

Refugees in Northern Ireland 2018

Some basic facts



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Contents

Foreword and Introduction	1
Definitions and the world refugee situation	2
Why people flee	3
Journeys in search of safety	4
Why do refugees come to the UK?	5
Asylum and refugee numbers	6
Numbers of people seeking asylum in N Ireland	7
The process of applying for asylum in N Ireland	8
Access to support during the process	9
The challenges	10
Resettlement refugees	12
N Ireland response to the refugee and migrant crisis	13
Integration	14
What can you do?	16
EMBRACE resources	16
Support organisations, further reading & useful web sites	17

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Foreword

Having recently visited refugee camps in Jordan and having worked for many years with people who have come to Northern Ireland to seek asylum, I feel that it is very timely to have a publication that gives an overview of the topic: *Refugees in Northern Ireland*. At a time when many are asking questions about those who are arriving on our shores, 'Why are they here? Who are they? What impact will they have on our lives?' and hopefully 'What can I do?', it is important to be able to access factual information. It is also essential to have a developed understanding of the challenges involved, both for people who arrive here and for us as a society when we seek to offer sanctuary and the opportunity to contribute and belong in a new country.

Denise Wright MBE
EMBRACE Chairperson, 2016

Introduction

The UN Refugee Agency has stated that by the end of 2016 there were 65.6 million people in the world who had been displaced from their homes by war, civil conflict or persecution. Of these, 22.5 million individuals were refugees.¹ Our television screens have shown many people making desperate journeys to reach safety. This humanitarian crisis touches all our consciences, but many people struggle in knowing how to respond, partly because of a lack of understanding of refugee issues, especially in our local context.

Local people may well think that refugees are very unlikely to come here. They are much more aware of people who have been forced to flee *from* here, because of conflict, poverty and famine in the past; and the movement of individuals and communities to different parts of their own cities; across the border; to Great Britain, or to other countries; because of recent sectarian conflict or intimidation.

But, while many of us have gone into exile across the centuries, there is nothing new about people from other countries coming here, looking for a safer place to live. They may never have developed into large communities of refugees, but small groups and individuals have found safety here in the past. There are many examples.

Most people will be aware of the Huguenots who fled first to Holland because of religious persecution in France in the late seventeenth century, and later went on to find work in other countries, including Ireland, with a small community working in the linen industry in Lisburn.

In the late nineteenth century, Jewish people, persecuted in the Russian Empire, fled from present-day Baltic states and some made their homes in Belfast and beyond.

A few Belgian refugees reached Ireland during the First World War.

Some desperate Jewish people and other people who were persecuted by the Nazis came here in the 1930s and '40s and some of these refugees and exiles set up businesses that provided work for local people.

Following a defeated uprising, nearly 900 Hungarian refugees found respite here for a few months in 1957, before moving to permanent homes in Canada.

The aftermath of the Vietnamese War saw many desperate people fleeing by sea from communist rule and a few of these 'boat people' were brought to Northern Ireland, as resettlement refugees, the largest group to Craigavon, in 1979.

When the UK began to receive larger numbers of applications for asylum in the 1990s and early 2000s, the Home Office introduced a system of dispersal to cities around GB. Northern Ireland has never been part of this system but a small number of people have managed to reach here each year in recent decades and stayed here during the asylum application process. This booklet is about their experiences, as well as about the recent arrival of resettlement refugees from Syria.

¹ UN Refugee Agency www.unhcr.org/uk/figures-at-a-glance.html

Some Definitions

Q Who is an asylum seeker?

A A person who is looking for a safe place outside her/his own country. People seek asylum if they fear persecution in their own country because of their ethnicity, nationality, religion, social group or political opinion.

Q What is our obligation to people seeking asylum?

A The UK signed the 1951 UN Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees, and has agreed to allow people who enter the country to apply for asylum here. They have a legal right to be here while their application is considered. Equally, anyone from this country may seek asylum in any other country that has signed the convention.

Q Who is a refugee?

A In the UK it is someone who applies for asylum, and is successful in being granted refugee status or has been designated as a refugee by the United Nations Refugee Agency (UNHCR) and come here through a resettlement programme. ('Refugee' is also commonly used as a general term for people who have been displaced from their own homes by persecution, war, civil unrest, climate change or natural disaster.)

Q Who is a displaced person?

A Anyone who is forced from their home due to persecution, civil conflict, war or natural disaster can be referred to as a displaced person, but the term is often applied to an 'internally displaced person' (IDP) – someone who has been forced to move to another part of their own country.

Q How does a refugee differ from a migrant?

A A migrant is someone who moves within their own country or to another country by their own choice, usually for employment, education or for personal reasons. Many refugees and migrants now have no alternative but to travel together² and some media organisations, such as the BBC choose to use the word 'migrant' for all people on the move who have not completed the process of being recognised formally as refugees.³

The World Refugee Situation

*'Globally, one in every 122 humans is now either a refugee, internally displaced [in their own country], or seeking asylum.'*⁴

This decade has seen forced displacement and human suffering on an increasingly terrifying scale. Outgoing UN High Commissioner for Refugees, António Guterres expressed his concern in 2015:

*'We are witnessing ... an unchecked slide into an era in which the scale of global forced displacement as well as the response required is now clearly dwarfing anything seen before ...'*⁵

The new High Commissioner, Filippo Grandi has said that

*'The outlook for 2018 is grim.'*⁶

(For more statistics see pages 6–7.)

² See 'All in the same boat: The challenges of mixed migration' on the UNHCR web site. www.unhcr.org/pages/4a1d406060.html (accessed 2016).

³ See for example 'Migrant crisis: Migration to Europe explained in seven charts', 4 March 2016. www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-34131911

⁴ António Guterres 'UNHCR News Story, 'Worldwide displacement hits all-time high as war and persecution increase', 18 June 2015. www.unhcr.org/558193896.html

⁵ 'Worldwide displacement hits all-time high ...'

⁶ Global report: 10 most under-reported humanitarian crises of 2017 www.unhcr.org/uk/news/press/2018/1/5a659f6ca/global-report-10-under-reported-humanitarian-crises-2017.html

Why People Flee

To be accepted formally as a refugee, it is not sufficient to be fleeing from war or disaster. A person must demonstrate persecution because of their race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group, or political opinion and show that they would come to serious harm if they returned home. Some examples of persecution:

- A whole ethnic group may be under threat (attempted genocide).
- Some political regimes will not tolerate an opposition and kill political opponents.
- Homosexual or transgender people may be subject to brutal punishment including execution.
- Some states, or groups within states, persecute minority religious groups.
- Women or girls may be threatened with forced abortion, honour killing, forced marriage or female genital mutilation.
- Children are forced into armed groups.
- Disabled children may be under threat of death.

'Tamar' [from Nigeria], whose 6 year-old child has cerebral palsy and is unable to walk, see or speak is frightened that "if we were deported back to our home country, my daughter will be killed because people in my tribal group view my daughter and her illness as a curse".'

'Tamar', a mother seeking asylum for her family in N Ireland ⁷

'I left Zimbabwe in October 2002 because of the political situation there. I was a primary school teacher in Zimbabwe and was involved in the trade union. There were a lot of problems and my life was in danger.'

Ronald Vellum, one of a number of Zimbabwean refugees living in Belfast ⁸

'I was tortured for several days before being released ... I was told that I was to await sentencing. I knew that I had to leave Iran immediately if I was to have any chance of surviving.'

