A Proposal for a Refugee Integration Strategy for Northern Ireland

November 2013
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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Northern Ireland Strategic Migration Partnership (NISMP) is a cross-sector, multi-agency partnership funded by the Home Office which works to ensure that Northern Ireland is a welcoming place for new migrants and proactively retains and integrates people in a way that helps meet skills and labour needs to support future economic growth. A list of NISMP board members can be found in Appendix 1. In light of the growing numbers of people seeking asylum in Northern Ireland and those who have been granted right to remain, NISMP partners have identified a refugee integration strategy as a priority for Northern Ireland.

This proposal has been developed with a range of stakeholders from the statutory and voluntary sectors and refugee community. A stakeholder workshop for 30 participants was complemented by a series of individual meetings and focus group discussions. A list of agencies and individuals who have contributed to the proposal can be found in Appendix 2.

Northern Ireland is currently the only region within the UK or Ireland which does not have a Refugee Integration Strategy. The needs of asylum seekers and refugees are subsumed under those of minority ethnic groups which are currently best addressed through the Racial Equality Strategy (2005-2010) and the requirements towards equality of opportunity and good relations outlined under Section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act (1998). The issues of refugee integration raised in this document can therefore be considered as coming under the remit of the Racial Equality and Good Relations Unit of OFMdFM which has responsibility for policy relating to people from minority ethnic backgrounds.

Although Northern Ireland has a small number of asylum seekers and refugees relative to the rest of the UK, it is growing year on year. The number of asylum applications processed in 2012/2013 through Drumkeen House, the Home Office reporting centre in Belfast, has increased by approximately 60% since it opened in 2010. There has been a commensurate rise in numbers granted refugee status which has increased by around 80% in the same period. Nationalities represented have principally come from China, Somalia, Sudan, Iran and Syria.

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1 Figures provided by Home Office
On receipt of right to remain status, many refugees will apply for family members to join them in the UK through the family reunification process, thus further increasing the numbers, age spread and diversity of needs of this group.

Refugee integration is not simply a measure of refugee outcomes in terms of service delivery and access to employment and education opportunities. It is also a function of the institutional and informal processes and structures which help achieve these outcomes. ‘Indicators of Integration’ is a Home Office report which proposes an understanding of integration that can be used by those working in the field of refugee integration in the UK. The Indicators of Integration framework illustrates the clear interdependence between the visible outcomes of integration i.e. in employment, housing, education and health and the supporting structures, values and systems which facilitate the integration process (see Figure 1). The Indicators of Integration framework has been used in this paper to benchmark current practice in Northern Ireland against both the standards set in the framework and practice as it exists elsewhere in the UK.

Figure 1

INDICATORS OF INTEGRATION FRAMEWORK

Means and Markers

- Employment
- Housing
- Health
- Education

Social Connections

- Social bonds
- Social bridges
- Social links

Facilitators

- Language & Cultural Understanding
- Safety & Security

Foundation

- Rights & Citizenship

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2 Ager and Strang, 2004
Existing Practice in Northern Ireland: Strengths

In the absence of a refugee integration strategy for Northern Ireland, frontline staff and support agencies must rely on provisions within existing policies in order to support asylum seeker and refugee families with non-government organizations providing complementary project support. Departments and statutory agencies have shown an understanding of the additional barriers that these families might face in accessing and using public services. Within health, for example, the Belfast Trust and the Public Health Agency have collaborated to develop the Northern Ireland New Entrants Service and within education the Inclusion and Diversity Service works with schools to improve support for newcomer children (See Box 1 below). Likewise the Housing Executive has operated a Race Relations Policy and Action Plan since 2005 which they have developed and deliver in collaboration with minority ethnic and community organizations. Free ESOL classes are also provided to asylum seekers by the Department for Employment and Learning, thus helping to address the most commonly cited barrier to integration and effective engagement with support agencies.

BOX 1: Public Sector Programmes to Support Minority Ethnic Integration

Northern Ireland New Entrants Service (NINES)

The NINES programme offers screening services, health assessments, advice and a range of clinics for new entrants to NI, with asylum seekers and refugees constituting a principal client group. [www.belfasttrust.hscni.net/2118.htm](http://www.belfasttrust.hscni.net/2118.htm)

Inclusion and Diversity Service

IDS supports schools in providing for the needs of pupils and parents for whom English is not the first language. They provide Toolkits for Diversity to help schools create a welcoming and inclusive environment for all pupils.

[www.education-support.org.uk](http://www.education-support.org.uk)
Non-government organizations also play an important role in improving effective access to services for migrant families, including asylum seekers and refugees (see Box 2 below). In addition, this sector is taking the lead in building relationships and social capital within and between new and more established communities thus contributing to community cohesion and providing an advocacy platform for all. The Northern Ireland Community of Refugees and Asylum Seekers (NICRAS), for example, is a refugee-led organization which has prioritised integration as a strategic aim. Other community focused groups such as ACSONI (African and Caribbean Community Support Organisation in NI), and HAPANI (Horn of Africa People’s Aid in NI) have a large number of refugees and asylum seekers among their members and work to promote integration and inclusion.

**BOX 2: Facilitating Refugee Access to Services**

*Minority Ethnic Employability Support (MEESP)*

MEESP is an initiative of GEMSNI, aiming to reduce unemployment among minority ethnic groups by supporting them in identifying and tackling their personal barriers to entering and competing effectively in the labour market.

[www.gemsni.org.uk/meesp](http://www.gemsni.org.uk/meesp)

*An Tuar Ceatha*

Barnardo’s Tuar Ceatha Services helps to improve the lives of minority ethnic and refugee children and their families by providing individual parenting support, group work and high quality play-based learning for young children.

[www.barnardos.org.uk/tuarceatha.htm](http://www.barnardos.org.uk/tuarceatha.htm)

*Chinese Welfare Association*

The CWA facilitates access to healthcare for Chinese communities through a range of services such as interpretation, signposting, health seminars and providing training to health professionals.

[www.cwa-ni.org](http://www.cwa-ni.org)
Minority ethnic integration is also recognised as a necessary condition for the broader peace and reconciliation agenda, with EU Peace III funding used to fund programmes such as the Minority and Migrant Ethnic Project coordinated through Belfast City Council and the Newry and Mourne based Challenge of Change programme (see Box 3).

### BOX 3: Peace III Funded Programmes to Support Minority Ethnic Integration

**Migrant and Minority Ethnic Project** The Migrant and Minority Ethnic Project is a partnership between Belfast City Council, GEMS NI, the Law Centre, South Belfast Roundtable and ICTU which aims to improve the integration and participation of migrant and minority ethnic communities in the City. The project incorporates the Employment Support and Integration service and the Belfast Integration and Participation Project (BIPP). Through these it coordinates a range of training activities and information provision as well as supporting the very successful Friendship Club in South Belfast.

[http://belfastcity.gov.uk/migrants](http://belfastcity.gov.uk/migrants)

**Challenge of Change**

Challenge of Change facilitates the greater involvement of people from BME communities in civic, community and political life in the Newry and Mourne area through organizing capacity building programmes, networking opportunities and community based events.

[www.newryandmourne.gov.uk](http://www.newryandmourne.gov.uk)

### Existing Practice in Northern Ireland: Weaknesses

Although mainstream policies and practices in Northern Ireland reflect the general needs that minority ethnic communities may have in accessing services, for example, interpretation or translation requirements, in general there is no direct recognition of the barriers that may disproportionately affect refugees or of the challenges to service providers in effectively supporting refugee families. Some of these barriers stem from a lack of flexibility in administrative procedures, such as stipulations around school funding which make it difficult for schools to support children who arrive in the middle of the school year, which is the case for many asylum seeker and refugee children. Others are more complex and require novel
approaches and innovative thinking. For example, the higher than average unemployment rates among second and third generation immigrants throughout Europe\(^3\) are indicative of mainstream policies which have a disproportionately negative impact on migrant communities. Regions which have a strategic focus regarding refugee integration are better able to identify and address such issues. Collaboration between Jobcentre Plus and the Skills Funding Agency in London, for example, has improved the identification of refugee clients who need extra language support and the content and delivery of these courses\(^4\). Similarly, in the Republic of Ireland, Vocational and Education Committees responsible for the delivery of adult education, run an adult refugee programme, which is open to all refugees who are actively seeking employment. This provides up-skilling in English language ability as well as cultural understanding and assistance in accessing work or further study\(^5\). In contrast, the onus in Northern Ireland is placed on the individual seeking employment to address his/her language support needs before they are able to participate in employment support programmes\(^6\).

