



Unity in **Community** Project

Research & Reflections on Learning

May 2020

Table of Contents

INTRODUCTION	3
The Organisation.....	3
Project Background.....	3
Unity in Community Project.....	4
RESEARCH REPORT	6
SECTION A The Refugee and Asylum Seeker Communities in Northern Ireland	7
Background: the global picture.....	7
Migrants and refugees in Northern Ireland: An historical perspective	7
Recent transformations	10
The beginning of the refugee crisis.....	11
Estimating the size of the refugee and asylum seeker population	12
The response to refugees and asylum seekers in Northern Ireland	15
SECTION B Connecting with Refugee and Asylum Seeker Communities	17
Trying to bridge the gap.....	17
Youth Work Sector	17
Perspectives from Parents	18
Separated and unaccompanied children and young people	19
Culture, Faith and Traditional Norms	20
Gender Equality	21
APPENDIX 1: FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS	25
APPENDIX 2: GLOSSARY OF TERMS	26
REFLECTIONS ON LEARNING	28
Introduction	29
Reach Out - Take Time - Listen	31
Collaboration and Meaningful Partnership Work.....	31
Parental Engagement.....	32
Start where (young) people are at – needs and strengths-based approaches	33
Social and Economic Marginalisation	35
Wider Socio-Political Considerations	35
Additional practical considerations	36
Final Thought	37
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS.....	38

INTRODUCTION

The Organisation

Youth Link: NI is a Regional Voluntary Youth Organisation established in 1991, as the inter-church youth service for Northern Ireland. Youth Link's vision is of Churches working together to build excellence in youth work and ministry, contributing to a just, peaceful and flourishing society, that is based on the common good.

Youth Link: NI recognises that providing opportunities for young people, volunteers and youth workers to learn, develop and work with together, can enable challenging conversations to occur in safe spaces, the impact of which can be to shape a society in which diversity is celebrated and people feel a genuine sense of belonging.

Project Background

From its inception, Youth Link: NI has consciously and proactively worked across and between diverse communities, taking seriously its remit of building sustained and positive relationships.

The organisation has a long history and commitment to peacebuilding, including promoting and celebrating diversity in our society. Youth Link: NI was a strategic partner in the cross-sectoral youth service initiative, Joined in Equity, Diversity and Interdependence (JEDI) and later the Community Relations, Equality and Diversity (CRED) Reference Group.

Patrick White, The Director of Youth Link: NI reflected in 2012, for an article featured in, "DV – Exploring Diversity":

"Diversity belongs to the very constitution of the universe. If life consisted of sameness it would be very dull and boring. Life consists of the many, symbolised by the full and rich colour spectrum of a rainbow" ¹

In 2015 a steering group was established to develop intercultural and inclusive guidelines for youth workers and volunteers. This steering group, chaired by Youth Link: NI, was comprised of the Youth Council for Northern Ireland (YCNI), EMBRACE, Northern Ireland Community of Refugees and Asylum Seekers (NICRAS), Northern Ireland Interfaith Forum and International Meeting Point. This group worked collaboratively to inform and develop the Reach Out, Enrich Within Guidelines for Youth Workers:

"We as members of various faith communities in Northern Ireland, understand that all religions, if sincerely practised, share the same essential aims – to cultivate compassion, to promote peace, and to support understanding between peoples' of the world. We recognise that Youth Work is critical to the achievement of these things."²

(NI Interfaith Forum Statement, Reach Out, Enrich Within Guidelines)

¹ DV – Exploring Diversity; Inhouse Publication, Youth Link: NI

² Reach Out, Enrich Within Guidelines; Youth Link: NI; 2016

With financial support from the Education Authority's Outreach Programme for Regional Voluntary Youth Organisations, Youth Link: NI has worked over the past number of years, to consider intercultural youth work approaches and to develop good practice in reaching out and engaging with people from diverse minority ethnic communities, faiths, cultures and traditions, which call Northern Ireland (NI) 'home'.

"We want the society we are building to be inclusive, but diverse, embracing people from all faiths and traditions." Reach Out, Enrich Within Guidelines, Youth Link: NI 2016

Subsequently, Youth Link: NI has concentrated on how these guidelines can be applied in practice and identifying opportunities to engage with and support young people, their families, and advocacy groups, to understand and experience the value and purpose of youth work.