A male refugee in N Ireland, from Iran, who had taken part in a student protest ⁹

'In 2014, harassment of both underground and state-sanctioned churches increased, especially in Zhejiang Province [China] where at least 400 churches were torn down or had crosses forcibly removed ... Hundreds of people have been detained for short periods and some remain in custody, accused under ambiguous crimes more often used to punish political dissidents.'

UK Home Office ¹⁰

⁷ Barnardo's Tuar Ceatha Black, Minority Ethnic and Refugee (BMER) Project, *Supporting Refugee and Asylum Seeking Families Living in Northern Ireland*, page 20.

⁸ Story collected in 2004. The full interview is on the EMBRACE CD-Rom, 'Once We Were Strangers', where the contributions were anonymous. www.embraceni.org/wp-content/uploads/2011/09/1-zimbabwe.pdf

⁹ *Forced to Flee; Frequently Asked Questions about Refugees and Asylum Seekers in Northern Ireland* (3rd Edition), Refugee Action Group.

¹⁰ UK Home Office, *Country Information and Guidance; China: Christians*, 2016, page 5, 2.2.4.

www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/565508/CIG-china-christians-v2-March-2016.pdf

Journeys in Search of Safety

Desperate people put their lives at risk in order to reach safer countries. The tragic scenes as over a million people have struggled to reach Europe in recent years, are just part of a worldwide phenomenon. Globally, the International Organization for Migration reckons that 6,002 people died in transit in 2017, of whom 3,119 drowned in the Mediterranean Sea.¹¹

A lack of legal routes to safer countries means that people smugglers are often the only hope for people who are desperate to move. (The Refugee Council has been pleading for Syrian refugees to be given legal routes of escape, with their 'Let them Fly' campaign.¹²)

Smugglers / agents can provide an important service for migrants or refugees, but once money has changed hands and people are far from home, they are powerless.

Gangs attack vulnerable people as they travel through deserts and across mountains. Smugglers may throw clients into the sea, separate women and men and sell them into slavery, or pass them on to people who hold them hostage for money.¹³ Sexual assault and torture are common.

Overland travel can be as risky as the sea journeys we see on TV.

... Y's mother had paid for him to be smuggled out of Afghanistan where the situation was very dangerous. His journey had taken many weeks ... The leaders were occasionally angry and threatening and some ... were armed. ... The group often spent all day out of doors ... sometimes walking through mountain ranges in the snow ... Y was frequently very cold and frightened ... Towards the end of his journey, Y ... followed them onto a boat, which then sailed for Northern Ireland. He had no idea where he was. ... He had left behind his mother and younger sister. His brother had recently been killed and he had bad memories of his journey west.

An unaccompanied teenager who arrived in Belfast¹⁴

Does everyone use a people smuggler or agent?

It is often difficult for people to reach safety without crossing borders illegally, with the aid of a smuggler. Those who have passports may be able to arrange their own travel legally, from and to certain countries, but most have to use 'people smugglers', 'agents' and / or 'guides'.

Moving people across borders with their consent in this way should not be confused with 'trafficking': i.e. deceiving and transporting people in order to exploit them for money. Some agents, however, do take advantage of people's desperation and use the vulnerability of refugees in order to control, exploit and abuse, and so a smuggler can become a trafficker. And also, some trafficked people may be able to apply for asylum in the UK because of the way they would be treated if they returned to their country of origin.

¹¹ IOM Missing Migrants Project <https://missingmigrants.iom.int/>

¹² Refugee Council web site

www.refugeecouncil.org.uk/latest/news/4560_let_them_fly_ask_the_government_to_offer_safe_passage_to_syrians

¹³ Danish Refugee Council and the Regional Mixed Migration Secretariat, *Desperate Choices: Conditions, Risks & Protection Failures Affecting Ethiopian Migrants in Yemen* (Nairobi, DRC and RMMS, 2012).

¹⁴ Teresa Geraghty, Celine McStravick and Dr Stephanie Mitchell, *New to Northern Ireland: A Study of the Issues Faced by Migrant, Asylum Seeking and Refugee children in Northern Ireland*, 2010, pages 93–94.

Why do Refugees Come to the UK?

Some people come to the UK because they have relatives or friends already here. It has been found that 'Even where asylum seekers had only vague connections with distant relatives in the UK, the knowledge that they would know someone in this country made it more attractive than other possible destinations where they would be completely alone.'¹⁵

Others may have some knowledge of English; come from a country that has a historical association with the UK; or feel that there is a chance for peace, security and fairness here. When smugglers / agents are involved in arranging travel there can be a mixture of the preference of the person being transported and how much they can afford to pay. In many cases people have no choice or knowledge of where they were going.¹⁶ Research published in 2010, found that

- Over two thirds of people seeking asylum in the UK did not choose to come here.
- Most only discovered they were going to the UK after leaving their country of origin.
- The primary objective for all those interviewed was reaching a place of safety.
- Around three quarters had no knowledge of welfare benefits and support before coming to the UK – most had no expectation they would be given financial support.
- 90% were working in their country of origin and very few were aware they would not be allowed to work when they arrived in the UK.¹⁷

Why Northern Ireland?

Some come intentionally because they have friends or relatives here but Jo Marley, Director of Bryson Intercultural, has said that people who seek asylum in Belfast mostly think that they are in London, Dublin or Europe when they first arrive.¹⁸ An agent has usually decided on their destination. This is what one male refugee said.

'I came from Sudan a year ago because I felt my life was in danger if I remained. Many people had already gone from the place where I lived and those who stayed were being killed. I borrowed money from my family and paid someone who was able to help me get away.

*I did not mean to come to Northern Ireland but this is where I arrived and I have to stay here or I will be sent back to Sudan. ...'*¹⁹

Some people may have been living here already, on a temporary visa, when a change in their country (such as a military coup) makes it too dangerous to go home, and they have to apply for protection.²⁰

¹⁵ Vaughan Johnson and Jeremy Segrott, Home Office Research Study 243 *Understanding the Decision-Making of Asylum Seekers*, 2002, page 42.

¹⁶ *Understanding the Decision-Making of Asylum Seekers*, page 25.

¹⁷ Heaven Crawley, *Chance or Choice? Understanding Why Asylum Seekers Come to the UK*. London: Refugee Council, 2010. www.refugeecouncil.org.uk/assets/0001/5702/rcchance.pdf

¹⁸ She spoke on Radio Ulster in 2014. See the BBC web site www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-northern-ireland-26189348

¹⁹ *Forced to Flee* page 6.

²⁰ *Forced to Flee*, page 4.

Asylum & Refugee Numbers

The UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR) estimates that around 65.6 million people had been forcibly displaced worldwide at the end of 2016: 22.5 million refugees, 40.3 million internally displaced in their own countries, and 2.8 million seeking asylum in other countries. 10.3 million people were newly displaced in 2016.²¹ At that time the fastest growing refugee population was caused by conflict in South Sudan.²² By January 2018 the focus was on over 647,000 Rohingya people, forced to flee Myanmar / Burma.²³ Many conflicts or disasters are under-reported. In January 2018, for example, the UNHCR was appealing on behalf of over a quarter of a million people displaced by the Boko Haram insurgency in Nigeria.²⁴

The vast majority of refugees (84% in 2016) live close to areas of conflict, many in a small number of countries. Turkey (bordering Syria) hosted most in 2016, 2.9 million people; Pakistan, 1.4 million; Lebanon, 1.0 million; Iran, 979,400; Uganda, 940,800, and Ethiopia, 791,600.²⁵

In developed countries, with formal asylum processes, applications for protection increased in 2016. The recipients of the largest number of new applications in that year were Germany (722,400), the USA (262,000), Italy (123,000), Turkey (78,600), and France (78,400).²⁶

UK asylum statistics

Asylum applications in the UK peaked in 2002 at 84,132 and fell over the succeeding years. The lowest number of applications was 17,916, in 2010. The increased number of unresolved conflicts in the world has fuelled a recent rise with 32,733 applications in 2015, 30,747 in 2016²⁷ and 26,350 in 2017.²⁸

These asylum application statistics are well below those received in many other European countries.