A further and repeatedly highlighted concern of stakeholders in Northern Ireland is the lack of strategic guidance in relation to supporting individuals and families during the 28 day transition period from receipt of refugee status and the withdrawal of asylum support. This is an extremely short timeframe which most consider unrealistic, and during which alternative accommodation must be found, national insurance numbers acquired and relevant welfare benefits registered for. Although Extern’s Multidisciplinary Homeless Support Team (MDHST), in partnership with NIHE, have recognised this as an issue and do offer support to those granted leave to remain, the inherent resource constraints and competing demands on the team, coupled with an absence of an agreed and coordinated response towards these new refugees means that many continue to rely on community-based organizations for advice. This has resulted in an inconsistency in the support and signposting provided and consequently the threat of destitution during this period is a reality for many.

This reliance on community-based organizations both during the transition period and for longer term integration needs, has resulted in a preference for South Belfast as a place to live for a majority of refugees as this is where these community organizations tend to be situated. This has changed the demographics of the area, leading to pressures on housing stock and

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\(^3\) Hansen, R., Feb 2012

\(^4\) Greater London Authority, Jan 2013

\(^5\) www.adultrefugee.ie

schools while refugees who are housed elsewhere feel isolated and inadequately supported in the integration process.

**Recommendations**

Refugees and asylum seekers are uniquely vulnerable in that they are defined by what they are fleeing from and leaving behind rather than what they are moving towards and what they can contribute to a third country. They can therefore find that their prior qualifications or work experience are not fully recognized and that they need additional support through skills training or qualification conversion courses before they are able to enter the labour market. Health needs, particularly in relation to mental and emotional health are also more marked among refugees. The asylum process itself can exacerbate the integration needs of refugees with long periods of economic inactivity and uncertainty over the future leading to stagnation of skills and social isolation.

Effective refugee integration requires an enabling policy environment with public services and government agencies working in complementarity with the community and voluntary sector. A refugee integration strategy would provide the coordination needed to allow this to take place. It would allow a wide dissemination of good practice and agreed standards throughout Northern Ireland which at the minute is inconsistent in its application even within the Belfast area. It would also facilitate monitoring and evaluation allowing further good practice to develop and be identified.

A number of recommendations have been drawn out at the end of each section throughout this report. These mostly suggest actions that individual agencies or departments could take to progress the integration of refugees. In isolation, however these will not fully address the barriers that refugees, as a growing demographic in Northern Ireland, face in their efforts to integrate into local communities and the wider society. It is therefore the recommendation of the stakeholders involved in putting together this proposal that OFMdFM coordinate the development and implementation of a Refugee Integration Strategy for Northern Ireland.
1. Introduction

The Northern Ireland Strategic Migration Partnership (NISMP) is a cross-sector, multi-agency partnership funded by the Home Office which works to ensure that the needs of Northern Ireland’s increasingly diverse society are reflected in its policies and practices. A list of NISMP board members can be found in Appendix 1. In light of the growing numbers of people seeking asylum in Northern Ireland and those who have been granted right to remain, NISMP partners have identified a refugee integration strategy as a priority for Northern Ireland.

Integration is a devolved matter within the UK, reflecting an understanding of the importance of place, local norms and cultural knowledge in developing appropriate policies. The 2001 “Full and Equal Citizens” Home Office policy document led to the development of more comprehensive refugee integration strategies for Scotland (2003\(^7\), currently under review), England (2005\(^8\), revised 2009\(^9\)) and Wales (2008\(^10\)). There are also several areas within England which have taken responsibility for refugee integration and have developed their own strategies\(^{11}\). This is part of a general move towards localism with more responsibility being devolved both to the various regions and to local government authorities within each of these regions.

“...In the past integration challenges have been met in part with legal rights and obligations around equalities, discrimination and hate crime... Today, the challenges we face are too complex for laws and powers to provide the sole solution”

Department for Communities and Local Government (2012: p.6)

Northern Ireland is currently the only region within the UK or Ireland which does not have a Refugee Integration Strategy. In Northern Ireland the needs of asylum seekers and refugees are subsumed under those of minority ethnic groups which are currently best addressed through the Racial Equality Strategy and the requirements towards equality of opportunity and good relations outlined under Section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act (1998).

\(^7\) www.scotland.gov.uk/Resource/Doc/47032/0027032.pdf

\(^8\) Home Office, 2005

\(^9\) UKBA, 2009

\(^10\) Welsh Assembly Government, 2008

\(^11\) For example, London, Sheffield, Yorkshire,
Refugees are uniquely vulnerable in that they have arrived in Northern Ireland as a result of forced migration, further compounded by a period of hiatus spent as an asylum seeker while awaiting regulation of their legal status. In this proposal we will examine how refugees are currently being supported in the process of becoming integrated and productive citizens in Northern Irish society and will consider the ramifications that an absence of a Refugee Integration Strategy for Northern Ireland might have, not just on the refugees themselves, but also on the next generation who will emerge from this group as well as impacting on community relations within NI and the resources of the public and voluntary and community sectors.

A wide range of stakeholders were involved in developing this proposal, through individual and focus-group discussions and through a stakeholder workshop. The stakeholders included 15 individuals who have either been through or who are currently going through the asylum process and those who work in or coordinate front line support services both in the public sector and in the voluntary, community and NGO sector. A full list of those involved can be found in Appendix 2.

Numbers of asylum seekers in NI

It is difficult to put an exact figure on the number of asylum seekers and refugees living in Northern Ireland. In relation to asylum seekers, most figures from the Home Office are not disaggregated down to the regions. Indicative figures are, however, provided by NIHE and Bryson One Stop Service, which have been contracted to provide advice, transport and accommodation support for asylum seekers. In 2012 Bryson processed paper work for 286 asylum applicants and 84 dependents and, in January 2013, the NIHE were providing accommodation for 420 asylum seekers, of which there were 97 families and 110 individuals. Asylum applications are increasing year on year with Drumkeen House, the Home Office reporting centre in Belfast, noting an increase of approximately 60% since opening in 2010, with applicants coming principally from China, Somalia, Sudan, Iran and Syria.

Once right to remain status has been given it is naturally more difficult to ascertain where people have settled and the numbers of refugees who have entered the UK through the family reunification programme. However, with the increased rate of asylum applications reported

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12 Embrace (2013)
by the Home Office, there has been a commensurate rise in the number granted leave to remain, which has shown an 80% increase in the period since the opening of Drumkeen House. In terms of absolute numbers, figures provided by support agencies are less indicative than for asylum applicants due to the withdrawal of statutory support. However, the Multi-Disciplinary Homeless Support Team (MDHST) at Extern offers support on referral to asylum seekers who are transitioning to refugee status. Since this service started in March 2012 to September 2012, MDHST received 124 referrals (43 male, 81 female) from 19 countries\textsuperscript{13}.

\textsuperscript{13} Figures provided by NIHE
2. ASPECTS OF INTEGRATION

It is not the purpose of this paper to propose a definition of the term ‘integration’. Nevertheless, in order to identify current support available to refugees in Northern Ireland and to benchmark this against recognised good practice elsewhere, we must begin with an exploration of the term and its use in relation to refugees.

In 2004 the Home Office commissioned a study into the definition and means of integration in order to establish a framework for a common understanding of integration that can be used by those working in the field of refugee integration in the UK.

