strategy. Much learning is available from other contexts- Scotland, in particular, in which the development and implementation of a refugee strategy there was done in a highly collaborative and innovative manner- provides an example which Northern Ireland can surely emulate.

Integration happens at many levels and in collaboration with members of the host community. The asylum process in the UK, as we have shown in this report, is a challenging one and the often-negative experience of an asylum seeker and refugee over the course of this process can have a long-term impact on the ability to integrate. In Northern Ireland, as we have evidenced, asylum seekers and refugees have particular challenges with appropriate legal support which further compounds an already difficult process. Further, the commercialisation of asylum processes more generally has meant a decline in housing standards and conditions for asylum seekers and refugees. This broad commercialisation of the asylum process in the context of a neoliberal economy, austerity measures, and locally stretched public funding and demands has negatively impacted the everyday living standards of asylum seekers and refugees in Northern Ireland and Great Britain.

Further to this, post-migration stressors play a role in diminishing conditions for asylum seekers and refugees. This report points to a broad range of post-migration stressors, such as a deterrent and infantilising asylum process coupled with poor supports and an inability to work-many of which compound or create health challenges for asylum seekers and refugees. The issues of destitution and exploitation also figured large in our discussions with research participants, with many working hard to find solutions to these growing problems. The complexities of spatial segregation, prejudice and racism also exist in Northern Ireland, and many of the research participants in this report highlighted how it has negatively impacted on their everyday lives.

This has consequences for a Northern Ireland integration project and many asylum seekers and refugees find themselves alienated in the society within which they had hoped to seek refuge. An integration strategy, then, must ultimately reckon with creating a more humane and hopeful context for asylum seekers and refugees to integrate into. This will also bring benefit to broader society in Northern Ireland, in that, becoming a more reflective society, and working towards bettering services, collaborations and relationships, and indeed, society in general- will be an achievement for all residents and citizens of Northern Ireland.



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## Appendices

### Appendix 1 List of Participants

Service Providers	Voluntary Organisations - Host Community	Asylum Seekers & Refugees
Belfast Trust	Dialogue for Diversity	47 participants from ten different countries
CRAIC NI	EMBRACE	
LAW Centre	EXTERN	
Public Health Agency NI	Food Bank, Belfast	
NIACRO	Intercultural Community Group, Craigavon	
Housing Executive	NISHA	
Culturlaan, Derry / Londonderry	NICRAS	
NHS	Belfast Friendship Club	
HomePlus	Bryson	
NBC	LORAG	
One Private practice solicitor	Equality Authority	
NINES	Acsoni	
Local City Councils	Barnardos	
GEMSAI	Larne House Visitor Group	
	NISMP	
	Art Eskta	
	South Belfast Round Table	
	Faith Based Groups x 3	
	Hapani	
	North West Migrant Forum	
	British Red Cross	
	Refugees and Asylum Forum	
	STEP	

Table 1 Research Participants



## Appendix 2 Questionnaire

### Survey of Service Providers

Please complete the following questions about your organisation. Your involvement in this research is anonymous. Your name and the name of your organisation will not be mentioned in the resulting research. If you do not want to answer a question, or do not know the answer, please leave it blank.

#### About Your Services and Service Users

1. How many people use your services per year (if known) \_\_\_\_\_
2. In what year did your organisation start providing services? \_\_\_\_\_
3. Is your organisation run mainly by refugees/asylum seekers and/or migrants from the community that you work with? (Please tick) Yes ☐ No ☐
4. Most of your members are (Please tick **only one** box)  
Refugees (or with leave to remain) ☐  
Asylum seekers ☐  
Migrant's ☐  
Other (please specify) \_\_\_\_\_
3. Please estimate what percentage of your service users are: Male \_\_\_\_\_%  
Female \_\_\_\_\_%
4. What services do you provide to service users? (Please tick **all** that apply)