*In 2016, there were six asylum applications for every 10,000 people resident in the UK. Across the EU28 [the 28 member countries of the European Union] there were 26 asylum applications for every 10,000 people. The UK is therefore below the average among EU countries for asylum applications per head of population, ranking 17th among EU28 countries on this measure.*²⁹

The contrast with other countries in the world is even greater. The British Red Cross has pointed out that around 126,000 refugees were living in the UK in 2014: 0.19% of the population.³⁰ At that time the small country of Lebanon was host to 1.15 million refugees – 23.2% or nearly a quarter of the population.³¹

²¹ UNHCR Global Trends. www.unhcr.org/globaltrends2016/

²² UNHCR, *Global Trends: Forced Displacement in 2016*, p.2. www.unhcr.org/5943e8a34.pdf

²³ UNHCR website. www.unhcr.org/uk/rohingya-emergency.html

²⁴ UNHCR website. www.unhcr.org/uk/news/press/2018/1/5a7184f34/unhcr-partners-seek-us157-million-aid-boko-haram-displaced.html

²⁵ UNHCR, *Global Trends: Forced Displacement in 2016*, p.3.

²⁶ UNHCR, *Global Trends: Forced Displacement in 2016*, pp 40–41.

²⁷ House of Commons Library: Briefing Paper SNO1403, *Asylum Statistics*, 23 January 2018.

<http://researchbriefings.parliament.uk/ResearchBriefing/Summary/SNO1403>

²⁸ Refugee Council, 20 Top Facts about Refugees and Asylum Seekers www.refugeecouncil.org.uk/20facts

²⁹ House of Commons Library: Briefing Paper SNO1403.

³⁰ *Refugees and Asylum Seekers: Setting the Story Straight in 2015*.

www.redcross.org.uk/~media/BritishRedCross/Documents/What%20we%20do/Refugee%20support/UKS_RefugeeWeek_MYT_HBUSTER_15_WEB.pdf

³¹ *World at War* pages 2 and 3. www.unhcr.org/556725e69.pdf

Numbers of People Seeking Asylum in N Ireland

It is difficult to be accurate about numbers because the Home Office very rarely issues figures for NI. When figures are released they often cover only those who are receiving asylum support (see page 9), not all applicants. There will always be additional people who are supporting themselves (see page 9).

The Law Centre NI used a number of sources to estimate numbers in 2015. They stated that there were around 200 applications for asylum here in the year to August 2015 (less than 1% of the UK's asylum applications) and about 600 people seeking asylum in N Ireland and living in officially supported accommodation at that time. The Law Centre briefing states that, 'The large majority of asylum applications are single adults whereas approximately one fifth of applications are from families.'³²

It may take a number of years for some people to have their asylum application assessed so there are always more people with cases under consideration than there are applications in a single year. The Law Centre stated that those who arrived here at that time were from very troubled areas.

*Asylum seekers come from countries from around the globe that are experiencing war, conflict and human rights abuses. In Northern Ireland, asylum applicants are most commonly from China, Somalia, Sudan, Nigeria and Zimbabwe.'*³³

In the quarter ending June 2015, these are the countries for which the most applications were under consideration in NI: 'China (154 asylum applications), Nigeria (78), Somalia (58), Sudan (40), Zimbabwe (34), Algeria (14), Syria (14), Iran (13), South Africa (13) and Albania (6).'³⁴ The large numbers of Chinese people in the figures do not necessarily mean that a greater number arrive here to seek asylum at any one time. Although not a country in conflict, there is evidence of human rights abuse in China,³⁵ but cases are difficult to assess. The process often takes several years.

Numbers have increased recently, with 610 people in asylum accommodation in March 2016, from 36 countries; and rising to over 720 people in supported accommodation in summer 2017.³⁶ Bryson Intercultural / Migrant Help in Belfast processed applications for asylum for around 360 people, including dependents in 2017.³⁷

A few children arrive without adult family members and are the responsibility of Social Services. There were 13 referrals in 2016/17.³⁸ Some are orphans but parents may be desperate to save one family member (see page 4). These children may be known as 'separated children' or 'unaccompanied minors'. Five unaccompanied children applied for asylum in 2010, four in 2011, and eight in 2012.³⁹ Journalist, Lindsay Fergus found that

*25 children who arrived into Northern Ireland unaccompanied between 2011 and August 2015 have been taken into care – the youngest was 12 years old – ... Countries the children had originated from included: Albania, Algeria, China, Egypt, Guinea Bissau, Iran, Romania, Somalia, South Korea and Sudan.'*⁴⁰

³² Law Centre briefing, 'How many asylum seekers and refugees are there in Northern Ireland?', October 2015.

www.lawcentreni.org/Publications/Policy-Briefings/How-many-refugees-in-NI-Oct-2015.pdf (Law Centre Policy Officer, Liz Griffiths, has been helpful with her advice during the preparation of this publication.)

³³ 'How many asylum seekers and refugees are there in Northern Ireland?'

³⁴ Lindsay Fergus, 'New figures reveal 500 people seeking asylum in Northern Ireland', The Detail web site, 2 October 2015. www.thedetail.tv/articles/500-seeking-asylum-in-northern-ireland

³⁵ UK Home Office, *Country Information and Guidance Opposition to the Chinese Communist Party*, 2015, page 5. www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/470780/China_-_Opposition_to_the_Chinese_Communist_Party.pdf

³⁶ NI Housing Executive, the 16th and 17th Annual Progress Reports to the Equality Commission.

³⁷ Information supplied by staff from Bryson Intercultural / Migrant Help, April 2018.

³⁸ Delegated Statutory Functions Statistical Report, (HSBC) quoted in their Evidence to All Party Parliamentary Group on Modern Slavery and Human Trafficking Inquiry into the situation of unaccompanied and separated minors in Europe, Law Centre (NI), May 2017.

³⁹ Ravi KS Kohli, Helen Connolly and Helen Beckett, *By Their Side and On Their Side, Reviewing the Evidence for Guardianship for Separated Children in Northern Ireland*, 2014. www.niccy.org/media/1325/niccy-guardianship-main-report-feb-14.pdf

⁴⁰ 'New figures reveal 500 people seeking asylum in Northern Ireland'.

The Process of Applying for Asylum in N Ireland⁴¹

People are expected to apply for asylum at the 'first available opportunity', i.e. at the point when they arrive in the UK. This can be difficult in N Ireland because Home Office immigration officers may not be present at the ports and airports, so people usually make themselves known e.g. to Bryson Intercultural / Migrant Help or to the police. The failure to meet initially with an official, who is familiar with the process, may result in people spending some time in immigration detention in Larne House (see page 11). This is how the process should work:

- A person contacts Bryson Intercultural / Migrant Help, at Bryson House, 28 Bedford Street, Belfast BT2 7FE, Monday to Friday, 9am to 5pm (closed 1pm to 2pm) and explains that they need protection.
- Outside these hours people should make themselves known to the Police Service of NI (PSNI).
- Bryson Intercultural / Migrant Help notifies the asylum request to the Home Office UK Visas and Immigration (UKVI) at Drumkeen House, South Belfast.
- Unaccompanied children (under 18) are brought to the local Health Trust's Social Services Gateway Team who look after them during the asylum process.
- Emergency Accommodation is arranged, if necessary.⁴² (Some people are self supporting, relying on savings, family or friends, and need no assistance with accommodation).
- The Home Office requires the asylum applicant to attend a Screening Interview at Drumkeen House.
- A Home Office Case Worker / Case Owner is appointed to manage the case.
- Asylum applicants have to report / sign regularly with the Home Office.
- An Applications Registration Card (ARC Card) is issued.
- If the asylum applicant has no money, he/she will receive weekly financial support (see page 9) and follow-on accommodation is provided, through the NI Housing Executive (NIHE), in the private rental sector.⁴³
- The applicant supplies a Statement of Evidence and there is a Substantive Interview with the Case Owner.
- The Home Office makes an initial decision. About a third of applicants are granted protection at this stage.