The resulting “Indicators of Integration” report\textsuperscript{14} suggests the following framework for integration (See Figure 1)

Figure 1

\begin{center}
\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{indicatorsofintegration.png}
\end{center}

\textsuperscript{14} Ager and Strang, 2004
It is clear within this framework that the various domains of integration are interdependent and mutually reinforcing. Integration as measured through outcomes in employment, housing, education and health is facilitated through active social connections networks, shared language and knowledge of cultural norms within a safe and stable environment. This is embedded in a foundation of rights and citizenship which outline the expectations and obligations within the integration process.

2.1 Refugee Integration within the Northern Ireland policy context

In Northern Ireland the Racial Equality and Good Relations Unit of OFMdFM has responsibility for policy relating to people from minority ethnic backgrounds. It is the role of the Unit to publish and implement the Racial Equality Strategy for Northern Ireland, promote awareness of race and minority ethnic issues across all government departments and advise ministers and their departments on how policy and programmes might impact on people from minority ethnic backgrounds. The Unit also manages the Minority Ethnic Development Fund (MEDF) which provides support for voluntary and community organisations working with minority ethnic people and groups.

As the issues raised in this document can be viewed as coming under the remit of the Racial Equality Unit, it will be useful therefore to consider their relevance to the six strategic aims of the Racial Equality Strategy. These strategic aims correlate quite clearly with the ten domains of the Indicators of Integration framework:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Racial Equality Strategy Aim</th>
<th>Indicators of Integration Framework Domain</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Elimination of Racial Inequality</td>
<td><strong>Foundation</strong>: Rights and Citizenship</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Means and Markers: employment, housing, education, health</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Social connections</strong>: social links</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Facilitators</strong>: safety and stability</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Combating racism and hate crime</td>
<td><strong>Facilitators</strong>: Safety and Security</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Equality of Service Provision</td>
<td><strong>Means and Markers</strong>: Education, Health, Housing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participation</td>
<td><strong>Means and Markers</strong>: Employment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Social Connections: Social bridges, Social Links</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social Cohesion</td>
<td><strong>Social Connections</strong>: Social bridges</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Facilitators: Language and cultural knowledge</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Capacity Building</td>
<td><strong>Social connections</strong>: Social bonds</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
In this proposal, current practice in Northern Ireland will be examined against the ten domains of the indicators of integration framework. Although a number of practice and policy level indicators are listed against each domain in the framework, for the purposes of this paper we will limit our considerations to two core indicators in each area and, in the absence of relevant data, considerations will be based on available research, interviews with key stakeholders and the discussions held at the stakeholders’ workshop.
3. BENCHMARKING PRACTICE IN NORTHERN IRELAND:

3.1 MEANS AND MARKERS

The ‘Means and Markers’ domains of the Indicators of Integration Framework comprise Employment, Housing, Education and Health. These areas serve as markers of integration in so far as they show evidence of achieving things that are valued within the community. They also serve as means to those ends, in that they will often help achieve other things relevant to integration.

3.1.1 EMPLOYMENT

According to the Migration Policy Institute, the failure of integration policies in Europe is not one of culture, “rather it’s rooted in employment and income... If immigration is going to work, new immigrants will have to be fully incorporated into society, and most importantly into the economy.”

Employment not only provides an income to a refugee and helps build his/her sense of self worth, it also correlates positively with health, social capital and wellbeing. A needs assessment of the Horn of Africa community, of which 90% of those involved in the research were either asylum seekers or refugees, highlighted employment and education opportunities as a priority for meaningful integration. In Europe, unemployment rates that are higher than

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15 Hansen, Feb 2012: P1
16 Young, 2012
the national average are found among second and third generation immigrants who also suffer from consistently lower language and education attainment\(^\text{17}\). The impact of this is felt not just by individuals but also by their families and the communities into which they are integrating.

**Performance against Indicators of Integration Framework**

While data pertaining to the Integration Framework’s core indicators for employment have not yet been collected for Northern Ireland, various research findings are available which can be used to gauge the performance of current practice both against these indicators and against practice elsewhere.

- **Employment Core Indicator 1: Employment and unemployment rates of refugees (compared with rates amongst the general population).**

Refugees face a number of barriers which negatively affect their employment opportunities. In addition to poor levels of English, few social networks and a lack of knowledge about local systems and work culture which they share with other migrant groups, refugees are also faced with challenges relating to their refugee status, resulting in unemployment rates which are much higher than the national average. This is in spite of employment and education profiles which are, in general, largely similar to their UK-born and foreign-born peers\(^\text{18}\). Several explanatory factors have been put forward for this including the impact of the asylum process on the relevance and recognition of an individual’s prior work experience or qualifications; employers’ fear of prosecution for wrongful employment of a migrant\(^\text{19}\), and discrimination. For some groups of refugees such as Somalis, chances of employment are further compromised by the fact that many do not have a strong education profile\(^\text{20}\). This is of significance in Northern Ireland where Somalis make up one of the larger asylum seeker groups.

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\(^{17}\) Hansen, Feb 2012  
\(^{18}\) Spencer (ed), 2006  
\(^{19}\) Ibid.  
\(^{20}\) Saggar and Somerville, May 2012
Employment Core Indicator 2: Average annual earnings and/or income for refugees and/or refugee households.

Although refugee specific data is lacking, migrants in general are over-represented in low-paid, low-grade employment in Northern Ireland\(^\text{21}\). In Scotland, research has shown that refugees and asylum seekers indicate more financial struggle than even the most deprived 15% of the Scottish population\(^\text{22}\).

**Addressing barriers to good employment outcomes**

The range of barriers faced by a refugee makes securing employment a complex endeavour requiring supportive mainstream policy and provision as well as more targeted support.

**Mainstream policy support**

Elsewhere in the UK refugees are recognized as a priority customer group for Jobcentre Plus\(^\text{23}\), with a Refugee Marker incorporated into the monitoring system enabling support given to be tracked and assessed. A range of measures have been put in place to facilitate access to mainstream employment support for refugees. In terms of the initial urgent needs of individuals the following is available:

- Fast track Child Tax Credit applications from refugee customers
- Allow application to benefits to proceed without a NINO as long as there is evidence that a NINO application has been made\(^\text{24}\).
- The Simple Payment Service, which enables people who do not have a bank account to receive a benefit payment.

Consideration is also given to the longer term needs of the clients to secure employment:

- Early entry onto a number of training and employment support initiatives\(^\text{25}\).

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\(^{21}\) Wallace, McAreavy and Atkin, 2013  
\(^{22}\) Mulvey, Jan 2013  
\(^{23}\) Jobcentre Plus, Oct 2010  
\(^{24}\) Ibid.  
\(^{25}\) Ibid.
• The use of the Adviser Discretion Fund to cover National Recognition Information Centre (NARIC) costs in relation to assessing qualifications and skills not currently recognised in the UK\textsuperscript{26}.

In Northern Ireland, while much of the above good practice exists, the lack of coordination and strategic guidance mean that there is little consistency between the experiences of refugees. For example, without the identification of refugees as a priority client group, neither the fast tracking of applications for Child Tax Credit, nor ‘Steps to Work’ support are routinely being offered to refugee clients although both of these services are permissible within current guidelines.

**Targeted support**

In Northern Ireland the Department for Employment and Learning’s Steps to Work (StW) scheme provides a flexible approach to helping individuals address their employment and training needs. Although this scheme can be beneficial for refugees who have a reasonable command of English and familiar education and employment profiles, the concern was raised by both refugees and support agencies that for some refugees, there are particular barriers to accessing the labour market which require supplementary support. These mainly related to the extended period of time spent in the asylum process during which individuals are unable to gain local work experience, or to poor English language skills which severely limits their employment opportunities and even prevents them from accessing the StW scheme.\textsuperscript{27} Within the Steps to Work Staff Guidelines, advisers are recommended to “consider deferring the StW participation until the client has addressed their language barrier”\textsuperscript{27}. DEL does however offer provision for addressing these language needs through the Adviser Discretion Fund (ADF) which has responded to the needs of this client group by expanding the use of ADF to include provision of funds for ESOL courses.