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- We provide advice and information ☐
- We provide training – e.g. mother tongue classes, English, or other courses ☐
- We provide for specific needs such as education/health/labour/legal/or other \_\_\_\_\_
- We give service users the chance to meet and socialise with each other regularly ☐
- We hold events – such as celebration days & cultural events ☐
- We directly provide food and/or other essentials like clothing ☐
- We provide activities – such as dancing, sports, cooking, etc. ☐
- We refer service users to other agencies that can also help them ☐
- We provide opportunities for service users to meet refugees/migrants from other countries
- We provide opportunities for service users to meet people from the UK ☐
- We help service users to maintain contact with their country of origin ☐
- We provide translation/interpretation services ☐
- Other – please specify \_\_\_\_\_
5. What are the specific challenges that your organisation faces in providing these services? Please explain
6. Do you agree with the following statements about your service users? (Please tick for each statement)



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	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Agree Strongly	Agree
Service users meet each other and become friends via our organisation.					
If our organisation did not exist, most of our service users would probably not know each other.					
Our organisation is the first place our service users come to if they need help or advice.					
Our organisation is a big part of our service users' day-to-day lives.					

7. What are the three main issues that asylum seekers and refugees have in terms of life in Northern Ireland when they access your service? (Please list)

1. \_\_\_\_\_
2. \_\_\_\_\_
3. \_\_\_\_\_

8. What are the gaps within your service and how might these be addressed? Please explain

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### About an Integration Strategy

9. Does your organisation believe an integration strategy is required in Northern Ireland?

Yes ☐ No ☐

Please explain

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10. Would an integration strategy aid with current gaps in service provision for asylum seekers/refugees and the migrant population more broadly?

Yes ☐ No ☐

Please explain

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### Appendix 3 Interview guides

#### Interview guide for service providers.

Permission to record

1. Could you describe your organisation and service (and its structure)? Is it part of an umbrella organisation or linked to other services?
2. What are the main services you provide?
3. Who accesses your services (nationalities, backgrounds)? Tell me about your service users generally if you can
4. Which services are most popular or most in demand? (Prompt to cover why they think that is the case).
5. Have any of the services you provide changed over the past number of years? Why?

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6. Do you feel this service is an important part of As/Ref lives? Why?
7. What challenges do you currently face? Indeed, what changes would you make if you could?
8. How would you assess the current refugee crisis situation?
9. What do you understand by integration?
10. What does that mean in practice and how well do you think it is working?
11. How do you think you can best support those who only have temporary leave to remain? And within a national context which has different goals?
12. How well do you think that service providers in general in Northern Ireland are meeting asylum seekers and refugees needs? What gaps remain? And also the needs of the local population?
13. What are the key differences (if any) in providing services to asylum seekers and refugees?
14. Do you provide any specific services for unaccompanied minors?
15. How does your organisation link into other UK wide structures? Do you have any links with Republic of Ireland organisations/service providers?

### NORTHERN IRELAND AND POLICY/BORDER

16. What about the process of managing UK policies within a devolved context? How far are the different interests of Northern Ireland taken into account?
17. Does the context of Northern Ireland as a post-conflict/divided society pose any particular difficulties for the services you provide to asylum seekers and refugees – what are the strategies for dealing with this?



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18. There have been quite a number of policy changes in UK immigration in the last few years – what ones would you say have had the most impact in Northern Ireland?
19. Does the ROI/Northern Irish border pose any particular problematics to service provision?
20. What do you think have been the main changes that have taken place at local level?
21. How are such changes measured?
22. How far do you think that asylum policy has been mainstreamed or linked into other policy areas? e.g. equalities, regeneration
23. How far do you undertake consultative work with asylum seekers or refugees or use representative groups?
24. Does Northern Ireland need its own specific refugee integration policy? What should be included in this?
25. Are there specific and different challenges for programme refugees (such as the group from Syria) and independent asylum seekers?

### OTHER REPRESENTATION

26. Do you engage with campaign/activist groups or campaign/raise awareness yourself?
27. How do you decide what groups to engage with? What about new campaign groups that have emerged in Northern Ireland with the recent refugee crisis?
28. How would you assess public understanding of asylum and refugee issues in Northern Ireland? How far has it changed/improved? What remains to be done?
29. How well are information needs being met for asylum seekers/local communities/service providers?

