

Refugees in Northern Ireland

2020–21

Some basic facts



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Foreword

Having visited refugee camps in Jordan in preparation for the arrival of Syrian families in 2015, and having worked for many years with people who have come to Northern Ireland to seek asylum, I feel that it is very important to have a publication that gives an overview of the topic: 'Refugees in Northern Ireland'. People are coming with much to offer to their new homeland but are also hoping for a warm welcome and support to rebuild their lives.

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 an up-to-date developed understanding of the challenges involved, both for people who arrive here and for us as a society as we seek to offer sanctuary and the opportunity to contribute and belong in a new country.

At a time when the UK government is looking to restrict the rights of people coming to seek sanctuary through the UK asylum system, it is important that we as Christians seek to influence and lobby government, not only to uphold their legal responsibilities under the 1951 UN Convention on Refugees, but also to have a humane and compassionate response.

The contribution of the asylum seeking and refugee community is something the churches across NI have learned about over the past five years, having been involved in supporting families and individuals through the Syrian Vulnerable Persons Relocation Scheme. In Belfast churches have been involved with people seeking asylum for over 20 years. By offering support through the delivery of ESOL (English for Speakers of Other Languages) classes, and providing practical support and friendship, those involved have created a solidarity which has benefited both us and our new neighbours.

In 2021 a consultation on the NI draft Refugee Integration Strategy will be launched and the theme of Refugee Week (June 14-21) is 'We cannot Walk Alone'. It would be great if Churches could contribute to these, partnering with those for whom seeking sanctuary is a lived experience.

Denise Wright, MBE, former EMBRACE Chair, Co-ordinator of the NI Refugee and Asylum Forum and member of the Delivery Consortium for the NI Resettlement Scheme.

Introduction

By the end of 2019 79.5 million people in the world had been displaced from their homes by war, civil conflict or persecution. Of these, 26 million individuals were refugees.¹ We have seen people making desperate journeys in an attempt to reach safety. Humanitarian crises touch 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.

People may 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, 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, around 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 and 1980.

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.

2020 saw a lot of changes. There is a new accommodation provider for people in the asylum system. The COVID 19 pandemic has created additional difficulties. The Syrian Vulnerable Persons Relocation Scheme has ended in N Ireland and sufficient normality will need to return before the new resettlement scheme can begin, but the pandemic has not reduced the numbers of refugees and new people still arrive here to apply for asylum.

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.² ('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 together³ 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.⁴

² See page 14.

³ 'All in the same boat: The challenges of mixed migration', UNHCR www.unhcr.org/pages/4a1d406060.html (accessed 2016).

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

The World Refugee Situation

At least 100 million people have been forcibly displaced from their homes in the last 10 years.⁵ The UN High Commissioner for Refugees says that ‘We are witnessing a changed reality in that forced displacement nowadays is not only vastly more widespread but is simply no longer a short-term and temporary phenomenon.’⁶

During 2020 the UN Refugee Agency highlighted continuing conflict in Syria; South Sudan’s displacement crisis; violence in Ukraine; refugees and migrants desperate to reach Europe by sea; the flight of stateless Rohingya refugees from Myanmar to Bangladesh; Venezuelans travelling across Latin America and the Caribbean; crisis in the Sahel region in Africa because of conflict and climate change; more conflict and security concerns in Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya and Somalia; violence in the Central African Republic; people internally displaced in Ethiopia; the return to conflict to the Democratic Republic of the Congo; and the suffering and displacement of many people in Yemen.⁷

85% of refugees were still being hosted in developing countries, including 27% in the least developed countries.⁸ The world pandemic is compounding the difficulties for displaced people and the states that receive them.

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. More rarely, people may become a ‘refugee sur place’, someone who has the need to apply for asylum when the situation at home changes after they have left.⁹

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.

⁵ UN Refugee Agency, 2020, *Global Trends Forced Displacement in 2019*, p4. www.unhcr.org/globaltrends2019/

⁶ *Global Trends Forced Displacement in 2019*, p.6.

⁷ *Global Trends Forced Displacement in 2019*, p.6.

⁸ *Global Trends Forced Displacement in 2019*, p.2.

⁹ See the case of ‘Abdi’ in Dr Brendan Quail’s unpublished PhD thesis, *The Use and Formation of Social Networks among Asylum Seekers and Refugees in Northern Ireland*, Queen’s University Belfast, page 125.

'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 ¹⁰

'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 ¹¹

'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 ¹²

'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 ¹³

¹⁰ Barnardo's Tuar Ceatha Black, Minority Ethnic and Refugee (BMER) Project, *Supporting Refugee and Asylum Seeking Families Living in Northern Ireland*, page 20.

¹¹ Story collected in 2004. The full interview is on the EMBRACE CD-Rom, 'Once We Were Strangers', when the contributions were anonymous. www.embraceni.org/wp-content/uploads/2011/09/1-zimbabwe.pdf

¹² *Forced to Flee; Frequently Asked Questions about Refugees and Asylum Seekers in Northern Ireland* (3rd Edition), Refugee Action Group.

¹³ UK Home Office, *Country Information and Guidance; China: Christians*, 2016, page 5, 2.2.4.

www.refworld.org/docid/56eae61f4.html accessed February 2021. (Members of other religions also experience persecution: see www.gov.uk/government/publications/china-country-policy-and-information-notes, for persecution of Uighurs and other Muslims; members of the Falun Gong; and adherents of Buddhism, and Taoism / Daoism.)

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, research for the International Organization for Migration Missing Migrants Project estimated that a shocking total of over 35,000 migrants and refugees had died en route since 2014,¹⁴ with a total of 3,463 in 2020. Causes include asphyxiation, drowning, starvation, lack of medicines, the weather and violence.¹⁵ 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.¹⁶) 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 travelling through deserts and across mountains. Smugglers may throw clients into the sea, separate women and men, sell them into slavery, or pass them on to people who hold them hostage for money.¹⁷ Sexual assault and torture are common even for those who are held in official centres e.g. in Libya where Amnesty International has said that people 'have little access to food, water or medical care' and 'face brutal treatment: torture, rape – and even being sold'.¹⁸ 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 Belfast¹⁹

The use of people smugglers or agents

It is often difficult for people to reach safety without crossing borders illegally, with the aid of a smuggler, but it is still a last resort and people know that it involves total loss of control. As one person said: 'You are that vulnerable whatever they say you are going to do.'²⁰ 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'. Northern Ireland is on the periphery of Europe and Dr Brendan Quail found that most of the participants in his research study had come here by plane, mostly accompanied by their smugglers. The minority 'travelled by ship, lorry or boat',

¹⁴ IOM Missing Migrants Project <http://missingmigrants.iom.int/about>

¹⁵ IOM Missing Migrants Project <https://missingmigrants.iom.int/>

¹⁶ Refugee Council web site

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

¹⁷ 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).

¹⁸ 'Urgent: stop the selling and detention of refugees and migrants in Libya'. <https://www.amnesty.org/en/get-involved/take-action/urgent-stop-selling-and-detention-of-refugees-and-migrants-in-libya/>

¹⁹ 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.