Regions which have a strategic focus regarding refugee integration are better able to identify and address such issues. Collaboration between Jobcentre Plus and the Skills Funding Agency in London, for example, has improved the identification of refugee clients who need

\textsuperscript{26} Spencer (ed), 2006

\textsuperscript{27} www.delni.gov.uk/stw-staff-guidelines-august-2012.pdf
extra language support and the content and delivery of these courses\textsuperscript{28}. Likewise, in the Republic of Ireland, Vocational and Education Committees responsible for the delivery of adult education, run an adult refugee programme which is open to all refugees who are actively seeking employment. This provides up-skilling in English language ability as well as cultural understanding and assistance in accessing work or further study\textsuperscript{29}.

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**Recommendations**

*A number of recommendations have been drawn out at the end of each section throughout this report. In isolation, however these will not fully address the barriers faced by refugees and should therefore ideally be considered in the context of a coordinated Refugee Integration Strategy for Northern Ireland.*

1. NISSA and DEL should work to ensure consistency of experience for refugees in terms of support offered from front facing staff.

2. A refugee marker should be incorporated into the monitoring system enabling support given to be tracked and assessed and amended where necessary.

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\textsuperscript{28} Greater London Authority, Jan 2013

\textsuperscript{29} www.adultrefugee.ie
Finding secure and stable accommodation is pivotal to successful integration and the links between housing and community cohesion are clear. Correlations have also been made between housing, health and employment outcomes. Poor housing conditions or housing in a neighbourhood perceived as unsafe has been linked to increased incidences of stress and depression among refugees\textsuperscript{30}. Equally, employment provides a means of maintaining tenure and improving housing outcomes. A holistic approach to meeting housing needs which connects with education and employment needs and community networks is therefore advised\textsuperscript{31}.

**Performance against Indicators of Integration Framework**

While data pertaining to the Integration Framework’s core indicators for housing have not yet been collected for Northern Ireland, various research findings are available which can be used to gauge the performance of current practice both against these indicators and against practice elsewhere.

- **Housing Core Indicator 1: Proportion of refugees living in owner-occupier and secure tenancy conditions (compared with general population).**

UK studies reveal that the majority of refugees move into social housing on receiving their right to remain status but that poverty, language difficulties, lack of understanding around available housing options and discrimination present barriers to security of tenancy or moving on to alternative accommodation where preferred\textsuperscript{32}. A significant amount of housing churn during the first four years of refugee status has also been noted, indicating both dissatisfaction with housing conditions and insecurity of tenancy\textsuperscript{33}. It is also significant that

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\textsuperscript{30} Spencer (ed), 2006  
\textsuperscript{31} Ibid.  
\textsuperscript{32} Robinson, Reeve and Casey, 2007; Netto and Fraser, 2007  
\textsuperscript{33} Mulvey, Jan 2013
there is a gender dimension to responses on housing with more women dissatisfied than men and women with children expressing the most dissatisfaction\textsuperscript{34}.

In feedback from the NISMP stakeholder workshop, it was felt that the comparatively low numbers of asylum seekers and refugees meant that in some regards access to suitable accommodation in Northern Ireland may be more straightforward than elsewhere in the UK. The exception to this however, was the availability of suitable family housing which was scarce, particularly in the areas where they preferred to live, although it was acknowledged that this was a general problem faced by all those on the waiting list for social housing.

- \textbf{Housing Core Indicator 2: Proportion of refugees resident in housing areas targeted for renewal and support.}

In the UK most asylum seekers and refugees are accommodated in areas that are in low-demand, characterised by poverty, community tensions and crime\textsuperscript{35}. Although social housing in Northern Ireland is allocated as far as possible based on areas of choice, concern has been expressed by stakeholders around the housing of asylum seeker and refugee families in areas where there is a history of community tensions\textsuperscript{36}. A recent report from the Refugee Studies Centre of Oxford University finds that the history of sectarianism in Northern Ireland has resulted in persistent pigeonholing of people into categories of ‘us’, ‘them’ and ‘other’ which will impact on a refugee’s experience of community integration\textsuperscript{37}. This presents a unique concern for many newly-housed refugees in Northern Ireland as over 90% of social housing areas are segregated into single identity communities\textsuperscript{38}. During the asylum process asylum seekers can remain unaware of the existence of the sectarian divide as they are mainly housed in South East Belfast, the most ethnically diverse area of the city. However, on receipt of refugee status they are often rehoused in single identity communities or in interface areas and have to negotiate highly politicized community relations in which they will either be categorised as ‘other’ or ‘them’\textsuperscript{39}.

\textsuperscript{34} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{35} Spencer (ed), 2006
\textsuperscript{36} McGovern, Meas, Webb, 2011
\textsuperscript{37} Malischewski, April 2013
\textsuperscript{38} www.nihe.gov.uk/index/community/community_cohesion/bric.htm
\textsuperscript{39} Malischewski, April 2013
**Addressing barriers to good housing outcomes**

Adequate housing stock as well as stable community relations are key factors in determining the housing outcomes for refugees and their families.

**Housing stock**

Many refugees currently prefer to live in South Belfast as it is the location for most refugee support organizations and asylum seeker housing and therefore the area they are most likely to be familiar with. However, the position put forward by local stakeholders is that housing stock in South Belfast is becoming increasingly strained as a consequence of its popularity among refugees and other migrant communities. While this can be taken as testament to the good practice of many of the support organizations and service providers in this area, a refugee integration strategy would enable other areas to develop a similar capacity, remove the strain from South Belfast and help secure the benefits of ethnic diversity more evenly across the region.

**Community relations**

As experience elsewhere has shown, the involvement of the receiving communities in the rehousing of asylum seekers and refugees is crucial to pre-empting any possible community tensions. In Leicester, for example, the Council worked closely with residents’ associations over the course of a year on an estate where they were hoping to house refugees and asylum seekers. Similarly, in Glasgow, the Cube Housing Association ensured that a proportion of the income derived from providing housing to asylum seekers was reinvested in the neighbourhood and that this was made explicit to existing residents.

Such initiatives should be complemented by ensuring that refugees have adequate knowledge of the area in which they are being housed as well as of the range of possible housing pathways. Elsewhere in the UK specialist housing support for refugees is available through housing associations dedicated to BME clients or through regional Refugee Councils. Although as yet no similar support exists in Northern Ireland, it is important to recognize the work that is being done by Extern’s Multidisciplinary Homeless Support Team (MDHST).

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40 Perry, 2005
41 For example HAFOD in Wales http://www.hafod.org.uk; AAGHA in Scotland www.agh.org.uk; Arawak Walton in Manchester www.arawakwalton.com
42 NIHE, 2005
which, since March 2012, has undertaken support for those granted leave to remain in Belfast. Working in partnership with the NIHE, the team supports individuals leaving Home Office accommodation who have been referred for assessment and follow-up support. In tandem with meeting their housing needs the team has also assisted refugees in accessing a range of benefits and services. This support, however, is being provided within the existing resource constraints of the team which is consequently limited as to the level and extent of assistance it can provide.

**Recommendations**

*A number of recommendations have been drawn out at the end of each section throughout this report. In isolation, however these will not fully address the barriers faced by refugees and should therefore ideally be considered in the context of a coordinated Refugee Integration Strategy for Northern Ireland.*

1. Specialist housing advice and guidance should be provided for all refugees and in particular those who are transitioning from NASS accommodation. This should be holistic in its approach, factoring in education, health and social needs, and thus requires a multi-disciplinary approach to delivery.
2. NIHE and housing associations should continue to work closely with residents’ organisations and community organisations in order to dispel myths and promote integration.
3. Councils should work closely with residents’ organisations and community organisations to promote the integration of minority ethnic communities as part of the community planning process.
3.1.3 EDUCATION

Education is a marker of integration in that equality of access and opportunity within the education system for ethnic minority groups is evidence of a society that values and supports cultural diversity. It is also a means of integration, paving the way for greater employment opportunities and helping to build language skills and social connections within the local community. For asylum seeker and refugee children, the stability of a school routine contrasts with the insecurity that pervades other aspects of their lives. The support that they receive at this stage will furthermore be central to determining the outcomes of second generation refugee families. Across Europe, second and third generation immigrants currently finish school with lower than average educational attainment, clearly impacting on economic and social outcomes. For adult refugees, their country of origin and gender will have a bearing on the level of formal education they completed before coming to the UK. In a 2010 Home Office report it was found that 14% of new refugees had spent no years in formal education, the majority of these women. A refugee strategy will help address these issues for refugee families, providing targeted support to the benefit of these families and the wider society.