30. What do you think of the rise of direct action in protesting against housing moves and dawn raids?
31. Promotion of community cohesion – how far have strategy and indicators been developed in terms of your own organisation and governmental strategy?
32. Funding – how do you decide on what projects to fund -factors taken into consideration, monitoring, evaluation, goals.
33. What are your priority issues/goals for the future in terms of AS/Ref and integration strategies?
34. Is there anyone else that you would recommend speaking to?

### Interview guide for host communities

35. Could you give some background to your community?
36. What role does your community organisation play here?
37. Are there many members of the refugee/migrant community living in this community? Does your organisation engage with these community members? If so what are the main challenges as you see it for both the host community and migrant community in this particular area?
38. As a community leader –how do you view issues of integration within your community? What are the main challenges? What role can/does your organisation play? Do you organise any integration/awareness events?
39. Do you have links with other community orgs working with asylum seekers/refugees in the UK or Republic of Ireland?
40. Are there particular issues with integration in Northern Ireland given its status as a post-conflict/divided society? Do you think the border between ROI/NI plays





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any kind of role in this?

41. Has the host community been welcoming to members of the refugee/migrant community? Have there been any particular issues in recent years?
42. What would you like to do to challenge perceptions of asylum seekers and refugees in Northern Ireland?
43. What are your views on the current refugee crisis?
44. Do you think NI has been welcoming of programme refugees from conflict areas in the past? What about the current group from Syria?
45. Do you think NI needs its own refugee integration strategy?
46. Anything else you would like to speak about?

### Interview guide-semi-structured – Asylum seekers/Refugee questions

**Preliminary questions** - background/nationality/age/ religion/member of family or single

#### EXPERIENCES

How long have you been living in Northern Ireland?

What were your experiences of arriving in Northern Ireland?/Can you tell me about when you first came to Northern Ireland?

Did you have good/bad experiences when you arrived? Can you tell me about them?

How did you deal with immigration issues?

How did these issues impact on your life here in Northern Ireland?

What was/is your perception of/what did you think about the immigration process here in Northern Ireland?

#### SERVICES (HEALTH, HOUSING, EDUCATION AND SO ON DEPENDING ON WHOM YOU ARE SPEAKING TO (FAMILY MAKEUP)

Do you find there is adequate support for refugees in Northern Ireland? (in particular with regards to certain services?)

#### HOUSING

Can you tell me about your experience in trying to find somewhere to live?

What are your specific housing needs and living conditions? How do you feel about where you currently live?

What have the interactions with housing agencies/organisations and landlords been like for you?

Did you choose to live where you are living now?

Did you get to know your neighbours? How do you feel you in this neighbourhood/area?

How do you feel about where you are living -is there anywhere else in Northern Ireland/UK that you would prefer to live? Why?

Do you live near other refugees or people from your home country?

What would you change about the process of finding somewhere to live (through the immigration procedures/process)?



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### HEALTH

Have you had to access health services in Northern Ireland? For example, have you registered with a GP?

How did you find this process? How do you access health needs information in general? Is there material available in your language or do you need a translator/interpreter?

How satisfied/happy have you been with your encounters with the health service?

### EDUCATION

Have you (or family members/children) had to access education in Northern Ireland?

If so what have been your particular experiences?

How do you feel the education/training you have received here has helped you with your life in Northern Ireland?

If children-did you choose a particular school for your child/children? Do you have contact with your child/children's teachers?

How did you find that process? Did you have help in doing this?

In what ways are you helping your children settle into school/learn?

Do you have particular expectations from the school around learning/discipline/religion?

Did you take English lessons? How did you access these classes?

### LABOUR

Do you have a particular profession? Can you work in this profession here in Northern Ireland?

Do you work? (full time, part time, casual) If no -would you like to work?

Have you received any advice on particular training for what you would like to do?

Would you like to do further study or learn a new profession?

What are the main barriers to getting work here in Northern Ireland?

### LEGAL ISSUES

How have you found the legal supports for immigration here?

Have you ever had to access legal support/support for racism (or hate crimes)?