If a person gets a positive decision they

- receive Temporary Leave to Remain in the UK for 5 years
- have the right to access employment, welfare benefits and social housing
- and are entitled to have some of their close family with them. (The Red Cross can help with the complicated process of family reunion and supported 29 reunions locally in 2017.⁴⁴)
- The Extern Refugee Floating Support Project workers can help with accessing education, training, work, benefits, and accommodation.
- Many people have to move into emergency accommodation before they can find a permanent home. Children may have to look for a new school.

If they get a negative decision they are asked to leave the country, are given notice to leave their accommodation and told that they will lose their financial support. They may be able to appeal to an independent tribunal or obtain new evidence in order to submit a fresh claim. Some choose to return voluntarily to their country of origin.⁴⁵ If people are turned down after appeal, they may be removed from the country but some cannot be removed e.g. because their country is too unsafe or they have health problems. Many are too frightened to leave of their own accord.

⁴¹ The Refugees and Asylum Seekers pages of the Bryson Intercultural website contain more detailed information about the process and the support available. <http://www.brysonintercultural.org/refugees-asylum-seekers/>

⁴² This is arranged by the service company Serco, who have the Home Office contract for asylum accommodation in NW England, and Scotland & Northern Ireland.

⁴³ NIHE is subcontracted by Serco.

⁴⁴ Figure mentioned at a Red Cross Global Belfast event at Belfast City Hall, 21 March 2018.

⁴⁵ People may be eligible for help in returning to make a new life in their country of origin. www.gov.uk/return-home-voluntarily

Access to Official Support During the Process

People seeking asylum in the UK are usually not allowed to work or claim benefits. Some support themselves, relying on savings or their family or friends, but those who can show that they are destitute will get the following:

- Emergency accommodation when they arrive.
- Section 95 Support at a flat rate of £37.75 per week for both adults and children (as at April 2018), paid through the Aspen card that can be used at cash points and certain shops. There are small extra allowances for pregnant women and children under three.
- Follow-on accommodation in the private rental sector, almost always in the Belfast area.
- Free legal advice in relation to their case.
- Free medical care.
- Children can attend school and adults can attend Essential Skills and ESOL (English for Speakers of Other Languages) classes.

If their application is refused

- They usually lose their Section 95 support and their accommodation.
- If they fulfil strict Home Office requirements they may be able to apply for Section 4 hardship support.⁴⁶
- Those who do not / or cannot leave the country, often have to rely on charity and the support of other refugees or they would have to sleep rough. At present families with children do not lose their support and accommodation but may do so if the Immigration Act 2016 is applied here in full.
- Those who manage to get Section 4 support are provided with emergency accommodation and are issued with a non-cash Aspen card enabling them to purchase of food and other essentials to the value of £35.39 per week in a range of shops (as at April 2018).
- If they can appeal or put forward a new case their Section 95 support and accommodation are restored.

Those whose applications are successful are given five years temporary leave to remain, which may be extended. They are then entitled to apply for jobs and have access to benefits. Some are not recognised as refugees but if it is decided that they need protection for another reason they may be granted Humanitarian Protection (5 years leave to remain) or Discretionary Leave to Remain (1–3 years leave to remain).

Ongoing advice and community support

‘Some people can have their claim processed after two months, some six months, some one year, some two years. The process can be very long especially for certain countries.’

Justin Kouame, Chairperson of the NI Community of Refugees and Asylum Seekers⁴⁷

When they arrive initially, people are advised by Bryson Intercultural / Migrant Help who are sub-contracted by the Home Office (see page 6). The Red Cross can also provide advice and a little cash, until asylum support begins. Many people join the NI Community of Refugees and Asylum Seekers (NICRAS), a refugee-run organisation that provides advice, social activities and training opportunities, including English classes. The Homeplus charity runs a drop-in centre for destitute asylum seekers in South Belfast, where they can access food, company, advice and other services. Faith groups (especially churches) and other support groups, assist with English classes, access to clothing and other material needs, as well as the opportunity to meet people. Groups such as the Belfast Friendship Club provide opportunities to socialise and network informally with local people and other newcomers. Many people in the asylum process develop social support networks within the refugee community, where there is an understanding of what they are going through. Faith is very significant in sustaining people through a very difficult time in their lives, and finding a compatible faith group can be important for many, although some may have had their faith challenged by their experiences.

⁴⁶ See www.brysonintercultural.org/refugees-asylum-seekers/asylum-seekers/asylum-support

⁴⁷ Quoted on the Detail web site, Lindsay Fergus, ‘Asylum seekers tell their stories’, 2 October 2015. www.thedetail.tv/articles/asylum-seekers-tell-their-stories

The Challenges

The Application Process: This provides many causes for anxiety: including fear of questioning; the delays; translation difficulties; and issues regarding legal support. The majority of asylum applications are rejected initially. ‘Many applications are rejected on “non-compliance” grounds – for example they may have failed to correctly fill in the paperwork or missed an immigration interview.’⁴⁸ It is hard to back up a case with evidence, and there is a ‘climate of disbelief’⁴⁹ when applications are assessed.

‘When you are watching your village burn to the ground, getting proof isn’t the first thing on your mind.’⁵⁰

People applying for asylum in NI also report problems with their legal representation, in the following categories: poor communication; lack of support in understanding or preparing for each stage of the asylum process; and poor quality immigration advice or an inability to understand the advice given. All these have had devastating consequences for individuals.⁵¹ In February 2018 the NI Community of Refugees and Asylum Seekers (NICRAS) produced a best practice guide to the provision of immigration legal advice, providing both legal advisors and people in the asylum system an understanding of the service that should be provided.⁵²

Fear of detention and removal: People who are forced to flee dread being forced to return to their home country. These fears include anxiety about possible detention prior to removal. This anxiety is present every time they report to the Home office: they have seen friends go to report but not return because they have been detained. People are often detained prior to removal but they can also be detained at any time during the process.

Before 2005, immigration detainees were kept in the prisons here. Although that has ended, it is still possible for asylum applicants to be held in prison if they are suspected of migration offences.

Most local immigration detainees are now housed in Larne House Short Term Holding Facility in Larne, Co. Antrim, which is heavily used.⁵³ Between 1st February 2014 and 31 January 2015, 2,363 detainees were moved through Larne House.⁵⁴ People can be held there for up to a week before being released, transferred to GB for further detention or removed to their country of origin. Many immigration detainees who are removed in this way have never been in the asylum system and are undocumented migrants.

According to the latest statistics 212 people from 47 different countries were detained at the short-term holding facility between April and June 2015 – during that timeframe 46 were removed from the UK, 47 were granted conditional temporary release and the remainder were transferred to facilities elsewhere in the UK.⁵⁵

Language: The language barrier is a problem in the application process and in developing a normal social life. People appreciate beginners and conversation classes as well as the official further education ESOL (English for Speakers of Other Languages) classes. (A mobile app is being developed to help people find language classes.)