Performance against Indicators of Integration Framework

While data pertaining to the Integration Framework’s core indicators for education have not yet been collected for Northern Ireland, various research findings are available which can be used to gauge the performance of current practice both against these indicators and against practice elsewhere.

- Core Indicator 1: The percentage of children from refugee families achieving:
  - specified key stages (or equivalent) at primary level; five or more GCSEs/Standard Grades at A*-C; two or more ‘A’ level or Advanced Higher passes; admission to university

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43 Hansen, 2012  
44 UKBA, Research, Development and Statistics Directorate, 2010
There is no monitoring of the educational performance of refugee children at national level although children from BME backgrounds are among those who have been identified as being at risk of underachievement by both the Department of Education for Northern Ireland (DENI)\(^{45}\) and the UK Department for Education (DfE)\(^{46}\). “BME”, however, is a broad category and doesn’t give any clear indication as to whether asylum seeker and refugee children are enjoying equality of access and opportunity within our education system. DfE recognizes that asylum seeking and refugee children have a wide range of educational and social needs relating to interruptions in their education, experiences relating to their asylum claim, changes in family circumstances and racist bullying or isolation in schools\(^{47}\). In recognition of their legal duty to enable educational access and opportunity for all children, some Local Education Authorities have developed their own guidelines to support these children\(^{48}\). The Refugee Council recommends that such guidance be statutory\(^{49}\).

In Northern Ireland there is particular concern for the educational opportunities open to young people in their teenage years who have had little or no previous experience of formal education. The children identified who fall into this category are principally from Somalia, one of the largest asylum seeking groups in Northern Ireland, constituting the second largest number of first time asylum applicants in 2011 and the largest in 2012\(^{50}\). The educational needs of these children are profound and complex. A Refugee Integration Strategy would facilitate the development of an agreed and coordinated approach to more fully addressing these needs.

Stakeholders in Northern Ireland have also raised concerns around school funding procedures which do not account for children who arrive in the middle of the school year. This means that schools who enrol asylum seeker children beyond the start of the school year struggle to provide the required support. As many asylum seekers and refugees live in South Belfast (see section 4.2.2), this has resulted in disproportionate demand being put on just a few schools.

\(^{45}\) Department of Education (DENI), 2012
\(^{46}\) Department for Education (DfE), 2010
\(^{48}\) Hampshire County Council, Sept 2009
\(^{49}\) Walker, Feb 2011
\(^{50}\) Statistics made available to NISMP by UKBA
Core Indicator 2: Number of refugees completing vocational qualifications

Vocational qualifications and training provide opportunities for entering the labour market and it is therefore important that refugees are supported in accessing such courses. However, English language ability is a significant barrier for many and the content and level of many available ESOL classes are not sufficiently targeted for the purposes of vocational training. Lack of affordable childcare provision is a further barrier which disproportionately discriminates against women from gaining vocational qualifications.

Addressing barriers to good educational outcomes

In Northern Ireland a Newcomer Pupils policy provides guidance for schools to more effectively support pupils from a minority ethnic background. Assistance for this is provided through the DE funded Inclusion and Diversity Service. However the additional needs of asylum seeking and refugee children that relate to, for example, circumstances around their asylum claim or prior experience of formal education are not directly addressed in this policy. A Refugee Integration Strategy would enable these to be comprehensively identified and addressed as in the other devolved administrations. In Wales, for example, targeted funding has been provided to Local Education Authorities to support refugee inclusion in schools with additional support given to young people transitioning to post-16 education opportunities. The government has also taken responsibility for the accessibility and quality of ESOL provision, establishing an ESOL advisory group for this purpose.

More flexibility in the allocation and distribution of pupil premium funding has been identified as a priority for Northern Ireland which would allow schools to more easily provide timely and targeted support to asylum seeking and refugee children.

In relation to older children and adult refugees, a greater understanding is required of the barriers faced in relation to accessing education. They are not a homogeneous group and their needs will vary according to their age, sex, prior experiences of learning and country of origin. Any strategy must take this into consideration and encourage a multidisciplinary and

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51 Refugee Council and University of Birmingham, Nov 2007

coordinated approach to resolving the issues prioritised by refugees themselves and relevant support agencies.

**Recommendations**

*A number of recommendations have been drawn out at the end of each section throughout this report. In isolation, however these will not fully address the barriers faced by refugees and should therefore ideally be considered in the context of a coordinated Refugee Integration Strategy for Northern Ireland.*

1. The Department of Education should build flexibility into funding mechanisms which would allow schools to access funding for asylum seeking or refugee children who arrive in the middle of the school year.

2. DE and DEL in collaboration with voluntary and community groups working in this area should work together to provide the education and training support necessary to better identify and meet the needs of young refugees who have had little or no previous experience of formal education.

3. An ESOL advisory group should be set up by OFMdFM which would allow better coordination and targeting of ESOL support.
3.1.4 HEALTH

The World Health Organization’s definition of health as being a “state of complete physical, mental and social wellbeing and not merely the absence of disease and infirmity”\(^53\) makes it clear that outcomes in this area are a factor not only of mainstream health provision or targeted interventions but also of policies and practices relating to other domains of integration such as employment, housing and community cohesion.

It is of note therefore, that in the UK, while the health of asylum seekers is on a par with that of the population as a whole, this deteriorates within 6 months to five years of arrival, a development which is particularly marked in relation to mental health\(^54\). This may be due a number of factors, such as the effects of the asylum process or the deprioritisation of health by individuals seeking asylum. A refugee integration strategy will help address the factors which result in this deterioration of refugee health outcomes over time and provide a framework through which the symbiotic relationship that health has with other aspects of integration can be encouraged and improved.

**Performance against Indicators of Integration Framework**

There are a number of indicators listed under the health domain of the Indicators of Integration framework, two of which have been chosen to illustrate the issues faced by refugees and service providers in Northern Ireland and measures that have been put in place to address these.

- **Indicator 1: Proportion of refugees registered with GPs (compared with the general population).**

The Belfast Health Development Unit notes that GP registration is low amongst certain minority ethnic groups, particularly those who don’t have a permanent address, a requirement for registration in Northern Ireland\(^55\). It also recognizes that lack of understanding regarding

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\(^{53}\) [www.who.int/about/definition/en/print.html](http://www.who.int/about/definition/en/print.html)  
\(^{54}\) Spencer (ed), 2006  
\(^{55}\) Belfast Health Development Unit, 2010
entitlements and knowledge of how to access services along with language barriers and poor cultural awareness of some service providers have further contributed to disappointing registration figures. These points were echoed by participants at the NISMP stakeholder workshop who related them to the plight of many asylum seekers and refugees. A particular point was raised relating to refugees who have previously spent a period as a refused asylum seeker, during which time entitlement to free primary healthcare is removed. This is perceived as further contributing to confusion regarding entitlements once right to remain status has been secured. Asylum seekers were also deemed as being particularly vulnerable to misinformation that can result from lack of clarity around entitlements, believing in some cases that certain health disclosures may affect the outcome of their asylum case.

- **Indicator 2: Utilisation rates of specialised services (e.g. antenatal care, mental health services etc) by refugees (compared with the general population).**

Registration with a GP is a prerequisite for utilisation of specialised services. Any monitoring system will therefore account only for those refugees who are registered with GPs, and then only if immigration status is a captured dataset. It is clear however, from the experiences of stakeholders involved in putting together this proposal that even refugees who are registered with GPs can remain unaware of the services available to them due to communication difficulties at the GP surgery or signposting which is inadequately tailored to the needs of minority ethnic communities. Barnardos Northern Ireland reports that communication difficulties make it more difficult for early intervention with children who have developmental difficulties as parents are unable to fully explain their concerns around symptoms or behaviour\(^{56}\).