²⁰ A Refused asylum seeker from Zimbabwe quoted in *The Use and Formation of Social Networks among Asylum Seekers and Refugees in Northern Ireland*, page 174.

also accompanied by a smuggler.²¹ Article 31 of the UN Refugee Convention states that entering a country illegally or on false papers is legitimate if it is in order to seek asylum. (Nevertheless, in March 2021 the Home Secretary announced the plans to penalise people who apply for asylum, having travelled in this way.²²) Moving people across borders with their consent should also 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.

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.’²³

For most, however, 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.²⁴ The important motivation is to get away from danger.

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, where their rights will be protected. 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.²⁵

There is no reason to believe that the situation has changed today.

²¹ *The Use and Formation of Social Networks among Asylum Seekers and Refugees in Northern Ireland*, pages 150 and 172. See pages 173–76 on arranging to use a smuggler.

²² ‘Priti Patel promises overhaul of asylum seeker rules’, BBC News 24 March 2021. www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-politics-56500680

²³ Vaughan Johnson and Jeremy Segrott, Home Office Research Study 243 *Understanding the Decision-Making of Asylum Seekers*, 2002, page 42.

²⁴ *Understanding the Decision-Making of Asylum Seekers*, page 25.

²⁵ 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

Why do refugees come to N Ireland?

Some people do come intentionally because they have friends or relatives here but most of those who had not planned in advance to arrive here may have heard of the UK but have no knowledge of Northern Ireland.²⁶ Jo Marley, Director of Bryson Intercultural (now Bryson Care), has said that people who seek asylum in Belfast mostly think that they are in London, Dublin or Europe when they first arrive.²⁷ 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. ...'*²⁸

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 apply for protection.²⁹

Asylum & Refugee Numbers

The UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR) estimated that around 79.5 million people had been forcibly displaced worldwide at the end of 2019: 26 million refugees, 45.7 million internally displaced in their own countries, and 4.2 million seeking asylum in other countries.

During 2019 alone, an estimated 11 million people were displaced. The causes of the unprecedented decade of displacement include the continuing conflicts in Syria, South Sudan, Ukraine, and Africa's Sahel region; the renewal of conflict in Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya, Somalia, the Central African Republic, and the Democratic Republic of Congo; the flight of huge numbers of people from Venezuela and stateless Rohingya people from Myanmar to Bangladesh; and the vast humanitarian crisis in Yemen.³⁰

There were also some 5.6 million Palestinian refugees, recognised by the UN Relief and Works Agency for Palestine refugees in the Near East (UNRWA). The majority are those who either lost their homes as a result of the 1948 conflict, or are their descendants.³¹

The vast majority of refugees (73% in 2019) live in developing countries close to areas of conflict, many in a small number of countries. Turkey (bordering Syria) hosted most in 2019, 3.6 million people; Columbia (close to Venezuela) hosted 1.8 million; Pakistan, 1.4 million; Uganda 1.4 million; and Germany 1.1million.³² In developed countries, with formal asylum processes, the recipients of the largest number of new asylum applications in that year were the USA (301,000), Peru (259,800), Germany 142,500, France (123,900), Spain (118,300), Brazil (82,500), Greece (74,900), Mexico (70,400), Costa Rica (59,200), and Canada (58,400).³³

²⁶ Brendan Quail, *The Use and Formation of Social Networks among Asylum Seekers and Refugees in Northern Ireland*, page 145.

²⁷ She spoke on Radio Ulster in 2014. For material relating to this broadcast see the BBC web site www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-northern-ireland-26189348

²⁸ *Forced to Flee* page 6.

²⁹ *Forced to Flee*, page 4. See also page 3 of this booklet. Such an applicant is referred to as a 'refugee sur place'. 5

³⁰ *Global Trends Forced Displacement in 2019*, p. 6.

³¹ *Global Trends Forced Displacement in 2019*, p.2.

³² *Global Trends Forced Displacement in 2019*, p.3.

³³ *Global Trends Forced Displacement in 2019*, p.52.

In 2018 the UN General Assembly adopted a Global Compact on Refugees to ease pressures on host countries, support safe return and expand access to third country solutions such as resettlement.³⁴

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 2016,³⁵ 26,350 in 2017³⁶ and 37,453 in 2018.³⁷ There were 35,737 applications in 2019.³⁸ COVID-19 caused a drop in 2020 with only 5,789 applications by the end of June 2020.³⁹

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

In 2019, there were around 5 asylum applications for every 10,000 people resident in the UK. Across the EU28 there were 14 asylum applications for every 10,000 people. The UK was therefore below the average among EU countries for asylum applications per head of population, ranking 17th among EU28 countries.⁴⁰

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.⁴¹ At that time the small country of Lebanon was host to 1.15 million refugees – 23.2%, or nearly a quarter of the population.⁴² The UK was host to just 1% of the world's refugees in 2015.⁴³

Numbers of people seeking asylum in N Ireland

It is difficult to be accurate about numbers because the Home Office rarely issues figures for NI. When figures are released they usually cover only those who are receiving asylum support (see page 13), not all applicants. There will always be additional people who are supporting themselves. The Law Centre NI estimated 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 briefing states that, 'The large majority of asylum applications are single adults whereas approximately one fifth of applications are from families.'⁴⁴ It may take a number of years for people to have their asylum

³⁴ UN Refugee Agency www.unhcr.org/uk/the-global-compact-on-refugees.html

³⁵ House of Commons Library: Briefing Paper SNO1403, *Asylum Statistics*, 23 January 2018. <http://researchbriefings.parliament.uk/ResearchBriefing/Summary/SN01403>

³⁶ Refugee Council, 20 Top Facts about Refugees and Asylum Seekers www.refugeecouncil.org.uk/20facts

³⁷ Asylum Information Database (AIDA) *Country Report: United Kingdom, 2018 update*, March 2019, page 9. www.asylumineurope.org/sites/default/files/report-download/aida_uk_2018update.pdf

³⁸ House of Commons Library: Briefing Paper SNO1403, *Asylum Statistics*, 3 September 2020, p.3. <https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/research-briefings/sn01403/>

³⁹ Migration Observatory briefing, 4 December 2020.

<https://migrationobservatory.ox.ac.uk/resources/briefings/migration-to-the-uk-asylum/>

⁴⁰ House of Commons Library: Briefing Paper SNO1403, *Asylum Statistics*, 3 September 2020, p.3.

⁴¹ British Red Cross *Refugees and Asylum Seekers: Setting the Story Straight in 2015*.

⁴² *World at War* pages 2 and 3. www.unhcr.org/556725e69.pdf

⁴³ UNHCR quoted in Refugee Council leaflet, *Tell it Like it Is*, 2017.

⁴⁴ Law Centre briefing, 'How many asylum seekers and refugees are there in Northern Ireland?', Law Centre NI, October 2015. (Law Centre Policy Officer, Liz Griffiths, was helpful with her advice during the preparation of earlier editions of this publication.)