Culture shock and isolation: Many people have lost all contact with friends and family and a way of life where they had jobs and a place in society. There may be poor local understanding of their culture and it takes time for them to understand the host culture. People may be moved at any time by the Home Office, which does not assist them in feeling at home.

⁴⁸ *Forced to Flee*, page 5.

⁴⁹ Parliamentary Home Affairs Committee, Seventh Report – Asylum, October 2013, ‘Past and current criticisms of the asylum system’, paragraph 11.

⁵⁰ Medical Justice Network booklet, 2007.

⁵¹ Mary Kerr, *Improving Legal Support for Asylum Seekers in Northern Ireland*, NI Strategic Migration Partnership, 2016.

⁵² Best Practice in the Provision of Immigration Legal Advice Services in Northern Ireland, NICRAS, Belfast 2018.

⁵³ There is a religious advisory group, members of which visit Larne House regularly and a secular Larne House Visitor group. See <http://larnehousevisitinggroup.org.uk/index.html>

⁵⁴ Independent Monitoring Board for Glasgow, Edinburgh and Larne Short Term Holding Facilities, Annual Report, 1 February 2014 to 31 January 2015, page 19. www.imb.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2015/05/Glasgow-Edinburgh-2014-15.pdf (This is quoted in an Amnesty International press release on ‘Northern Ireland concerns at immigration detention revelations - 2,000 NI detainees last year’, 4 March 2015. www.amnesty.org.uk/press-releases/northern-ireland-concerns-immigration-detention-revelations-2000-ni-detainees-last)

⁵⁵ ‘New figures reveal 500 people seeking asylum in Northern Ireland’, The Detail web site, 2 October 2015.

Enforced Idleness: People feel shame at living off the state. (They may well have worked as skilled professionals in their own country.) Inactivity adds to anxiety, because most are not allowed to work during the asylum process.

'Because you're not allowed to work, you always think about what is going to happen (to your case).'

'Halima', who volunteered as a translator until she got leave to remain and permission to work.⁵⁶

Poverty: Most people arrive with only the clothes they are wearing. They are allocated accommodation in the private rental sector and a small basic weekly allowance (a flat rate of £37.75 as at April 2018). A 2016 report highlighted shortcomings in some of the accommodation and a fear of making complaints.⁵⁷ Lack of financial resources also curtails opportunities to socialise and feel part of society.

Destitution: At different stages of the process some people get no support at all and are forced to rely on faith groups and charities or the sacrificial kindness of other refugees.

*'... if people weren't being seen by charities like the Red Cross, where else would they turn? ... the fear would be ... someone would die of starvation'*⁵⁸

Negative attitudes: Most people will experience some sort of verbal abuse either on racial grounds, or because of the stigma attached to being 'an asylum seeker'. Others may be attacked in their homes. One woman told researchers

*'We got a threat from our neighbours saying if we stay there, they would kill us. ... In one area my friend was told to leave, they smashed her windows'*⁵⁹

An Iranian man said

*'When I explain why I had to leave most of the people are sympathetic, but there are times when people can be rude or nasty when they find out you are a refugee.'*⁶⁰

Health, Stress and Depression: All of the challenges experienced can have negative consequences on health. Isolation, humiliation, destitution or racist attacks can lead to suicidal despair. A medical report said of people who are seeking asylum

*[T]hey are very vulnerable to the repercussions of living with chronic stress, manifesting as insomnia, anxiety, depression, post traumatic stress disorder and drug and alcohol abuse.*⁶¹

Transition as a Refugee: Getting refugee status should be a huge relief and a time for great joy, but people are then told that they must leave their accommodation and lose their asylum support and have just 28 days to move on. New refugees often experience benefits delays, destitution and bewilderment as they try to establish a new life.⁶² It can be difficult to find opportunities to retrain or get your qualifications recognised.

⁵⁶ 'Halima' quoted in *Conversations Around the Kitchen Table: The Stories of Asylum Seekers in Northern Ireland*, page 12. www.communitydialogue.org/PDFs/kitchen.pdf

⁵⁷ F. Foley and C. Magennis, *Home Sweet Home: An Overview of the Housing Conditions of Asylum Seekers in Northern Ireland*, NI Community of Refugees and Asylum Seekers (NICRAS), 2016.

⁵⁸ Neil McKittrick, Red Cross NI, BBC Radio Ulster, February 2013.

⁵⁹ Orna Young, *The Horn of Africa Community in Belfast: A Needs Assessment*, page 20.

⁶⁰ Forced to Flee, page 6.

⁶¹ Dr Jillian Johnston, *Barriers to Migrant Health and Wellbeing in Belfast*, Belfast Health Development Unit, 2010. www.belfasttrust.hscni.net/pdf/Migrant-Health-Strategy.pdf

⁶² Pauline Carnet, Catherine Blanchard and Fabio Apollonio. *The Move-On Period: An Ordeal for New Refugees*, Red Cross, 2014.

Resettlement Refugees

Most refugees in the UK have made their own way here and then had to satisfy Home Office officials that they are in need of protection (see pages 4–6). A few people are also brought to the UK directly from refugee camps abroad. This is through the Gateway Protection Programme, run in conjunction with the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR). The Mandate Refugee Scheme resettles small numbers of refugees, usually dependents of someone who is already permanently settled in UK. In 2017 the UK resettled 813 Gateway and 28 Mandate refugees.⁶³

Applications are forwarded to the UK by the UNHCR, who have already examined people's cases in the camps and registered them as refugees in need of protection. Home Office officials visit them to assess their need for resettlement, check that there is no security risk, and assess their family circumstances. They are then brought to the UK, where they have immediate entitlement to apply for work and access benefits. There is advice and support for the first year.

Since the arrival of the Vietnamese refugees in the late 1970s no resettlement refugees had been received in N Ireland.

Resettlement refugees from Syria

By the second decade of the 21st century the escalating numbers of refugees and displaced people (see pages 4 and 6) were placing intolerable burdens on the countries surrounding the areas of conflict, especially those closest to Syria. With no end to the Syrian Civil War in sight, in 2013 the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR) urged the international community to resettle some of the most vulnerable people from the camps and areas that are hosting millions of refugees. They asked the wealthier countries to resettle 130,000 people. Some countries were generous. Germany offered to take 20,000 people straight away. Others (but not the UK) were allocated a number of refugees through a European quota system.

At first the UK government argued that they had already allowed Syrians whose visas were expiring to remain here, and were giving generous financial support to Syrians in refugee camps and that Syrians were protected by the ordinary asylum system.

Syrian Vulnerable Persons Relocation Scheme (VPRS)

Following increasing public concern and international pressure, however, the UK announced that some people would be brought to the UK under a Syrian Vulnerable Persons Relocation Scheme. After further pressure, in August 2015, the Prime Minister said that the UK would receive up to 20,000 vulnerable people by 2020. All would come from camps or residential areas in countries such as Turkey, Lebanon and Jordan – not from those who were already in Europe or North Africa. Priority within the Scheme is given to refugees who have medical needs; have survived violence and torture; are women at risk; are children in a situation that makes them particularly vulnerable; have legal or physical protection needs; do not have local integration prospects; or are elderly, in a situation that makes them particularly vulnerable. The VPR programme is similar to the Gateway Programme (see above). In conjunction with the UNHCR, the most vulnerable of the Syrian refugees in neighbouring countries are brought to the UK.