For asylum seekers and refugees, most of whom are on low incomes and with no family or friends to provide a support network, the logistics of arranging the time and transport to attend healthcare appointments can be a further deterrent to accessing secondary healthcare services.

Research carried out by the mental health charity, Mind, found that problems with emotional health tended to be under reported among asylum seekers and refugees\(^{57}\), a finding that was

\(^{56}\) McGovern, Meas, Webb, 2011

\(^{57}\) Mind, 2009
corroborated by research carried out amongst the Somali community in Northern Ireland of whom 66% of those participating were refugees and 24% asylum seekers. This found that in spite of almost 50% of those questioned stating that they had suffered from stress within the last year, only 5% had availed of assistance from health and social care services. A gender dimension has also been noted in the mental health of refugees in the UK with more women than men reporting poor emotional health.

Individuals present at the NISMP stakeholder workshop who had themselves gone through the asylum process spoke of the sense of physical and emotional isolation that can be felt as an asylum seeker or refugee. This impacts not only on the uptake of specialised services but also on mental health. Other factors identified which might explain this low take up of specialised services, include the lack of flexibility within generic systems and the lack of cultural understanding on the part of healthcare staff.

**Addressing barriers to good health outcomes**

Prompt screening and health assessment of asylum seekers will inform provision requirements and encourage early registration with GPs. The Northern Ireland New Entrant Services (NINES), a unit within the BHSCT, provides this service for newcomers to the region. The unit provides the necessary understanding of the possible health needs of asylum seekers, particularly important when health records may be lost or incomplete.

Improving communication between service users and service providers is also key to improved health outcomes for refugees. Community and refugee-led organizations are recognized as an important resource in this regard. In Northern Ireland the Chinese Welfare Association offers signposting and interpretation services for the Chinese community and health and social care providers. Other communities could benefit from a similar service but would need support to build capacity in this area. In England, Scotland and Wales, this support is included as an objective of their respective refugee integration strategies.

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58 Young, 2012
59 Ibid.
60 UKBA, Research, Development and Statistics Directorate, 2010
61 [www.belfasttrust.hscni.net/2118.htm](http://www.belfasttrust.hscni.net/2118.htm)
As seen in section 4.4.1 above, access to the health system for refugees and asylum seekers can be made more difficult, not only by communication challenges but also by feelings of isolation, stress and poverty which result in health concerns being pushed down the list of priorities. Their needs may also have a gender dimension or be related to their family situation as well as being affected by the circumstances relating to their immigration status. There are existing good practice initiatives in Northern Ireland which recognize the extra needs of some of the most vulnerable groups, particularly those of children and families. For example, the Barnardos Tuar Ceatha programme provides outreach family support services for refugees, asylum seekers and other BME families. However the needs of other groups, such as those with mental health needs appear to be less well supported. A refugee integration strategy would provide the coordination and guidance needed for appropriate service development through both mainstream services and targeted projects.

**Recommendations**

A number of recommendations have been drawn out at the end of each section throughout this report. In isolation, however these will not fully address the barriers faced by refugees and should therefore ideally be considered in the context of a coordinated Refugee Integration Strategy for Northern Ireland.

1. DHSSPS should enable support to be provided to refugee and migrant community organisations to develop their health related signposting and support services and ensure that sufficient guidance and materials are available to social and healthcare staff.

2. Health Trusts and the PHA should work more closely with refugee and migrant community organizations in order to develop more accessibly and culturally appropriate mental health services.

3. DHSSPS should ensure that asylum seekers have consistent access to a GP
3.2. Benchmarking Practice in

Northern Ireland: Social Connections

The ‘Social Connections’ domain of the Indicators of Integration Framework comprises Social Bonds, Social Bridges and Social Links. These are the networks and relationships that exist within a community (social bonds), between communities (social bridges) and between communities and government, departments and agencies (social links). All serve to connect an individual or group into the wider community.

In order for refugees to be integrated into the national fabric of society they must first be integrated into their local communities. That integration is a locally driven process is increasingly reflected in policy directions adopted by member states throughout the European Union. A recent study carried out on behalf of the Committee of the Regions of the EU finds that integration policies should be developed with a genuine ‘bottom-up’ approach\(^62\) which closely addresses the needs of local communities. ‘Migration Nation’, the integration strategy for Ireland places particular emphasis on the importance of community integration, stating, “integration lives and breathes, and indeed dies, at the level of community”\(^63\). In the UK the Localism Act (2011) and the pending devolution of a number of responsibilities to local authorities in Northern Ireland both reflect a similar policy direction.

Devolving responsibility to a more local level requires local government, agencies and community based organizations to have the capacity to represent their constituencies and to communicate and collaborate effectively in order to promote inclusion and integration and meet identified needs. It is vital therefore that existing stocks of social capital are supported

\(^{62}\) Centre for Strategy and Evaluation Services (CSES), April 2013

\(^{63}\) Office of the Minister for Integration 2008: p22
and opportunities are created for the generation of further social capital sources. New demographic groups such as refugees must be supported in their organization and in their connections with other groups so that they are included in this process.

**Performance against Indicators of Integration Framework**

While data pertaining to the Integration Framework’s core indicators for Social Connections have not yet been collected for Northern Ireland, various research findings are available which can be used to gauge the performance of current practice both against these indicators and against practice elsewhere.

As the three domains of Social Bridges, Social Bonds and Social Links are closely related, we will address them together, taking one indicator for each area for illustration purposes.

- **Social Bonds indicator: Number of registered refugee community organizations.**

There are strong and active Refugee Community Organizations in Northern Ireland (e.g. NICRAS, HAPANI) and other active groups that serve BME communities (e.g. CWA, ACSONI, Indian Community Centre), which work to build social bonds. However, it is unclear as to whether all asylum seeker and refugee communities feel included in their activities. Barnardos highlights the particular plight of some women with children who feel isolated and anxious living as asylum seekers or refugees in Northern Ireland. Individuals lacking this sense of group bonding will also be more vulnerable to exclusion from community based initiatives.

- **Social Bridges indicator: The proportion of refugees who report actively mixing with people from different ethnic backgrounds in everyday situations.**

The Belfast Integration and Participation Project is a South Belfast-based example of good practice in building social bridges between new and long standing communities. The project provides a range of social opportunities for refugees and asylum seekers and other residents of the area to meet and interact. It also offers practical training for BME groups and individuals on leadership and opportunities for voluntary work in the community.

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64 McGovern, Meas, Webb, 2011  
65 [http://bipp.gemsni.org.uk](http://bipp.gemsni.org.uk)
success of the project has generated interest in replicating the model elsewhere in the city and in other areas of Northern Ireland. Nevertheless, in light of the finding in the most recent Life and Times survey that 78% of people believe that there is prejudice against minority ethnic groups in Northern Ireland\(^6\), it is clear that more work remains to be done in this area.

- **Social Links indicator:** Number of refugees on membership roll of, and assuming political office through, registered political parties.

Social links are vital for the full integration of ethnic minority communities into the political and civic life of Northern Ireland. Challenge of Change, a PEACE III initiative coordinated through Newry and Mourne Council, recognizes this and has prioritised building the capacity of BME communities around civic and political engagement. In Belfast a number of advocacy groups work to highlight the particular needs of refugees to service providers and elected representatives. However representatives of the refugee community involved in developing this proposal paper, noted that refugees often feel alienated from political processes and that there is scope for political parties to be more proactive in engaging this group.