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

*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.*⁴⁵

Numbers have increased, with 610 people in supported asylum accommodation in March 2016, from 36 countries; rising to over 840 people in March 2018.⁴⁶ There were applications for asylum for around 340 people, including dependents in 2018.⁴⁷ At the end of June 2020 there were 841 asylum applicants in National Asylum Support Service (NASS) accommodation and 11 more people receiving support without accommodation.⁴⁸ There were a very low number of applications in some months in 2020 because of the pandemic, but Bryson Care / Migrant Help in Belfast had processed applications for asylum for 529 people, including dependents, by the end of the year. The countries of origin with the most numbers of applications were Eritrea, Sudan, Somalia and Syria.⁴⁹

A few children arrive without adult family members and are the responsibility of Social Services. There were 13 trafficked children and 20 unaccompanied children in care in N Ireland in 2014–15 and alarmingly nine of these children went missing.⁵⁰ There were 13 referrals in 2016/17⁵¹ and in 2017 there were 32 trafficked or unaccompanied children in care in N Ireland in 2017.⁵² Some are orphans but parents may be desperate to save one family member. These children may be known as ‘separated children’ or ‘unaccompanied minors’. They come from many countries. Journalist, Lindsay Fergus found that

*25 children who arrived into Northern Ireland unaccompanied between 2011 and August 2015 ... Countries the children had originated from included: Albania, Algeria, China, Egypt, Guinea Bissau, Iran, Romania, Somalia, South Korea and Sudan.*⁵³

Barnardo’s NI independent guardianship service advocates on behalf of separated, unaccompanied and trafficked children.⁵⁴ It has assisted 85 children and young people from 2018 to the end of 2019.⁵⁵

⁴⁵ ‘How many asylum seekers and refugees are there in Northern Ireland?’

⁴⁶ The NI Housing Executive 16th Annual Progress Report to the Equality Commission and the NI Housing Executive Public Authority Statutory Equality and Good Relations Duties Annual Progress Report 2017-18.

⁴⁷ Information from Bryson Intercultural/ Migrant Help staff.

⁴⁸ House of Commons Library Asylum Statistics Research Briefing SNO1403, Annex CBPO1403, 3 September 2020. <https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/research-briefings/sn01403/>

⁴⁹ Information from Bryson Care / Migrant Help staff, February 2021, who processed these applications and were also helpful with background information. (Bryson Care was formerly Bryson Intercultural.)

⁵⁰ *Heading Back to Harm; A Study on Trafficked and Unaccompanied children Going Missing from Care in the UK*, ECPAT UK & Missing People, 2016, p. 11 and p. 12. www.ecpat.org.uk/heading-back-to-harm-a-study-on-trafficked-and-unaccompanied-children-going-missing-from-care-in-the-uk

⁵¹ *Delegated Statutory Functions Statistical Report*, (HSBC) quoted in their Evidence to All Party Parliamentary Group on Modern Slavery and Human Trafficking Inquiry into unaccompanied and separated minors in Europe, Law Centre (NI), May 2017.

⁵² *Still in Harm’s Way*, a report by ECPAT UK and Missing People. www.ecpat.org.uk/still-in-harms-way (Two of the children, possibly trafficked, had disappeared p.15.)

⁵³ ‘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

⁵⁴ Health and Social Care Board, 1 May 2018. www.hscboard.hscni.net/independent-guardians/

⁵⁵ Written reply AQW 887/17/22, NI Assembly, 7 February 2020. <http://aims.niassembly.gov.uk/questions/printquestionssummary.aspx?docid=291843>

The Process of Applying for Asylum in N Ireland⁵⁶

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 detention in Larne House (see pages 16–17).

While the UK was in the EU they were part of the Dublin Regulation arrangement for dealing with asylum, including the assumption that most people should apply in the first safe country they reach. Brexit has implications for the ability of the UK to refuse to accept an asylum application and to return asylum seekers to some other countries.⁵⁷

This is how the process should work but each case is different, and it is impossible to give a timescale for the pathways described here. Some might get a positive primary decision within a few weeks while other people may spend years in the process. During the pandemic people have still been able to register an asylum claim but some aspects of the process have changed. The previous initial point of contact for making an application was for a person to contact the Bryson Care / Migrant Help Asylum Advice Service. On 28 September 2020 the Home Office changed this and at the time of writing the process is as follows:

- A person presents themselves at the Home Office, Drumkeen House, Galwally, Belfast BT8 6TB and explains that they need protection.
- Outside these hours people should make themselves known to the Police Service of NI (PSNI).
- They will then be sent for advice to Bryson Care / Migrant Help Asylum Advice Service at Linfield Industrial Estate, Block G, Unit 12 Weavers Court Business Park, Belfast BT12 5GH.
- Unaccompanied children (under 18) are brought to the local Health Trust’s Social Services Gateway Team who look after them during the asylum process.
- Unaccompanied minors’ applications are considered following receipt of a Statement of Evidence (SEF).⁵⁸
- Initial Accommodation (IA) is arranged, if necessary. The responsibility for providing IA in the private rental sector in N Ireland has been subcontracted to the Mears Group property management company.⁵⁹
- 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.
- An Applications Registration Card (ARC Card) is issued.

⁵⁶ The Refugees and Asylum Seekers pages of the Bryson Care website contain more detailed information about the process and the support available. www.brysonintercultural.org/refugees-asylum-seekers/

⁵⁷ House of Lords Library, In Focus, ‘Brexit: Refugee protections and asylum’, 17 September 2020. <https://lordslibrary.parliament.uk/brexit-refugee-protection-and-asylum-policy/>

⁵⁸ Law Centre NI webinar 9 April 2020. <https://www.lawcentreni.org/coronavirus-covid-19-update>

⁵⁹ www.mearsgroup.co.uk

- Applicants usually have to report/sign regularly at the Home Office, Drumkeen House, Belfast but this was suspended for some time because of COVID-19.⁶⁰
- If the asylum applicant has no money, and no other means of support, he/she will receive financial support (see page 13) and follow-on accommodation is provided in the private rental sector.⁶¹
- A Preliminary Information Questionnaire (PIQ) may have to be completed and there is a Substantive Interview with the Case Owner. (Some applicants may refer to this as ‘the big interview’.) Face-to-face interviews were suspended at the start of COVID-19 lockdown but since July some interviews have taken place using video call.⁶²
- Further evidence about a case normally had to be made in person but during the pandemic they can now be submitted by post or email.⁶³
- The Home Office makes an initial decision. (42% of UK applicants were refused at this stage in 2019.⁶⁴)

If a person gets a positive decision they

- receive Temporary Leave to Remain in the UK for 5 years and have the right to access employment, welfare benefits and social housing
- are normally told to leave their asylum accommodation and that their NASS (National Asylum Support Service) financial support will end. The process of issuing move on (‘notice to quit’) letters was paused at the beginning of the pandemic.⁶⁵
- are entitled to have some of their immediate family with them. The Red Cross can help with the complicated process of family reunion and supported 22 families in 2020, with 87 new arrivals.⁶⁶ (Exiting the Dublin Regulation following Brexit has implications for some family reunion rights.⁶⁷)
- 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 finding a permanent home.

If a person gets a negative decision they are usually

- asked to leave the country
- given notice to leave their accommodation
- told that they will lose their financial support.