On 22 February 2018 the Government announced that over 10,500 refugees had been resettled in the UK under schemes for vulnerable people: more than half way towards meeting the 20,000 commitment.⁶⁴ The Government has also agreed to resettle up to 3,000 vulnerable children and their families.⁶⁵

The Government has also been developing a scheme for community and faith groups to sponsor individual Syrian refugee families, starting in GB.⁶⁶ The numbers supported are not in addition to the 20,000 places promised for VPRS refugees and the scheme is not available in NI at present.

⁶³ UNHCR Asylum in the UK. www.unhcr.org/uk/asylum-in-the-uk.html

⁶⁴ <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/over-10000-refugees-resettled-in-the-uk-under-flagship-scheme>

⁶⁵ House of Commons Library Briefing Paper 06805, *Syrian Refugees and the UK Response*, 14 June 2017.

<http://researchbriefings.parliament.uk/ResearchBriefing/Summary/SN06805>

⁶⁶ www.gov.uk/government/news/community-sponsorship-scheme-launched-for-refugees-in-the-uk

N Ireland Response to the Refugee and Migrant Crisis

During 2015 people in N Ireland showed considerable compassion towards the many refugees and migrants who had fled from war zones, civil unrest, poverty and the despair of living for years in refugee camps and were trying to reach Europe. The knowledge that many of these people were trying to escape the Syrian civil war created a groundswell of goodwill. People offered their homes for refugees from Syria and asked how they could help. Goods were collected to go to the continental pressure points and volunteers went to the Greek islands and to Calais to help with rescuing people from the sea or to distribute aid. Rallies were held in towns and cities in N Ireland in support of refugees and this created a positive background for the initiative of bringing Syrian Vulnerable Person Resettlement Scheme (VPRS) refugees (see page 12) here. The First Minister and Deputy First Minister told the UK Government that they were willing to receive VPRS refugees and preparations began.

A Strategic Planning Group was led by the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister (OFMDFM) (now the Executive Office (TEO)) and a Reception and Planning Group was led first by the Department for Social Development (DSD) and now by the Department for Communities. An Integration Group was added later. A consortium of voluntary groups co-ordinated by Bryson Intercultural organises the practicalities of refugee integration. The Department for Communities NI issues regular briefing documents about the scheme.⁶⁷ The Home Office provides £11,120 to cover the costs of the first year for each refugee.

VPRS Resettlement Refugees in N Ireland

In December 2015, the first 51 VPRS refugees, originally from Syria, arrived in Belfast, 10 families with 11 children and one baby. They included Muslims and Christians. They arrived at a welcome centre where they could be reassured; have health checks and other needs assessments; find out about what was to happen to them; and hear about their entitlements. After a few days they moved on to temporary accommodation in different parts of Belfast, where they will stay until they can make their own long-term plans. Each of the families has the assistance of a refugee support worker from Extern or Barnardo's to advise them, until they become familiar with the way of life in their new communities. The Law Centre NI and the NI Human Rights Commission have published a guide explaining the rights of VPRS refugees in N. Ireland.⁶⁸

There was considerable public concern and sympathy and media interest in this first group of refugees and it was important to protect them from too much intrusive attention. According to the DSD, they began to settle well.

*The families who arrived in Northern Ireland during December have told us that they are very appreciative of all the support, advice and guidance provided to help them adjust to life in Northern Ireland. The families continue to miss their homeland and way of life and sometimes they feel a little isolated.*⁶⁹

More recently, the Alissa family from Aleppo has described how grateful they were to the people of Armagh. Mrs Lena Alissa said:

*'We didn't know much about Northern Ireland but everyone was so friendly when we first arrived ...'*⁷⁰

Small groups have been arriving every few months, and are now received in two welcome centres. By February 2018, 860 VPRS refugees had arrived and been housed in a variety of locations, including Ards & North Down; Armagh City, Banbridge & Craigavon; Belfast City; Derry City & Strabane; Lisburn & Castlereagh City; and Newry Mourne & Down council areas. The final total, for Northern Ireland, should be no more than 2,000 resettlement refugees from Syria after five years.

⁶⁷ Syrian Vulnerable Persons Relocation Scheme, recent briefing document, February 2017. www.communities-ni.gov.uk/publications/syrian-vulnerable-persons-relocation-scheme

⁶⁸ <http://lawcentreni.org/Publications/VPR-guide-English-Arabic-2016-with-new-rates-for-travel-documents.pdf>

⁶⁹ Syrian Vulnerable Persons Relocation Scheme, briefing document, April 2016.

⁷⁰ 'Syrian family on fleeing their homeland to start new life in Armagh' *Ulster Gazette*, 20 July 2017

<http://www.ulstergazette.co.uk/articles/news/59667>. The UN Refugee Agency website has also featured several stories about the NI SVPR scheme. See Matt Saltmarsh, 'Northern Ireland offers fresh start to a Syrian family', 22 February 2018 www.unhcr.org/uk/news/stories/2018/2/5a8e82874/northern-ireland-offers-fresh-start-to-a-syrian-family.html and Laura Padoan, 'Syrian refugees find peace in Northern Ireland', January 2017 www.unhcr.org/news/stories/2017/1/586ce3447/syrian-refugees-find-peace-in-northern-ireland.html

Integration

'...[W]hen people flee persecution, the flight to safety is only the first part of their journey. The second stage – rebuilding life in a strange land – is equally important. Sometimes settling here can be as hard or harder than the original flight from tyranny. Integration is not about “fitting in”, or about refugees becoming “more like us”. It is, rather, about equality and inclusion, and ensuring that refugees have equal chances to live full, safe and productive lives.'

Donna Covey, Refugee Council, 2009 ⁷¹

Some of the challenges:

The transition from the asylum system, or from a refugee camp, into 'normal' life can be hard, with financial difficulties, changes of accommodation, the shock of realising that one's skills and qualifications may not be recognised, and the continued challenge of learning a new language. The Extern Multidisciplinary Homeless Support Team has support workers dedicated to helping new refugees. NIACRO has a STEM (Sustaining Tenancies for people from Ethnic Minority backgrounds) project and some of their support workers help new refugees who experience neighbourhood difficulties. A Refugee Transition Guide also helps with the intricacies of accessing services and moving on. ⁷²

Family Reunion

People who have leave to remain in the UK are entitled to have close family join them but the process is complex. Fortunately the Justice Minister here has agreed to retain legal aid to assist with family reunion. ⁷³ The Red Cross can help with travel arrangements but some refugees still run up debts for their family's transport. Refugees on state benefits may find that these stop while the authorities reassess the entitlement of the enlarged family and take a while to be re-established. ⁷⁴ Long separations can affect family relationships. A 2018 Refugee Council / Oxfam report demonstrates the distress of continued family separation and its impact on integration. ⁷⁵

Joining a Divided Community

People from other countries can find it difficult to negotiate our society, where the political and religious divide and the history of conflict has left many unwritten cultural rules, and there is always the danger of saying the wrong thing. Communities have also learned to mistrust outsiders and there may be an attempt to get people to take sides in our local political conflict.

'I don't know about St Patrick's Day and whether I should be a part of it. Should I wear green?' ⁷⁶

Continuing to develop networks

When people become refugees and have to move accommodation, they may find it hard to keep in touch with former friends. They may take a while to develop new networks and it is important that local people in their new communities help them to get to know the amenities in their area. Formal or informal English classes don't just make it easier for people to communicate; they are opportunities for meeting people and learning about the local community. Faith groups are important for many people.