Unity in Community Project

In 2019/2020 Youth Link: NI secured funding from the Education Authority (EA) to deliver a project entitled 'Unity in Community', to support the mental health and wellbeing of young people from Newcomer Communities in NI - including those from the asylum seeker and refugee communities.

Newcomer Communities are identified as those where the mother tongue of *"parents and young people is not English. It is acknowledged that, increasingly, non-English speaking children entering school may have been born in Ireland. Nonetheless, the term newcomer reflects the challenge facing parents and children from different language and cultural backgrounds in accessing and entering education in a new country."* Department of Education.³

The Youth Link: NI Unity in Community Project had three interconnected key areas for action:

- (i) **Improve understanding of the needs of Newcomer Communities** through building on existing partnerships and developing further collaborative approaches and increase personal capabilities of Youth Workers in engaging and supporting young people
- (ii) **Provide mentor support to new and emerging grassroots voluntary groups**, which are already engaging with young people from Newcomer Communities through a range of informal activities; and
- (iii) **Support Young People and Volunteers from diverse Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic (BAME) Communities** to enhance their personal and social development skills and support their capacity to contribute to and engage in youth and community work.

As part of Key Area for Action (i) Youth Link: NI commissioned a small-scale research project, the aim of which was to examine the experiences of children and young people from Asylum Seeker and Refugee Communities, living in Northern Ireland.

³ www.education-ni.gov.uk/articles/newcomers

The research also considered responses that youth workers and youth organisations can make to address barriers, in order to promote greater participation and integration.

This research report is included in this document and is divided into two sections:

- A. A briefing paper on the context, examining the global picture of the refugee crisis; the history of migrant communities in Northern Ireland; and finally an estimate of the current size of the refugee and asylum seeker communities in Northern Ireland today, including the reception given by the host population.
- B. An account of a small-scale survey into the barriers facing the youth sector in trying to engage with newcomer communities, and the attitudes of some parents in the refugee and asylum seeker communities.

In addition to the research report, two members of Youth Link: NI's staff team, who were engaged in the Unity in Community Project, have written some reflections on learning, based on their experience of the project.

Further information on Youth Link: NI and this project are available at www.youthlink.org.uk

RESEARCH REPORT



Unity in **Community** Project

**YOUTH WORK WITH REFUGEE AND ASYLUM
SEEKER COMMUNITIES IN NORTHERN IRELAND**

AUGUST 2019 – MARCH 2020

Dr Paul Nolan

SECTION A The Refugee and Asylum Seeker Communities in Northern Ireland

Background: the global picture

The arrival of refugees and asylum seekers in Northern Ireland is part of a global pattern of displacement of people from their home countries. The United Nations Refugee Agency monitors the situation and at the end of last year, December 2018, the total global refugee population was at the highest level ever recorded – 25.9 million.⁴

Over two-thirds of the world's refugees come from just five countries: Syria, Afghanistan, South Sudan, Myanmar and Somalia. As has been the case since 2014, the main country of origin for refugees in 2018 was Syria with 6.7 million at the end of the year, an increase over the 6.3 million from a year earlier. The Syrian refugees have been hosted by 127 countries on six continents, however the vast majority (85 per cent) remained in countries in the region: Turkey, Lebanon, Jordan and Iraq. Outside the region, countries with large refugee populations included Germany, Sweden and Sudan.⁵

Comparing the size of a refugee population with that of a host country can help to provide a sense of the impact of hosting an inflow of refugees. Lebanon may not have the largest number of refugees (it is the seventh highest) but it has the highest refugee population relative to national population: 156 refugees per 1,000 national population. Next comes Jordan with 72 refugees per 1,000, and then Turkey with 45 refugees per 1,000. Half of the ten countries with the highest refugee population relative to national population were in sub-Saharan Africa.⁶

In high income countries, like Ireland and the United Kingdom, the figure is between 2 and 3 refugees per 1,000 of the national population – a very small percentage compared with elsewhere.⁷