⁶⁰ ‘Changes to the asylum and immigration process due to Covid-19’, Right to Remain, legal updates, 12 August, 2020. <https://righttoremain.org.uk/changes-to-the-asylum-process-due-to-covid-19/>

⁶¹ In the previous contract the NI Housing Executive was subcontracted by Serco to access initial accommodation locally.

⁶² ‘Changes to the asylum and immigration process due to Covid-19’

⁶³ ‘Changes to the asylum and immigration process due to Covid-19’

⁶⁴ House of Commons Library Briefing Paper SNO1403, *Asylum Statistics*, 3 September 2020, p. 7.

⁶⁵ William Walsh, Migration Observatory briefing, ‘Deportation and Voluntary Departure from the UK’, 7 July 2020. <https://migrationobservatory.ox.ac.uk/resources/briefings/deportation-and-voluntary-departure-from-the-uk/>

⁶⁶ Information supplied by Ann Marie White, Refugee Support Operations Manager, Red Cross, Belfast, February 2021.

⁶⁷ The Dublin Regulation is a EU arrangement for dealing with asylum applications. See Nicola Newson ‘Brexit refugee policy and asylum policy’, 17 September 2020. <https://lordslibrary.parliament.uk/brexit-refugee-protection-and-asylum-policy/>

They may be

- eligible to appeal to an independent tribunal. Tribunal hearings were suspended at the start of the pandemic but may take place again remotely, using video links.⁶⁸
- able to obtain new evidence, or state that their circumstances have changed, and submit a fresh claim.
- prepared to return voluntarily to their country of origin.⁶⁹
- removed from the country. (While the COVID pandemic reduced the number of enforced removals from the UK, they did not stop.⁷⁰)
- left in limbo because they cannot be removed e.g. because their country is too unsafe or they have health problems. They are often forced into destitution.⁷¹

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 £39.60 per week for both adults and children (as at February 2021), paid through the Aspen card that can be used at cash points and certain shops. There are extra allowances of £3 per week for pregnant women and children up to three; £5 per week for a baby under one year old.
- Follow-on accommodation in the private rental sector, almost always in the Belfast area.
- Free legal advice in relation to their case, financed by the Home Office, if they cannot pay themselves.
- 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 would usually lose their Section 95 support and their accommodation but this is suspended because of the pandemic.
- If they fulfil strict Home Office requirements, including medically certified evidence of vulnerability, they may be able to apply for Section 4 hardship support for refused asylum applicants.⁷²

⁶⁸ 'Changes to the asylum and immigration process due to Covid-19'

⁶⁹ People may be eligible for help in returning to make a new life in their country of origin but the Voluntary Returns Service has been suspended due to COVID-19. www.gov.uk/return-home-voluntarily

⁷⁰ 'Changes to the asylum and immigration process due to Covid-19'

⁷¹ Groups including Housing 4All, Community Foundation NI, Homeplus, EMBRACE and some churches had been exploring housing solutions for people who are left destitute, and in 2018 a pilot project provided temporary accommodation for some women, with the assistance of Choices Housing Association. The search for solutions continues.

⁷² Lindsay Fergus, 'Asylum seekers tell their stories', 2 October 2015. www.thedetail.tv/articles/asylum-seekers-tell-their-stories

- Those who do not / or cannot leave the country, often have to rely on charity and support from other refugees or they 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 (after applying via Bryson Care / Migrant Help) are provided with emergency accommodation and issued with a non-cash Aspen card enabling the purchase of food and other essentials to the value of £39.60 per week in a range of shops (as at February 2021).
- If they can appeal or put forward a new case, their Section 95 support and accommodation are restored.

Successful applicants 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, they may be granted Humanitarian Protection (5 years leave to remain) or Discretionary Leave to Remain (1–3 years leave to remain). These protections may also be extended.

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, 2015, then Chairperson of the NI Community of Refugees and Asylum Seekers ⁷³

When they arrive initially, people are advised by Bryson Care/ Migrant Help who are sub-contracted by the Home Office (see page 11). The Red Cross can also provide advice and a little cash, until asylum support begins.

Some people join the NI Community of Refugees and Asylum Seekers (NICRAS), a refugee-run organisation. They may also join a support group for people from their country or region. 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. (Some of the support organisations are listed on pages 28–29.) 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 is important for many, although some may have had their faith challenged by their experiences.

Additional support during the COVID-19 pandemic

2020 was a difficult time to arrive in NI to apply for asylum. It must be especially bewildering to have little English, and be in a situation where a support worker cannot sit close to you. There has been reliance on advice by telephone or on the doorstep. Early on in the pandemic, however, considerable effort was put into communication within the refugee and asylum support community to ensure that everyone knew what was happening. The Law Centre NI website carried updates.

During the first lockdown the NASS accommodation provider, Mears (see page 11), began to monitor those who were isolating by phoning them twice a week and a month's electricity and gas was put on meters. Bryson Care / Migrant Help provided mobile phones to some people so that their cases could be progressed. Most of the Red Cross work was done remotely.

Especially in the early months of the pandemic, a combined response from funders and NGOs – the COVID Response for Refugee and Asylum Community (CRRAC) initiative – was essential to ensure that people had safe access to food. The CRRAC phone number, 078 7852 5870, was a single point of assistance for food needs.

The South Belfast Roundtable, EMBRACE, Homeplus and NICRAS – working with South Belfast Foodbank, Storehouse, the Department for Communities NI (DfC) and the Community Foundation for NI (CFNI), via Belfast City Council (BCC) – received referrals directly and from the NASS accommodation provider, MEARS, with the permission of asylum seeking families. The DfC, Mears, Red Cross and the NI Strategic Migration Partnership were also involved at a strategic level, while CFNI and BCC were significant among a number of funders.

By late spring CRACC was delivering 136 food parcels weekly for asylum seeking families, funded by the DfC through Belfast City Council. Other donated boxes brought this to a total of over 160 parcels per week. Staff members from Homeplus, NICRAS, South Belfast Roundtable, and volunteers from Storehouse, SCANI (Sudanese Community Association Northern Ireland), NISA (Northern Ireland Somali Association) and other Refugee and Asylum Forum members delivered the parcels.

Belfast City Council funding enabled food parcels to be supplemented by culturally appropriate foods and baby essentials. In addition, 30 refugee families got deliveries from South Belfast Foodbank. Tins of tuna, bags of rice, tinned tomatoes and oil were added to all parcels along with nappies, wipes, and formula as necessary.

Initially South Belfast Foodbank and Storehouse distributed food parcels to single asylum seekers but it was difficult to deliver to these additional 190 people. So, in May, June and July £40 Tesco Vouchers were given monthly to each individual asylum seeker. Staff members distributed these, along with leaflets in six languages explaining what the vouchers were for and how to use them. The recipients felt that the vouchers were more helpful, allowing them to buy culturally appropriate food and removing the stigma of having parcels delivered to their doors.