**Addressing barriers to good Social Connections Outcomes**

Building the capacity of Community Based Organizations, including Refugee Community Organizations is central to the development of constructive social relationships. An example of good practice in this area is Framework for Dialogue, a longstanding project prioritised in the Scottish Refugee Integration Strategy and run by the Scottish Executive together with Glasgow City Council and the Scottish Refugee Council. This project supports refugees into host communities by establishing structures which allow continuing dialogue to take place. There are several examples of good practice in Northern Ireland such as those described above, which would benefit from a similar strategic approach to promoting dialogue, enabling these to be expanded and replicated elsewhere in the region and for the issues faced by newly established communities to become an integral part of the political agenda.

\(^6\) www.ark.ac.uk/nilt/2012/Minority_Ethnic_People/RACPREJ.html
Recommendations

A number of recommendations have been drawn out at the end of each section throughout this report. In isolation, however these will not fully address the barriers faced by refugees and should therefore ideally be considered in the context of a coordinated Refugee Integration Strategy for Northern Ireland.

1. OFMdFM in collaboration with DoJ and Local Government should ensure that Refugee Community Organizations and Community Based Organizations are supported and included in initiatives which promote community cohesion and development.
3.3 **BENCHMARKING PRACTICE IN**

**NORTHERN IRELAND: FACILITATORS**

The ‘Facilitators’ domains of the Indicators of Integration Framework comprise Language & Cultural Understanding and Safety & Stability. These are the key skills, knowledge and circumstances that help people to be active, engaged and secure within communities.

A shared language and a shared understanding of cultural norms in an environment free from racial harassment and crime are fundamental conditions for integration. Inadequate language skills and understanding of local systems will present a barrier to constructive social connections and inhibit access to employment and education opportunities and appropriate healthcare. Likewise, an environment which is perceived as unsafe will increase community isolation, distort the cultural knowledge of host and refugee communities and negatively impact on health and employment outcomes.

**Performance against Indicators of Integration Framework**

While data pertaining to the Integration Framework’s core indicators for the Facilitators domains have not yet been collected for Northern Ireland, various research findings are available which can be used to gauge the performance of current practice both against these indicators and against practice elsewhere.

As the two domains of Language & Cultural Understanding and Safety & Stability are closely related, we will address them together, taking one indicator for each area for illustration purposes.
Language & Cultural Understanding indicator: Proportion of refugees demonstrating English language fluency within two years of receiving refugee status.

In Northern Ireland, DEL offers free English classes for asylum seekers. While this has indeed been welcomed, for refugees it is more difficult to access similarly appropriate language tuition. Refugees involved in developing this proposal paper raised a number of barriers that they face in this regard such as cost, location, level and content of available classes. The need for continued quality controlled affordable English language tuition will only rise as the New Asylum Model of asylum claim assessment increases the number of refugees who have spent less than a year in the UK and who will consequently have a weaker understanding of the language. In addition, the requirement that all applicants for indefinite leave to remain in the UK are now required to pass the ‘Life in the UK’ tests and to possess an English language speaking and listening qualification to a specified level presents an added incentive to access appropriate ESOL provision.

Safety & Stability indicator: Number of racial incidents involving refugees recorded by the police.

The community safety strategy for Northern Ireland\(^\text{67}\) aims to tackle hate crime, including racially motivated hate crime and to contribute to the building of shared communities within an increasingly diverse society. Policing and Community Safety Partnerships (PCSPs) are charged with implementing this strategy at a local level. Elsewhere in the UK, attacks against asylum seekers in cities which are designated asylum dispersal areas are frequent. As Belfast is not a dispersal area, this has not been a reported trend in Northern Ireland. However, with increasing numbers of people seeking asylum this type of hate crime should be closely monitored.

Addressing barriers to good Facilitator outcomes

‘Mythbusting’ activities have proven effective in building cultural understanding between communities. In Northern Ireland the Belfast Integration and Participation Project is one of several examples of good practice in challenging and redressing the negative stereotypes that

\(^{67}\) Department of Justice, 2012
individuals may hold of others who are from a culturally different background. These activities work on the principal that integration is a two-way process and requires the active participation of both refugees and the receiving communities.

Media support is crucial to achieving good outcomes in cultural understanding and community safety and proactive engagement with media stakeholders in Northern Ireland would no doubt help improve outcomes in these areas. In Scotland, the role of the media in promoting positive images and contributing to community development is a key action in the Scottish Refugee Integration Action Plan68. Likewise, in Wales the media is also identified as a key partner in delivering the Welsh Refugee Inclusion Strategy69.

Recommendations

A number of recommendations have been drawn out at the end of each section throughout this report. In isolation, however these will not fully address the barriers faced by refugees and should therefore ideally be considered in the context of a coordinated Refugee Integration Strategy for Northern Ireland.

1. OFMdFM should coordinate the development of a strategy for delivering ESOL classes to refugees
2. MLAs and Councillors should take an active role in promoting refugee integration by working through the media to dispel myths around refugees and to promote positive images of refugees and their host communities.

69 Welsh Assembly Government, 2008
A repeatedly highlighted concern of Northern Ireland stakeholders is the impact of the asylum process on refugee integration outcomes. While the New Asylum Model has made the asylum application process quicker, many applicants remain in a backlog of ‘legacy’ cases. For this group of applicants an asylum process which can often stretch to years has a considerable impact on their physical and emotional health due in part to the conditions imposed during this period and a feeling of isolation and disconnection from wider society. For those processed through the New Asylum Model, the shorter time frame, while welcomed, brings its own difficulties, principally in relation to lack of familiarity with the systems, culture and language of the country.

Restrictions placed on accessing training and employment opportunities during the asylum process affects the relevance of previous work experience and qualifications and increases the likelihood that, once granted right to remain status, refugees will have to depend on state support. This provides an additional imperative for an Integration Strategy to support the more complex education and training needs of refugees.

For many asylum seeking and refugee children, school provides a degree of stability in what are essentially very unstable circumstances. If a family is relocated during the asylum process this upheaval can have a negative impact not just on their education but on their social and emotional welfare. Children are further affected by a family’s inability to access child specific benefits. Barnardos highlights the plight of asylum seeking families with a disabled child who are not entitled to claim any child benefit or disability allowances in spite of the additional costs entailed in caring for a person with a disability\(^\text{70}\).

One of the most urgent matters raised by both refugees and support organizations was that of the 28 day transition period from receipt of refugee status and the withdrawal of asylum support. The Home Office has recently (November 2013) responded to these concerns by

\(^{70}\) McGovern, Meas, Webb, 2011
delaying the start date of this transition period until after the biometric residence permit has been issued which will help accelerate access to public and other services.

Nevertheless, a number of challenges remain which have proven difficult to negotiate within the short transition window: alternative accommodation must be found, national insurance numbers acquired and relevant welfare benefits registered for. Housing is one of the most urgent needs during this transition period and new refugees are, “typically in immediate and desperate need of accommodation and therefore unable to wait for a tenancy in a preferred location” 71. The asylum process has been identified by a number of stakeholders in Northern Ireland as having a distorting effect on enabling refugees to access the range of housing pathways available. Not being able to work during the asylum process means that for many it is not possible to raise enough money for the rental deposit necessary for privately rented accommodation, effectively restricting them to social housing and their choice of area in which to live.

Receipt of refugee status is also the point at which case worker support is withdrawn leaving the individual to attempt to navigate the system on their own. New refugees are particularly vulnerable at this stage and can feel compelled to make decisions based on short term exigencies rather than on longer term goals. Extern’s Multidisciplinary Homeless Support Team (MDHST), in partnership with NIHE, have recognised this vulnerability and do offer support to those granted leave to remain; however the inherent resource constraints and competing demands on the team, coupled with an absence of an agreed and coordinated response towards these new refugees means that many continue to rely on community-based organizations for advice. This has resulted in an inconsistency in the support and signposting provided and consequently the threat of destitution during this period is a reality for many.

71 www.jrf.org.uk/publications/housing-pathways-new-immigrants
Recommendations

A number of recommendations have been drawn out at the end of each section throughout this report. In isolation, however these will not fully address the barriers faced by refugees and should therefore ideally be considered in the context of a coordinated Refugee Integration Strategy for Northern Ireland.