'It is really important for me to be part of the community – I have so many skills to share ... I want to learn from others and work together.' ⁷⁷

⁷¹ Refugee Council report of the 2009 conference, Integration: Building a Life in the UK.

www.refugeecouncil.org.uk/training_conferences/conferences/191_2009_conference_-_integration_building_a_life_in_uk

⁷² Belfast City Council web site. www.belfastcity.gov.uk/community/advice/migrants.aspx

⁷³ Law Centre NI, 27 March 2015, Legal Aid: 'Some good news for refugees and asylum seekers'.

www.lawcentreni.org/news/recent-news/1-news/1177-legal-aid-some-good-news-for-refugees-and-asylum-seekers.html

⁷⁴ Anecdotal evidence from the Refugee and Asylum Forum, 2014.

⁷⁵ *Safe but Not Settled: The Impact of Family Separation on Refugees in the UK*, 2018.

www.refugeecouncil.org.uk/assets/0004/2515/Safe_but_not_settled.pdf

⁷⁶ A Zimbabwean woman in the asylum system who is confused by our local culture and politics, speaking at a Community Foundation for NI, New Beginnings NI event, March 2016.

⁷⁷ Sabah Hasaballah, a refugee from Sudan, quoted in *Refugee!*, NICRAS, 2012.

Accessing education, training and employment

Many people will be longing to get into work, to feel useful and to contribute to their host country, as they did in their country of origin, only to find that when they get refugee status and permission to work, their qualifications are not recognised and they cannot afford to retrain. Taking an unskilled job is sometimes the only alternative. 'It is estimated that it costs around £25,000 to support a refugee doctor to practise in the UK. Training a new doctor is estimated to cost over £250,000 [2009 figures].⁷⁸ Extern support workers can help and advise (see page 17).

The impermanence of leave to remain

Before 2005 refugees used to get permanent settlement. The fact that people are now only given five years temporary permission to stay here can make it hard for people to e.g. embark on professional training, or obtain a mortgage. They have a short window of time in which to apply to have their permission extended, and may be subject at this stage to Active Review, where the Home Office can look at their case again in detail, to see if they still need protection, and whether the situation in their home country has improved.⁷⁹

Not having permanent permission to stay has always created fear. Edith Sekules arrived here in the 1940s after internment in Siberia. She set up a knitwear business in Kilkeel, Co. Down and had to travel for business purposes.

*'On my return from England to Northern Ireland I had to go through a customs check and show my Austrian passport and my Alien's book. I was very worried that they would not allow me back – I had not got over feeling nervous and intimidated by authorities or people in uniform, which stemmed from my experience of the Gestapo in Vienna and the KGB in the Soviet Union. ... I only relaxed after we were granted British citizenship ...'*⁸⁰

Secondary migration

Overall refugee numbers do not seem to have risen greatly in recent years. This is partly because, while some are content to settle here, others move on to GB where there could be better employment or education opportunities and the support, perhaps of family members or people from their own country or culture.

The needs of the host community

Integration has to be a two-way process. If refugees are to be made welcome in communities it is equally important that the host communities are involved, are listened to genuinely and reassured about any fears they may have, and that myths and rumours are not allowed to develop.

*'Training is the key to it all – and it has mutual benefits. It is not just for Asylum Seekers. Our community needs this too.'*⁸¹

The Belfast Friendship Club is a good example of local people having the opportunity to meet migrants, people in the asylum system, and refugees, and getting to know them in a safe environment. The friendships that are established benefit everyone.

The NI Executive indicated in 2015 that it was planning to produce a draft Refugee Integration Strategy.⁸² A research report on the experiences of people seeking asylum and refugees was published in December 2017. It had been commissioned by the Executive Office (TEO) in order to inform the development of such a strategy.⁸³

⁷⁸ *Reaping the Rewards: Re-training Refugee Healthcare Professionals for the NHS*, quoted in *Tell it Like it is: The Truth about Asylum*, Refugee Council, www.refugeecouncil.org.uk/assets/0003/7967/Tell_it_Like_it_is_May_2016.pdf

⁷⁹ At present this usually happens only if they do not apply for a renewal of their leave in time. The Refugee Council has campaigned for a return to the situation, before 2005, where refugees given permanent leave to remain in the first place. See their 2010 report, *The Impact of Limited Leave on Refugees in the UK*.

www.refugeecouncil.org.uk/assets/0001/7080/Limited_leave_report_final_September.pdf

⁸⁰ Edith Sekules, *Surviving the Nazis, Exile and Siberia* (The Library of Holocaust Testimonies), 2000, page 135.

⁸¹ Danny Murphy of Coiste, quoted in *Inclusive Neighbourhood Project: An Evaluation Report*, by Nora Greer, page 48.

⁸² In the *Racial Equality Strategy 2015–2025*, published in December 2015, it was stated that there was a strong case for a separate refugee integration strategy and by early 2018 the draft strategy was nearing consultation stage.

www.ofmdfmi.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/ofmdfm/racial-equality-strategy-2015-2025.pdf

⁸³ Dr Fiona Murphy and Dr Ulrike M Vieten, *Asylum Seekers and Refugees' Experiences of Life in Northern Ireland*, December 2017. www.qub.ac.uk/home/media/Media,784971,en.pdf

A sensitive welcome

Where there is a huge groundswell of sympathy, as there has been for refugees from Syria, it is easy for people to feel that they must make a personal contribution, but it is important that traumatised refugees are not swamped by goodwill. Some may not appreciate uninvited visits: the knock on the door may be a reminder of attack, kidnapping or torture. A welcome event in a community setting may help to develop relationships in a safe setting.

It is better for people to contact support workers, where possible, to ask if there are any particular needs, than to approach people directly with what may be unwanted charity. It is also important that no publicity should be given, photographs shared, or a campaign started on behalf of anyone in the asylum system, without the informed consent of the person concerned. Care should also be taken in encouraging people to share very painful memories.⁸⁴ People will really appreciate building normal friendly relationships, without being asked intrusive questions. 'Hello', a smile and a few words of conversation help to overcome isolation and language difficulties.

What can you do for local refugees and people who are seeking asylum?

Volunteering

Support organisations always welcome volunteers but do not always have immediate opportunities. The NI Community of Refugees and Asylum Seekers (NICRAS) has volunteers who assist with activities such as English classes, doing research for information packs, helping at social events, lobbying and advocacy. Volunteers with Red Cross migration services in Belfast can assist, for example, in helping to trace relatives. Some voluntary groups welcome assistance with English teaching and conversation. Ligia Parizzi has been appointed to co-ordinate the ESOL (English for Speakers of Other Languages) provision to the refugees from Syria in N Ireland and is creating a network within both the colleges and community sector. The NI Direct web site also carries advice about responding to the refugee crisis.⁸⁵ (Contact details for groups are on page 17.)

Donations

People in the asylum system have low incomes and may have urgent unmet needs. Refused asylum applicants who cannot be sent back to countries where they would be in danger, or those who are waiting to put in a fresh asylum application, for example, may become destitute (see page 11). You can help by contributing money or goods to local charities such as NICRAS, the Homeplus drop-in centre, your local St Vincent de Paul, foodbank, or Storehouse in Belfast. Always contact the charities in advance to ensure that your donation is needed. Brendan Quail of Bryson Intercultural can advise about volunteering, community support and other offers of help for resettlement refugees from Syria (see page 17 for contact details).⁸⁶

There is sometimes an Executive Office crisis fund to assist the needs of foreign nationals who have no recourse to public funds, but the EMBRACE Emergency Fund is also always needed, and some of this money is used to help refugees in crisis situations. Donations earmarked for refugees have also been used to meet the specific needs of newly arrived Syrian resettlement refugees and other new refugees, especially for fuel and electricity.