The National Emergencies Trust funded Bryson Care to provide people seeking asylum in Northern Ireland with 465 Computer Tablets and 150 Wi-Fi devices between September 2020 and March 2021. Asylum accommodation does not include access to Wi-Fi, so helping people to connect with loved ones during lockdowns; to participate in English language courses in isolation; and to correspond with statutory and community service providers which had gone online, was an essential service.⁷⁴ A number of schools and the Education Authority (EA) have been able to lend laptop

⁷⁴ Information supplied by staff at Bryson Care. (In addition, Dr Brendan Quail of Bryson Care was also helpful with the updating of this booklet.)

computers to ensure that children in the asylum system and other vulnerable children have devices. Early in 2021, in partnership with EA, CRACC acquired and distributed dongles, to ensure that every asylum-seeking family with a school-age child has access to a device and data, in order to take part in remote learning.

The additional support during the pandemic has taken considerable time – zoom meetings, negotiations around GDPR, collating endless spreadsheets and hundreds of phone calls to service users re logistics of needs and drop offs never mind policies and procedures to ensure volunteer and user safety

At the beginning of October the delivery of CRACC parcels and vouchers ended but funding was found to allow the helpline to continue. This enables a continuation of casework and support. Mears now phones clients monthly instead of fortnightly. During the crisis other groups including St Vincent de Paul and Belfast City of Sanctuary also helped to deliver additional assistance.

The Challenges

The application process

This provides many causes for anxiety: including the additional trauma of discussing traumatic personal events; the delays; translation difficulties; and issues regarding legal support. Usually, the majority of asylum applications are rejected initially, although this was slightly lower in 2019 when 42% of UK initial decisions were refusals.⁷⁵ ‘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.’⁷⁶ It is hard to back up a case with evidence, and there is a ‘climate of disbelief’⁷⁷ when applications are assessed: ‘When you are watching your village burn to the ground, getting proof isn’t the first thing on your mind.’⁷⁸

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.⁷⁹ 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.⁸⁰

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 when they report to the Home Office. Having had friends not return, it is common for people to bring their belongings with them when they attend their routine appointments. People are often detained prior to removal but they can also be detained at

⁷⁵ House of Commons Library Briefing Paper SNO1403, *Asylum Statistics*, 3 September 2020, p. 7.

⁷⁶ *Forced to Flee*, page 5.

⁷⁷ Parliamentary Home Affairs Committee, Seventh Report – Asylum, October 2013, ‘Past and current criticisms of the asylum system’, paragraph 11.

⁷⁸ Medical Justice Network booklet, 2007.

⁷⁹ Mary Kerr, *Improving Legal Support for Asylum Seekers in Northern Ireland*, NI Strategic Migration Partnership, 2016.

⁸⁰ Best Practice in the Provision of Immigration Legal Advice Services in Northern Ireland, NICRAS, Belfast 2018.

any time.⁸¹ Before 2005 they 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 the privately operated Larne House Short Term Holding Facility in Larne, Co. Antrim.⁸² Between 1st February 2017 and 31 January 2018, 1,888 detainees were moved through Larne House.⁸³ In the following year ending 31 January 2019, the number had dropped to 551 detainees with an additional 28 people detained, on a temporary basis in the non-residential holding rooms in the Drumkeen House Reporting Centre.⁸⁴ People can only be held in Larne House for up to a week before being released, transferred to GB for further detention or removed to their country of origin. (Many have never been in the asylum system and are undocumented migrants.) The Detail web site gives a detailed breakdown for some months in 2015.

*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.*⁸⁵

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 website, <https://esolwebapp.azurewebsites.net> and a mobile app have been developed to help people find 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 and may have few people they can trust or who understand their situation. There may be poor local understanding of their culture and it takes time for them to understand the host culture.

Enforced idleness

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

'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.⁸⁶

Poverty

Most people arrive with only the clothes they are wearing. They are allocated accommodation in the

⁸¹ There has been particular concern about detention during a pandemic. See Detention Action's campaign to have people released for their safety. <https://detentionaction.org.uk/stories/covid-19-immigration-detention-releases-where-we-stand/>

⁸² Larne House is operated by the Mitie management company. There is a religious advisory group, members of which visit Larne House regularly and a secular Larne House Visitor group. See <http://larnehousevisitorsgroup.org.uk/index.html>

⁸³ Independent Monitoring Board for Glasgow, Edinburgh and Larne Short Term Holding Facilities, Annual Report, 1 February 2017 – 31 January 2018, p. 22. www.imb.org.uk/reports/2018-annual-reports/page/2/

⁸⁴ Independent Monitoring Board for Glasgow, Edinburgh and Larne Short Term Holding Facilities, Annual Report, 1 February 2018 – 31 January 2019, p. 17. www.imb.org.uk/reports/2018-annual-reports/page/2/

⁸⁵ 'New figures reveal 500 people seeking asylum in Northern Ireland', The Detail web site, 2 October 2015.

⁸⁶ 'Halima' quoted in *Conversations Around the Kitchen Table: The Stories of Asylum Seekers in Northern Ireland*, page 12. www.embraceni.org/wp-content/uploads/2008/10/Conversations-Around-the-Kitchen-Table-pamphlet_Layout-1.pdf

private rental sector and a small basic weekly allowance (a flat rate of £39.60, as at February 2021). A 2016 report highlighted shortcomings in some of the accommodation and a fear of making complaints.⁸⁷ Lack of financial resources also curtails opportunities to socialise and feel part of society. People may be moved at any time by the Home Office, which makes coping more difficult.

Destitution

At different stages of the process some people get no support at all (see page 12), and are forced to rely on faith groups and charities or the sacrificial kindness of other refugees.⁸⁸

*'... 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'*⁸⁹

Negative attitudes

Having already had their sense of self-worth challenged by the process, 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'*⁹⁰

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.'*⁹¹

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.'*⁹²

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.⁹³ It can be difficult to find opportunities to retrain or get your qualifications recognised.

⁸⁷ 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. naccomm.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2011/08/NICRAS-HOME-SWEET-HOME-Report.pdf

⁸⁸ Luke Butterly describes how, in spite of the pandemic, it is still not always possible for support workers to find housing solutions for destitute asylum seekers. "Homeless migrants missing out despite 'Everyone in' pandemic policy", 25 February 2021, the Detail website. www.thedetail.tv/articles/concern-over-covid-19-s-effect-on-migrants-in-need-of-housing-support-in-northern-ireland

⁸⁹ Neil McKittrick, Red Cross NI, BBC Radio Ulster, February 2013.

⁹⁰ Orna Young, *The Horn of Africa Community in Belfast: A Needs Assessment*, page 20. <https://hapani.org/site/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/The-Horn-of-Africa-Community-in-Belfast-A-Needs-Assessment-April-2012.compressed.pdf>

⁹¹ *Forced to Flee*, page 6.

⁹² Dr Jillian Johnston, *Barriers to Migrant Health and Wellbeing in Belfast*, Belfast Health Development Unit, 2010.

⁹³ 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 11–12). Some people are also brought to the UK directly from refugee camps abroad. This has been through the Gateway Protection Programme, the Mandate Refugee Scheme (usually dependents of people already permanently settled in UK), the Vulnerable Persons Resettlement Scheme (VPRS) and the Vulnerable Children Resettlement Scheme (VCRS) – both for people from Syria.