### BENEFITS/WELFARE SYSTEM?

Have you accessed the Northern Irish welfare system? If so how did you find that process?

Do they have particular supports for AS/Refugees?

### INTEGRATION

What do you understand/think of the word/term integration?

Do you feel your neighbours/community are friendly/helpful towards you or refugees in general?



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What are the barriers to getting to know people in the community you live in ?

What would help you feel more a part of Northern Irish society?

### GENERAL (IF TIME)

Are you happy with your life in Northern Ireland?

Where have you found support? If you have children where do you get help with them if you need it?

Do you have a family and are they living here? If no-would you like to bring your family here?

What did you imagine your life would be like here before you came to Northern Ireland?

What advice would you give asylum seekers coming to Northern Ireland for the first time?

Is there anything else you would like to talk about?

### Interview guide-semi-structured- for asylum seekers

**Preliminary questions** - background/nationality/age/ religion/member of family or single

### EXPERIENCES

How long have you been living in Northern Ireland?

What were your experiences of arriving in Northern Ireland?/Can you tell me about when you first came to Northern Ireland?

Did you have good/bad experiences when you arrived? Can you tell me about them?

How did you deal with immigration issues?

How did these issues impact on your life here in Northern Ireland?

What was your perception of/what did you think about the immigration process here in Northern Ireland?

What are your living conditions/housing like? Have you had to access any services in NI such as health etc etc (this will mostly depend on how long someone has been here so will need to play by ear as such)

What organisations or places have you found helpful? Has it been easy to get help, advice or support since you arrived?

Have you met friends-met a community of support? Are you now involved in any groups? What kind?

What is the process of waiting for approval like? How do you spend your time (activities)?

Will you stay here if you are granted status? (rephrase depending on English levels)

What else would be useful for you to know about Northern Ireland?

Have you met many Northern Irish people? Have you felt welcomed? What do you understand by the term integration? What would be helpful to settle more into Northern

Ireland as you wait?

Anything else you would like to speak about?



## Endnotes

- 1 <http://www.unhcr.org/uk/1951-refugee-convention.html>
- 3 <http://www.scottishrefugeecouncil.org.uk/>
- 4 [http://citiesofmigration.ca/good\\_idea/on-your-mark-get-set-weibo/](http://citiesofmigration.ca/good_idea/on-your-mark-get-set-weibo/)
- 5 [http://citiesofmigration.ca/good\\_idea/building-better-housing-for-refugees-means-better-housing-for-all/](http://citiesofmigration.ca/good_idea/building-better-housing-for-refugees-means-better-housing-for-all/)
- 6 See two successful campaigns for comparison <http://www.iamanimmigrant.net/> and I came by boat campaign in Australia <http://www.icamebyboat.com.au/>
- 7 See Inclusive Neighbourhood Evaluation report [https://www.embraceni.org/wp-content/uploads/2008/08/21-nov\\_FINAL\\_INP-Evaluation-Report.pdf](https://www.embraceni.org/wp-content/uploads/2008/08/21-nov_FINAL_INP-Evaluation-Report.pdf)
- 8 See <https://rm.coe.int/CoERMPublicCommonSearchServices/DisplayDCTMContent?documentId=090000168048e623> for a full overview on what is happening with integration in this Berlin district.
- 9 See the work of John Bond from Initiatives for Change who argues that refugees should not be seen as victims but as active agents, rebuilders and peacemakers in their new and former homes see <http://www.iofc.org/answering-europes-migrant-crisis> (accessed Oct 24th, 2016).
- 10 See <http://www.unhcr.org/uk/figures-at-a-glance.html> for detailed facts on global displacement
- 11 See <http://www.unhcr.org/uk/news/latest/2015/6/558193896/worldwide-displacement-hits-all-time-high-war-persecution-increase.html> for details on the location of displaced peoples.
- 13 Other categories include discretionary leave, exceptional leave to remain, humanitarian protection (for 5 years). See <https://www.gov.uk/settlement-refugee-or-humanitarian-protection/overview>
- 14 For more information on the VPRS see Possible reference: [https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/472020/Syrian\\_Resettlement\\_Fact\\_Sheet\\_gov\\_uk.pdf](https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/472020/Syrian_Resettlement_Fact_Sheet_gov_uk.pdf)
- 15 <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/immigration-statistics-january-to-march-2016/asylum>
- 16 Germany (562,000), Sweden (159,000) and Hungary (142,000) were the three EU countries that received the highest number of asylum applications, together accounting for 62% of asylum applications in the EU in that period.
- 17 See for details <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/immigration-statistics-january-to-march-2016/summary>
- 18 See <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/immigration-statistics-january-to-march-2016/summary>
- 19 For details on how the Law Centre Northern Ireland estimated the number of asylum seekers and refugees in NI, please see <http://www.lawcentreni.org/Publications/Policy-Briefings/How-many-refugees-in-NI-Oct-2015.pdf>
- 20 <http://www.asaproject.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/03/fs1.pdf>
- 21 <http://www.asaproject.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/03/fs2.pdf>
- 22 See for more detail [http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2016/19/pdfs/ukpga\\_20160019\\_en.pdf](http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2016/19/pdfs/ukpga_20160019_en.pdf)
- 23 <http://www.democraticprogress.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/07/The-Good-Friday-Agreement-An-Overview.pdf>
- 24 <http://www.scottishconstitutionalfuture.org/OpinionandAnalysis/ViewBlogPost/tabid/1767/articleType/ArticleView/articleId/6959/Tom-Mullen-and-Sarah-Craig-The-Immigration-Bill-Reserved-Matters-and-the-Sewel-Convention.aspx>
- 25 <https://www.worldvision.org/wv/news/Syria-war-refugee-crisis-FAQ>