Countering misinformation

There is an important role for people with accurate knowledge to help in counteracting negative rumours about refugees that can easily circulate in communities in order to reduce the likelihood of painful racist incidents.

EMBRACE Resources

- EMBRACE has a range of published resources that provide information about migration and the asylum system www.embraceni.org/category/about-us/embrace-resources
- There is information on the web site about the asylum system and refugees www.embraceni.org/category/information/asylum
- EMBRACE can deliver talks and workshops on a range of subjects including asylum and refugee issues.

⁸⁴ The *Syrian Vulnerable Persons Relocation Scheme*, briefing document www.communities-ni.gov.uk/publications/syrian-vulnerable-persons-relocation-scheme contains good practice advice.

⁸⁵ www.nidirect.gov.uk/articles/syrian-refugee-crisis#toc-1

⁸⁶ Brendan was helpful with his advice on this edition of the booklet.

Support Organisations

Barnardo's NI Refugee Support Service Neil McKittrick Tel: 028 9067 2366 Email: neil.mckittrick@barnardos.org.uk

Belfast City Mission at the Bridge, Kimberley Street, Belfast BT7 3DY, UK engages in support activities alongside people seeking asylum, Willie Cowan, Tel: 07491 692722

Belfast Friendship Club meets every Thursday evening, 7–9p.m., Common Grounds Café, University Avenue, Belfast and provides a safe space for people to socialise. Email: stephanie.mitchell@sbtr.org.uk

Bryson Intercultural / Migrant Help assists people with applications for asylum, Bryson House, Bedford St, Belfast BT 2 7FE.

Bryson Intercultural co-ordinates the consortium responsible for Syrian refugee resettlement and accepts donations and offers of help from the public. Contact Brendan Quail: Tel: (028) 9032 5835, ext 208, E-mail: bquail@brysongroup.org
www.brysonintercultural.org/refugees-asylum-seekers/refugees/how-you-can-help-helping-ni-refugees

ESOL VPRS Co-ordination Point: Ligia Parizzi co-ordinates ESOL teaching to VPRS refugees in both the further education and community sectors. Email: Lparizzi@belfastmet.ac.uk Tel: (028) 9026 5233 Mob: 07814046391

City of Sanctuary builds a culture of hospitality for people seeking sanctuary in the UK. Groups are working towards C of S status in Belfast, Derry~Londonderry and Causeway (Coleraine, Ballymoney, Moyle and Limavady areas). www.cityofsanctuary.org

Extern Multidisciplinary Homeless Support Team has advisers dedicated to helping new refugees. Tel: (028) 9033 0433

HAPANI (Horn of Africa People's Aid NI) assists people from Djibouti, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Somalia and Sudan, including refugees. Tel: (028) 90315778 Mob: 07413525951

Homeplus Drop in Centre provides a range of support services for destitute people in the asylum system, 113 University Street, Belfast, BT7 1HP, Tel: (028) 9031 1836 Mob: 07889867610

International Meeting Point drop-in centre, run by the Presbyterian Church, has support services for people in the asylum system, and refugees. 133 Lisburn Road, Belfast BT9 7AG. www.facebook.com/Themeetingpoint133/

NICRAS (NI Community of Refugees and Asylum Seekers) is a refugee-run support organisation. 143a University Street, Belfast BT7 1HP. Email: info@nicras.org.uk www.nicras.btcc.co.uk Tel: (028) 9024 6699

Red Cross Belfast assists people in the asylum system, traces relatives and helps with the process of family reunion. Refugee Support Operations Manager, Ann Marie White, Email: amwhite@redcross.org.uk Tel: (028) 9073 5350

Refugees Welcome aims to link people with a room to spare with people in the asylum system who need somewhere to stay. <http://refugees-welcomeni.co.uk/> Email: rwnorthernireland@gmail.com

St Vincent De Paul supports people at their point of need, including refugees and asylum applicants. They welcome financial donations and goods sold in their shops can be turned into cash to assist refugees here and in Europe.

STEM (NIACRO, Sustaining Tenancies for people from Ethnic Minority backgrounds) project has support workers to help new refugees integrate in local communities. www.niacro.co.uk/stem Tel: (028) 9032 0157.

Storehouse Belfast assists people with food and material goods. Tel: (028) 9023 6333 www.storehousebelfast.com (Local foodbanks throughout NI assist people living in their areas.)

Some Further Reading

Carnet, Pauline, Catherine Blanchard and Fabio Apollonio, *The Move-On Period: An Ordeal for New Refugees*, Red Cross, 2014. www.redcross.org.uk/~media/BritishRedCross/Documents/About%20us/Research%20reports%20by%20advocacy%20dept/Move%20on%20period%20report.pdf

Law Centre NI, Refugee Week 2014: Information Sheet for MLAs. www.embraceni.org/wp-content/uploads/2007/12/Refugee-issues-MLA-info-sheet.pdf

Parliamentary Home Affairs Committee, Seventh Report – Asylum, October 2013, 'Past and current criticisms of the asylum system', www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201314/cmselect/cmhaff/71/7104.htm#a2

Potter, Michael, *Refugees and Asylum Seekers in Northern Ireland*. NI Assembly Research and Information Service, 2014, www.niassembly.gov.uk/globalassets/documents/ofmdfm/motions/motions/community-relations-refugee-week/refugees-and-asylum-seekers.pdf

Wilson, Robin, *Distant Voices Shattered Lives; Human Stories of Immigration Detention From Northern Ireland*, Refugee Action Group, 2010. www.embraceni.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/10/Distant-Voices-Shaken-Lives.pdf

Websites

British Red Cross (Refugees) www.redcross.org.uk/About-us/Advocacy/Refugees

Law Centre NI <http://lawcentreni.org>

Refugee Council web site www.refugeecouncil.org.uk

Churches Together in Britain and Ireland (CTBI) <https://ctbi.org.uk/how-the-churches-are-responding-to-the-refugee-crisis/>

Focus on Refugees (A programme of CTBI) <http://focusonrefugees.org/>

Support organisations and resources are highlighted for your discretionary use – inclusion does not imply endorsement

EMBRACE is a group of Christians working together to promote a positive response to people who are seeking asylum, refugees, migrant workers and people from minority-ethnic backgrounds living in Northern Ireland.

Our primary role is to resource Churches through information and training so that they can help make this a more welcoming place for migrant and minority-ethnic people.

The world refugee and migrant crisis has been brought close to us as we have seen dramatic pictures on our TV screens of the horrific journeys that people make in order to escape from war, civil conflict and persecution. Many people locally have wanted to help or felt fearful. But most know very little about those who have already come here to seek asylum.

Most of us have never met a refugee and find it hard to imagine what it is like to flee from home and go to a foreign land to ask for protection. This booklet attempts to give people an insight into what faces people when they make an asylum application here or when they come here for resettlement, as groups of Syrian refugees are doing at present.

EMBRACE NI is an interdenominational Christian group that resources churches around issues of immigration and asylum, welcome and integration. The organisation is part of the local Refugee and Asylum Forum and has years of experience in working alongside refugee support organisations.

Margaret McNulty volunteered for a number of years as EMBRACE Information Officer. She is grateful to individuals and groups within the refugee and asylum support sector for sharing the information that made it possible to compile this booklet.

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Building a Welcoming Community

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Front cover illustration: welcome banner, cards and toys greeting Syrian refugees in the reception centre, Belfast, 2015. © Denise Wright