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 and can apply for work or access benefits immediately. There is advice and support for the first year. A total number of 5,612 people were brought to the UK as part of these schemes in 2019.⁹⁴ From 2020 the Government had planned to consolidate all four schemes into a single global resettlement scheme welcoming about 5,000 people in the first year,⁹⁵ but COVID-19 put all UK resettlement on hold from March 2020 and future plans are still uncertain.⁹⁶

Resettlement refugees from Syria

By the second decade of the 21st century the escalating numbers of refugees and displaced people (see pages 4 and 8) 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.

Syrian Vulnerable Persons Relocation Scheme (VPRS)

Following increased public concern and international pressure, a UK Syrian Vulnerable Persons Relocation Scheme⁹⁷ was announced and, in August 2015, the Prime Minister said that the UK would receive up to 20,000 vulnerable people by the end of 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 was 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. In conjunction with the UNHCR, Syrian refugees in neighbouring countries, who meet a strict criterion of vulnerability, are brought to the UK.

⁹⁴House of Commons Library Briefing Paper, 8750, 6 March 2020, Refugee Resettlement in the UK, p.8.
<https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/research-briefings/cbp-8750/>

⁹⁵ House of Commons Library Briefing Paper, 8750, pp 25–6.

⁹⁶ House of Commons Library Briefing Paper, 9017, 28 January 2021.

⁹⁷ Sometimes referred to as the Syrian Vulnerable Persons Resettlement Scheme.

By the end of 2020, 19,768 refugees had been resettled in the UK, under the Vulnerable Persons Resettlement Scheme.⁹⁸ (It is still hoped that the few hundred remaining refugees can be resettled in 2021.⁹⁹)

The Government also agreed to resettle up to 3,000 vulnerable children and their families¹⁰⁰ and by the end of 2019 their Vulnerable Children's Resettlement Scheme has seen the resettlement of 1,747 individuals.¹⁰¹ A scheme for community and faith groups to sponsor individual refugee families from Syria was also developed.¹⁰² The numbers supported were not in addition to the 20,000 places promised for VPRS refugees and, by February 2020 424 refugees had been sponsored under this scheme,¹⁰³ including one family in Whitehead, Co. Antrim.¹⁰⁴

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 horror of 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 21) 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 later by the Department for Communities (DfC). An Integration Group was added later.

A consortium of voluntary groups co-ordinated by Bryson Intercultural (now Bryson Care) has organised the practicalities of refugee integration. The Department for Communities NI has issued regular briefing documents about the scheme.¹⁰⁵ The Home Office provided £11,120 to cover the costs of services and initial costs for the first year for each refugee.

⁹⁸ Migration Observatory, *Asylum and refugee resettlement in the UK*, December 2020.

<https://migrationobservatory.ox.ac.uk/resources/briefings/migration-to-the-uk-asylum/>

⁹⁹ House of Commons Library Briefing Paper, 9017.

¹⁰⁰ House of Commons Library Briefing Paper 06805, *Syrian Refugees and the UK Response*, 14 June 2017.

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

¹⁰¹ House of Commons Library, Briefing Paper Number SNO1403

¹⁰² www.gov.uk/government/news/community-sponsorship-scheme-launched-for-refugees-in-the-uk

¹⁰³ House of Commons Library Briefing Paper, 8750, p.23

¹⁰⁴ https://www.sponsorrefugees.org/northern_ireland_s_first_community_sponsorship_group

¹⁰⁵ www.communities-ni.gov.uk/publications/syrian-vulnerable-persons-relocation-scheme (*Summary of Syrian Families Settled in Northern Ireland (Groups 1–24)* is available on the same web page.)

VPRS resettlement refugees in N Ireland

Since the arrival of the Vietnamese refugees in 1979–80 no resettlement refugees had been received in N Ireland, but in December 2015, the first 51 VPRS refugees, originally from Syria, arrived in Belfast – 10 families with 11 children and one baby. The group 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 could stay until they could make their own long-term plans. Each of the families had the assistance of a refugee support worker from Extern or Barnardo's NI to advise them and prepare them to live independently and become familiar with the way of life in their new communities.

The Law Centre NI and the NI Human Rights Commission published a guide explaining the rights of VPRS refugees in N. Ireland. 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.*¹⁰⁶

Later, 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 ...*¹⁰⁷

Small groups arrived every few months, and were received in two welcome centres. By February 2020 a total of 25 groups consisting of 1,815 VPRS refugees had arrived and been housed in a variety of locations, including nearly every council area.¹⁰⁸ The target of 2,000 refugees was narrowly missed, when the COVID-19 pandemic ended the scheme in N Ireland, before the arrival of the final group.

When resettlement in N Ireland resumes it will be under a new NI Refugee Resettlement Scheme (NIRRS) organised through the DfC and other government departments and the NI Refugee Resettlement Consortium (NIRRC), formerly the Vulnerable Syrian Refugee Consortium.¹⁰⁹

¹⁰⁶ *Syrian Vulnerable Persons Relocation Scheme*, briefing document, April 2016.

¹⁰⁷ 'Syrian family on fleeing their homeland to start new life in Armagh' *Ulster Gazette*, 20 July 2017. 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

¹⁰⁸ DfC NI produced regular updates: www.communities-ni.gov.uk/publications/syrian-vulnerable-persons-relocation-scheme

¹⁰⁹ <https://www.brysonintercultural.org/refugees-asylum-seekers/refugees/northern-ireland-refugee-resettlement-consortium>

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, 2009¹¹⁰

The transition from the asylum system, or from a refugee camp or settlement, 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 in new surroundings. Culture shock and trauma continues. 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.¹¹¹

Family reunion

People who have leave to remain are entitled to have close family members join them but the process is complex and the criteria are strict. Fortunately the Justice Minister here has agreed to retain legal aid to assist with family reunion.¹¹² The Red Cross can help with travel arrangements but some refugees still run up debts for their family’s transport. Refugees on benefits may find that these stop while the entitlements of the enlarged family are reassessed and take a while to be re-established.¹¹³ Long separations can affect family relationships and impact on successful integration.¹¹⁴ The pandemic made family reunion even more difficult. Of the 22 families assisted by the Red Cross in Belfast in 2020, 14 (70 people) arrived with very little notice, from the end of August as soon as the opportunity to travel arose. (There was also a happy ending for one Syrian family who were assisted by the charity Together Now.¹¹⁵) In 2020 the Red Cross was able to develop its Family Reunion Integration Service (FRIS), training local people to act as ‘buddies’ for new arrivals who do not have access to support workers.¹¹⁶

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?’*¹¹⁷

¹¹⁰ Refugee Council report of the 2009 conference, Integration: Building a Life in the UK.

¹¹¹ It can be found on the Belfast City Council web page of advice providers.
www.belfastcity.gov.uk/community/community-safety-and-advice/advice/advice-providers

¹¹² Law Centre NI, 27 March 2015, Legal Aid: ‘Some good news for refugees and asylum seekers’.

¹¹³ Anecdotal evidence from the Refugee and Asylum Forum, 2014.

¹¹⁴ *Safe but Not Settled: The Impact of Family Separation on Refugees in the UK*, 2018.

<https://refugeecouncil.org.uk/resources/safe-but-not-settled/>

¹¹⁵ Emily McGarvey BBC News NI, ‘Abed’s Story: A Syrian refugee’s journey to Belfast’.