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26 SCOPUS is a database which allows for peer-reviewed academic literature to be searched for and evaluated.

27 See the Chinese Welfare Association for further information <http://www.cwa-ni.org/History.aspx>

28 See <http://www.migrationni.org/index.aspx>

29 As a point of clarification to this quote, failed asylum seekers can apply for support for subsistence and accommodation as we show in this report.

30 See <http://www.migrationpolicy.org/research/future-immigrant-integration-europe-mainstreaming-approaches-inclusion> for information on mainstreaming

32 See <https://www.nao.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2014/01/10287-001-accommodation-for-asylum-seekers-Book.pdf> for COMPAS audit.

33 See <http://www.lawcentreni.org/Publications/Policy-Briefings/LCNI-BRIEFING-Refugees-and-delays-with-benefits-May-2016.pdf>

34 See <http://www.belfasttrust.hscni.net/pdf/Migrant-Health-Strategy.pdf>

35 There is substantial documentation on the educational experiences of 'newcomer' children in Northern Ireland. In 2010, the National Children's bureau published a report entitled 'New to Northern Ireland-A study of the issues faced by migrant, asylum seeking and refugee children in Northern Ireland.' In 2011, the Northern Ireland Council for Ethnic Minorities published a study on 'Promoting Racial Equality in Northern Ireland's Post Primary Schools.' In 2014, the Northern Ireland Strategic Partnership published a report entitled 'The Integration of newcomer children with interrupted education into Northern Ireland Schools' and in 2015 a Barnardos report 'Feels like Home: Exploring the experiences of newcomer pupils in Northern Ireland' (2015). The Equality Commission's 'Every Child an Equal Child-Statement on Key inequalities in Northern Ireland and a strategy for intervention' (2008) while dated still makes some valuable recommendations. Further, the Department of Education established an inclusion and diversity service in 2007 which provides support and specialist advice in a range of areas to schools.

36 This overall very positive scheme means that this group enjoys a more privileged situation as far as provision of accommodation, services and job perspectives are concerned. Due to their relatively new arrival and different situation, the focus of our report is on the experiences of previously arrived asylum seekers and refugees in NI.

37 This is a verbatim transcription of an interpreted interview; the interviewed person appears in the text as 'third person'

38 <http://www.unhcr.org/en-us/57515d9c4.pdf>

39 <http://www.cgap.org/blog/does-microcredit-really-help-poor-people>







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