1. Integration should viewed as beginning at the point of asylum application and a Refugee Integration Strategy should include proactive steps which aim to ensure that the asylum process does not inhibit effective and efficient integration of refugees and their families.

2. OFMdFM together with relevant departments should implement and coordinate support for individuals who have newly received their right to remain status.
5. Conclusions and Recommendations

The numbers of people seeking asylum in Northern Ireland is increasing year on year. The number of asylum applications processed in 2012/2013 through Drumkeen House, the Home Office reporting centre in Belfast, has increased by approximately 60% since it opened in 2010. There has been a commensurate rise in numbers granted refugee status which has increased by around 80% in the same period. Nationalities represented have principally come from China, Somalia, Sudan, Iran and Syria.

Refugees have a complex set of health, education and employment needs, some of which, such as language and local cultural knowledge, they may share with other migrant groups. However in other respects their needs are more profound and reflect the fact that they are in Northern Ireland to seek asylum rather than for economic, educational or other reasons. For example, refugees can find that their prior qualifications or work experience are not fully recognized in Northern Ireland and that they need additional support through skills training or qualification conversion courses before they are able to enter the labour market. Health needs, particularly in relation to mental and emotional health are also more marked among refugees than among other groups of migrants. The asylum process itself can exacerbate the integration needs of refugees with long periods of economic inactivity and uncertainty over the future leading to stagnation of skills and social isolation.

While immigration is a reserved matter, responsibility for refugee integration is devolved. Although other regions, including a number of local government authorities in England, have developed refugee integration strategies, in Northern Ireland there is currently no framework in place which directly addresses the barriers to integration faced by this growing group of people. However, it is important to recognize that there are a number of discrete and independent actions which have been initiated by Departments in order to support the integration of refugees, such as the NINES health service offered by BHSCT and the PHA or the English Language classes for asylum seekers offered by DEL. Likewise, the Housing Executive has operated a Race Relations Policy and Action Plan since 2005 which they have developed and deliver in collaboration with minority ethnic and community organizations.
The voluntary and community sector has also been at the forefront of developing good practice models with the support of Peace III programme funds. The Belfast based Migrant and Minority Ethnic Project and the recently launched Creating Cohesive Community project by the Lower Ormeau Resident’s Action Group (LORAG) and South Belfast Roundtable (SBRT) are just two that were given particular mention by stakeholders. Similarly, a network of groups and individuals are working towards developing the culture of hospitality in Belfast within the ‘City of Sanctuary’ movement.\(^7\)

However, without an agreed approach to refugee integration, Northern Ireland will be unable to fully benefit from the human capital potential that exists among refugees and risks a consequent drain on state resources that research has shown is likely to persist among second and third generations of refugees. Furthermore, a failure to acknowledge the changing demographics of Northern Ireland society and the implications that this will have on community cohesion and security will lead to opportunity costs for both established and newcomer communities. In contrast, supported integration can benefit not just refugees and their families but also the communities into which they are integrating and the wider Northern Ireland economy.

**Recommendations**

A number of recommendations have been drawn out at the end of each section throughout this report. These mostly suggest actions that individual agencies or departments could take to progress the integration of refugees. In isolation, however these will not fully address the barriers that refugees as a growing demographic in Northern Ireland face in their efforts to integrate into local communities and the wider society. It is therefore the recommendation of the stakeholders involved in putting together this proposal that OFMdFM coordinate the development and implementation of a Refugee Integration Strategy for Northern Ireland. It is a further recommendation that the strategy is developed on the premise that integration begins at the point of asylum application, thus also addressing the many difficulties faced by asylum seekers which have an additional impact on their physical and mental wellbeing.

\(^7\) www.cityofsanctuary.org
beyond what might be expected from their immigration status. Finally, in addition to a targeted strategy, we would also recommend that the needs of asylum seekers and refugees are factored into the development of all future planning of strategies and services by statutory agencies.
## Appendix 1: NISMP Board Members

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<tr>
<th>Board Member</th>
<th>Organisation</th>
<th>Title</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ald. Geraldine Rice (Alliance)</td>
<td>Castlereagh Borough Council</td>
<td>NISMP Chair</td>
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<tr>
<td>Ald. Arnold Hatch (UUP)</td>
<td>Craigavon Borough Council</td>
<td>NISMP Vice Chair</td>
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<tr>
<td>Cllr. Charlie Chittick (DUP)</td>
<td>Omagh District Council</td>
<td>NISMP Officer</td>
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<td>Cllr. Monica Digney (SF)</td>
<td>Ballymena Borough Council</td>
<td>NISMP Officer</td>
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<tr>
<td>Cllr. John O’Kane (SDLP)</td>
<td>Fermanagh District Council</td>
<td>NISMP Officer</td>
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<tr>
<td>Jo Marley</td>
<td>Bryson Intercultural</td>
<td>Director</td>
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<tr>
<td>Deirdre MacBride</td>
<td>Community Relations Council</td>
<td>Programme Director – Cultural Diversity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Julie Humphries</td>
<td>Department of Education (DE)</td>
<td>Head of Additional Educational Needs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Colin Jack</td>
<td>Department of Employment and Learning (DEL)</td>
<td>Director SEERD</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stephen Galway</td>
<td>Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (DHSSPS)</td>
<td>Asst Director Primary and Community Care</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sinead Simpson</td>
<td>Department of Justice (DoJ)</td>
<td>Community Safety Branch</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dave Wall</td>
<td>Department of Social Development</td>
<td>Director of Central Policy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mike Golden</td>
<td>Home Office</td>
<td>Assistant Director, NI</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kevin Doherty</td>
<td>Irish Congress of Trade Unions (NICICTU)</td>
<td>Migrant Workers Support Unit</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Les Allamby</td>
<td>Law Centre NI</td>
<td>Director</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dolores Ferran</td>
<td>NIHE</td>
<td>Assistant Director Housing and Policy Services</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ken Fraser</td>
<td>Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister</td>
<td>Racial Equality and Good Relations Unit</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maura Muldoon</td>
<td>Police Service of Northern Ireland (PSNI)</td>
<td>Head of Community Safety Branch</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Khara Glackin</td>
<td>Thematic Subgroup on Immigration</td>
<td>Legal Advisor at STEP</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
## Appendix 2: Stakeholders involved in developing the proposal

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Public Sector Department/Organization</th>
<th>Department/Unit</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Belfast City Council</td>
<td>Good Relations Unit</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Belfast Health and Social Care Trust</td>
<td>New Entrants to Northern Ireland Service;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inclusion and Diversity Service</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Department for Employment and Learning</td>
<td>Shaftesbury Square Jobs and Benefits Office</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Department of Justice</td>
<td>Policing with the Community Branch</td>
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<tr>
<td>Department for Social Development</td>
<td>Social Security Agency</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Newry and Mourne District Council</td>
<td>Challenge for Change programme</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NI Housing Executive</td>
<td>Equality Unit; Race Relations Unit</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Public Health Agency</td>
<td>Minority Ethnic Health and Social Wellbeing</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### NGO Sector

- African and Caribbean Community Support Organisation in NI (ACSONI)
- Barnardos
- Belfast Migrant Centre
- BelongNI
- Bryson Intercultural
- Community Relations Council
- GEMS NI: Minority Ethnic Employability Support Project
- Horn of Africa People’s Aid NI (HAPANI)
- Lower Ormeau Residents Action Group (LORAG)
- NI Community of Refugees and Asylum Seekers (NICKAS)
- NI Council for Ethnic Minorities (NICEM)
- Red Cross
- Refugee Action Group
- South Belfast Roundtable
- Extern

### Refugees and Asylum Seekers

15 refugees and asylum seekers (all asylum seekers involved have spent at least two years in the asylum system).

### Other

- Former Principal of Post-Primary School
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[www.hafod.org.uk](http://www.hafod.org.uk)


[www.nihe.gov.uk/index/community/community_cohesion/bric.htm](http://www.nihe.gov.uk/index/community/community_cohesion/bric.htm)