<https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-northern-ireland-54153398>

¹¹⁶ Update from Louise McGowan, project co-ordinator of FRIS, Red Cross in Belfast, August 2020.

¹¹⁷ 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.

Continuing to develop networks

When people who have been through the asylum process become refugees and have to move on from their accommodation, the children may have to find new schools. They may all 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 help them to get to know the amenities in their new area and offer inclusion into social spaces and community services. 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 also very important.

*'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.'*¹¹⁸

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].'¹¹⁹ Extern support workers can help and advise (see page 12).

The impermanence of leave to remain

Before 2005 refugees got permanent settlement. The fact that people are now only given five years temporary permission to stay here makes it hard for people to e.g. embark on professional training, or obtain a mortgage. In March 2017 the Government said that it would actively review individual cases after the five years to assess if it was safe for people to be returned to their countries of origin.¹²⁰ Not having permanent permission to stay has always created fear. The Austrian woman Edith Sekules fled to Estonia from the Nazis with her Jewish family and was interned as an enemy alien by the Russians. She arrived here in the 1940s after spending the war years in Siberia. She set up a knitwear business in Kilkeel, Co. Down and often 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 ...'*¹²¹

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.

¹¹⁸ Sabah Hasaballah, a refugee from Sudan, quoted in *Refugee!*, NICRAS, 2012.

¹¹⁹ *Reaping the Rewards: Re-training Refugee Healthcare Professionals for the NHS*, quoted in *Tell it Like it is: The Truth about Asylum*, Refugee Council, 2016.

¹²⁰ Refugee Council, March 2017, 'New Government policy threatens refugees' futures' In March 2021 the Home Secretary indicated that the government planned to design an asylum system that would give immediate permanent leave to remain to refugees resettling here, who arrived by 'safe and legal routes'. BBC News www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-politics-56500680

¹²¹ Edith Sekules, *Surviving the Nazis, Exile and Siberia* (The Library of Holocaust Testimonies), 2000, page 135.

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. Opportunities for open dialogue and mutual learning are important for positive integration. As a participant said,

*'Training is the key to it all – and it has mutual benefits. It is not just for Asylum Seekers. Our community needs this too.'*¹²²

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.

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.¹²³ 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.

Local Policy and Practice

Northern Ireland's unique geographical and political situation, coupled with a recent troubled past has set it apart from the rest of the UK in terms of how refugee and asylum policy and practice have developed. When people seeking asylum in the UK began to be dispersed throughout the different regions in 2001, N Ireland was not included. The only people who live here during their asylum application process are people who have applied for asylum locally. Partly because we are outside the dispersal system, local politicians have been inclined to regard refugee and asylum issues as totally outside their devolved remit, as a policy area reserved by Westminster. This is the only nation in the UK not to have its own Refugee Council or refugee integration strategy.

In the absence of any officially sanctioned refugee forum, the gap has been filled largely by voluntary bodies and NGOs, who have tried to hold government and the administration of its rules, to account, as well as providing additional support for people who have fled here for safety.

There is not enough room here to cover the history of the last twenty years of action on behalf of refugees, but there are a few key elements. A campaigning Refugee Action Group (RAG) emerged in the early part of the 21st century, and came to the fore especially in speaking out against the holding

¹²² Danny Murphy of Coiste, quoted in *Inclusive Neighbourhood Project: An Evaluation Report*, by Nora Greer, page 48.

¹²³ The *Syrian Vulnerable Persons Relocation Scheme*, briefing document www.communities-ni.gov.uk/publications/syrian-vulnerable-persons-relocation-scheme

of immigration detainees – including some asylum seekers – in the NI prison system. The group included expertise from within the Law Centre NI and other NGOs, and trade union support enabled the publication of awareness raising material aimed at local journalists, at a time when the GB media was fostering negative attitudes regarding asylum.

The first decade of the 21st century also saw the birth of an independent refugee-led group, the NI Community of Refugees and Asylum Seekers; the interdenominational Christian EMBRACE group, which started with a sole focus on refugees; and some anti-racist groups at community level. Over the last two decades, migrant or inter-ethnic forums have developed in our towns and cities. City of Sanctuary groups have started more recently, with a particular emphasis, in conjunction with the Education Authority, on Colleges and Schools of Sanctuary.¹²⁴

The return of a devolved administration has enabled some official discussion of the issues, for example through the Immigration Sub Group of the Race Relations Panel at Stormont. The formation of a NI Strategic Migration Partnership in 2011 provided another significant forum for networking and action.

The role for a campaigning group like RAG seemed to decline, although aspects of its spirit remain in groups like Housing 4All and the Larne House Visitors Group campaigning around asylum housing and detention respectively. A crucial development was the formation of an informal Refugee and Asylum Forum (RAF) in 2011, where members of public bodies could join with charities and other NGOs to share information and work on solutions to significant problems for people in the asylum process and refugees.

Patient networking through RAF has proved that it is possible, as in the other devolved nations, to develop practices that diverge from those in England. For example, anyone who has been in the asylum system can now obtain ongoing medical treatment here; legal aid has been retained for aspects of the family reunion process; free English classes are available for refugees; the sporadic provision of an Emergency Fund for foreign nationals has gone some way to assisting destitute asylum seekers; and an independent guardianship service has been established for separated, unaccompanied and trafficked children. These all differ from practice in England. RAF was also important during the planning for the arrival of resettlement refugees from Syria, when government departments were glad to be able to tap into existing expertise. The group also campaigned for people who had been through the asylum process not to be treated unfavourably when compared to resettlement refugees.

There has been a long-felt need for a Refugee Integration Strategy (RIS). The Executive Office (TEO) indicated in 2015 that it planned to produce a RIS¹²⁵ and a research report was commissioned to inform its development. It described the experiences of people seeking asylum and refugees, and was published in December 2017.¹²⁶ It is understood that a draft strategy should be ready to go out for consultation some time this year.

¹²⁴ Education Authority website. www.eani.org.uk/school-management/intercultural-education-service-ies/schools-of-sanctuary

¹²⁵ 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. www.executiveoffice-ni.gov.uk/publications/racial-equality-strategy-2015-2025

¹²⁶ 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

What can you do for local refugees and people who are seeking asylum, in the current pandemic situation?

Volunteering

Support organisations do not always have immediate opportunities for volunteers and the pandemic has reduced the opportunities for face-to-face support. Some voluntary groups may still 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. It is worth exploring what local churches are doing in terms of assisting resettlement refugees from Syria with learning English.

It is always helpful to prepare for the possibility of volunteering by developing an understanding of the issues that affect refugees. Denise Wright, of the Belfast Roundtable, can provide free Refugee Awareness training.¹²⁷

People who are not in formal groups where they would receive awareness training should be conscious that certain actions should be avoided when befriending refugees. Both people in the asylum application process and those with recently achieved refugee status should never be encouraged or facilitated in crossing the border. Unless they have got advance permission to leave the UK, and to enter the Republic of Ireland, asylum seekers or refugees would be breaking the terms of their immigration status and someone providing them with transport could be charged with an imprisonable offence.¹²⁸

It is also an offence to give immigration advice e.g. about family reunion. Always signpost people to expert support organisations.

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 pages 12 and 18). You can help by contributing money or goods to local charities such as the Homeplus drop-in centre, your local St Vincent de Paul or foodbank,¹²⁹ and other groups such as Storehouse in Belfast¹³⁰ or the Kiltonga Christian Centre Storehouse in Bangor.¹³¹ Always contact the charities in advance to ensure that your donation is needed. Brendan Quail of Bryson Care can advise about volunteering, community support and other offers of help for resettlement refugees from Syria (see page 28 for contact details).¹³²

¹²⁷ Contact Denise Wright denise.wright@sbrtr.org.uk

¹²⁸ See the EMBRACE NI fact sheet 'Crossing the Border'. www.embraceni.org/resource-materials/information-sheets-and-briefings/

¹²⁹ Trussel Trust Foodbanks in N Ireland can be accessed here: www.trusselltrust.org/get-help/find-a-foodbank/?gclid=EAIaIQobChMI_-6h_saP7wIVt4BQBh3PGQyrEAAYASAAEgJlp_D_BwE&gclsrc=aw.ds

¹³⁰ www.storehousebelfast.com

¹³¹ Kiltonga assisted in the past by providing welcome packs and goods for the resettlement refugees from Syria. Tel: (028) 9146 7601 Mob: 07748 235009

¹³² See www.brysonintercultural.org/refugees-asylum-seekers/refugees/how-you-can-help-helping-ni-refugees Brendan was very helpful with his advice for this edition of the booklet.

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

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

Support organisations

(The information below is as it was before the onset of COVID-19 but many groups are now working remotely so some telephone contacts may not be possible.)

Barnardo's NI Refugee Support Service (028) 9067 2366

Belfast City Mission at the Bridge, Kimberley Street, Belfast BT7 3DY, UK engages in support activities alongside people seeking asylum, Willie Cowan. (028) 9032 0557

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

Belfast Unemployed Resource Centre (BURC) (www.burc.org) volunteers provide English language learning opportunities for migrants, asylum applicants and refugees (028) 9096 1111 <https://thebelfastprogramme.org> Email: esol@burc.org

Bryson Care / Migrant Help assists people with applications for asylum, Block G, Unit 12, Weavers Court Business Park, Linfield Road, Belfast BT12 5GH Tel: (028) 92 448447 Mob: 07387103286

Bryson Care co-ordinated the Vulnerable Syrian Refugee Consortium (VSRC) and accepts donations and offers of help from the public. The NI Refugee Resettlement Consortium (NIRRC) has replaced the VSRC. Contact Brendan Quail: Tel: (028) 9032 5835, ext 208, Email: bquail@brysongroup.org www.brysonintercultural.org/refugees-asylum-seekers/refugees/northern-ireland-refugee-resettlement-consortium/

Education Authority Intercultural Education Service provides educational support, Ciaran McPeake VPRS Support Officer Tel: (028) 9448 2210 Mob: 07739976790 Email: ciarancmcpeake@eani.org.uk Website: www.eani.org.uk/school-management/intercultural-education-service-ies

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

ESOL NI website signposting English classes <https://esolwebapp.azurewebsites.net>

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. <https://ireland.cityofsanctuary.org/>

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

Extern Syrian Vulnerable Persons Resettlement Scheme Support Service Rebecca Martin-Greenwood. Mob: 0748 3982817

HAPANI (Horn of Africa People's Aid NI) assists people from Djibouti, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Somalia and Sudan, including refugees. Botanic House, 1–5 Botanic Ave. Belfast BT71JG Tel: (028) 9031 5778 Mob: 07413525951

Homeplus Drop in Centre provides support for destitute migrants, people in the asylum system and refugees, 113 University Street, Belfast, BT7 1HP, Tel: (028) 9031 1836 Mob: 07889 867610 Email: info@homeplusni.com

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/

Law Centre NI Immigration and Asylum Hub. Advice Line (028) 9024 4401

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.org.uk Tel: (028) 9024 6699

NI Hyatt Ltd is a Social Enterprise support for refugee and migrant communities mainly in the Armagh, Banbridge and Craigavon Borough Council and Newry, Mourne and Down Council areas. Email nihyattltd@gmail.com

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 resources, reading and websites

(Material no longer easily accessible has been excluded.)

Websites

Bryson Care (Refugees & Asylum Seekers): www.brysonintercultural.org/refugees-asylum-seekers

The Detail investigative website with some articles on immigration and asylum: www.thedetail.tv

EMBRACE NI: www.embraceni.org

Housing4All, Rights for People Seeking Asylum (part of the PPR [Participation & Practice of Rights] Project) website <https://www.pprproject.org/rights-for-people-seeking-asylum>

International Organisation for Migration (IOM), Missing Migrants Project:

<http://missingmigrants.iom.int/about>

Law Centre NI (refugees and asylum seekers): www.lawcentreni.org/policy-advocacy/refugees-and-asylum-seekers

The Migration Observatory: <https://migrationobservatory.ox.ac.uk/>

Right to Remain legal updates: <https://righttoremain.org.uk/>

UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR): www.unhcr.org

Online Publications

Department for Communities NI:

Summary of Syrian Families Settled in Northern Ireland (Groups 1–24) and Syrian Vulnerable Persons Relocation Scheme – Briefing Document. www.communities-ni.gov.uk/publications/syrian-vulnerable-persons-relocation-scheme

House of Commons Library:

Briefing Paper SNO1403, *Asylum Statistics* <https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/research-briefings/sn01403/>

Briefing Paper *Refugee Resettlement in the UK*. <https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/research-briefings/cbp-8750/>

Conversations Around the Kitchen Table: The Stories of Asylum Seekers in Northern Ireland.

www.embraceni.org/wp-content/uploads/2008/10/Conversations-Around-the-Kitchen-Table-pamphlet_Layout-1.pdf

Foley, F. 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.

nacom.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2011/08/NICRAS-HOME-SWEET-HOME-Report.pdf

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

www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201314/cmselect/cmhaff/71/7104.htm#a2

Jesuit Refugee Service, *Being Human in the Asylum System: A Fresh Perspective Drawn from Catholic Social Teaching*, London, 2021. <https://www.jrsuk.net/being-human/>

Murphy, Dr Fiona 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

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

Quail, Brendan. *The Use and Formation of Social Networks among Asylum Seekers and Refugees in Northern Ireland*. PhD thesis, Queen's University Belfast, 2017. <https://pure.qub.ac.uk/en/studentTheses/the-use-and-formation-of-social-networks-among-asylum-seekers-and>

Red Cross, *Still an Ordeal: the Move-On Period for New Refugees*, 2018 www.redcross.org.uk/-/media/documents/about-us/research-publications/refugee-support/still-an-ordeal-move-on-period-report.pdf

Red Cross, *Can't Stay. Can't Go. Refused Asylum Seekers Who Cannot be Returned*, 2017 www.redcross.org.uk/-/media/documents/about-us/research-publications/refugee-support/cant-stay-cant-go-webready.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

Support organisations, websites and publications are highlighted for discretionary use – inclusion does not imply endorsement. Some organisations may not be functioning in the same way at the end of the pandemic.

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.

EMBRACE NI 2021

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