Migrants and refugees in Northern Ireland: An historical perspective

Ireland, (RoI and NI), has for much of its history been an unusually homogenous society, with very little ethnic, national or religious diversity. The people were almost exclusively white and members of one or other Christian faith. In the 2001 census, less than one percent (0.8%) of the population in Northern Ireland was from a minority ethnic community.⁸

It is difficult to ascertain the percentage for earlier periods, as there was no question about

⁴ United Nations Refugee Agency Global Trends (2019) : <https://www.unhcr.org/globaltrends2018/>

⁵ Ibid

⁶ Ibid

⁷ Asylum Europe Country Reports: <https://www.asylumineurope.org/reports/country/republic-ireland/statistics>

⁸ NI Statistics and Research Agency, 2001 Census, Population Report: <https://www.nisra.gov.uk/publications/2001-census-population-report-and-mid-year-estimates>

ethnic identity in the census prior to 2001.

In the 1960s and 1970s when issues of race became part of the political dynamic within Britain, Stormont politicians felt that Northern Ireland was 'a place apart' and they did not need to concern themselves with such matters.

This meant that Westminster legislation such as the successive Race Relations Acts of 1965, 1968 and 1996 were not applied to Northern Ireland. When the subject came up at a cabinet meeting in the old Stormont parliament, the then Prime Minister, Terence O'Neill explained to his colleagues that no legislation was required because in Northern Ireland there was 'no colour problem'.⁹

In actual fact there were small minority ethnic groups in Northern Ireland at the time, principally Indian and Chinese communities, who experienced racism as an everyday reality, but it was not until 1997, just one year before the Good Friday Agreement, that the Race Relations (Northern Ireland) Order became law, affording them a first line of protection.

The Indian Community population in the 1960s and 1970s were mainly traders in fabrics, working either as travelling vendors or market-stall holders. The Chinese population in this same period were in the restaurant business: in 1977 there were at least 25 Chinese restaurants listed in the Belfast Street Directory, almost fifteen per cent of the total.¹⁰

Neither of these two communities could be classified as refugees; rather, they were people who moved to Northern Ireland to pursue a business opportunity.

The same was true of other communities who arrived in earlier periods, originally as economic migrants but who later put down roots. At the beginning of the 18th century a group of French Protestants, or more precisely Calvinists, known as the Huguenots, arrived in Ireland. They were escaping religious persecution in their native country but those who settled in the area around Lisburn soon invested their finances and skills in the burgeoning linen industry. By 1711 the original 70 families had risen to 120, and in Lisburn they had their own church, congregation and minister. Religious services were for a time conducted in French. Eventually the Huguenots in Lisburn and Lambeg became assimilated, joining the Anglican church and speaking English, but their heritage remains in family names like Alderdice, Boucher and Devanney.

German entrepreneurs, many of them Jewish, also saw opportunities in Ireland, north and south. The most famous is undoubtedly Gustav Wolff, whose name is forever associated with that of his business partner, Edward Harland, with whom he built many ships, including the Titanic. Wolff became very much part of the establishment in Belfast, converting to the Church of Ireland and serving as a Member of Parliament for Belfast East in the years before

⁹Crangle, J. (2018). 'Left to Fend for Themselves': Immigration, Race Relations and the State in Twentieth Century Northern Ireland. *Immigrants & Minorities*. P.3 <https://doi.org/10.1080/02619288.2018.1433534>

¹⁰Ibid. P.10

the First World War. With the outbreak of war there was a rise in anti-German feeling. It coincided with the decline of the linen industry which had provided employment for German workers, and the small community had more or less disappeared by the end of the war.

It was in the 1930s that Northern Ireland had its first experience of refugees. The growth of Nazism in Germany and the subsequent invasion of eastern Europe propelled the movement of millions across the globe, and the scattering of these populations resulted in thousands arriving in the UK and Ireland. A hostel was opened on Cliftonpark Avenue to support refugees, and then a farm at Millisle, Co Down, provided sanctuary to Jewish children fleeing Nazi persecution. After the war the farm became a recuperation centre for child survivors from Auschwitz.

The decades of stability Europe enjoyed after 1945 meant there were no additional refugees to be accommodated, but in the late 1970s an unexpected source threw up another refugee crisis. In July 1979 it was decided that because of the “acute problems being raised in South-East Asia through the flight of refugees from Vietnam”¹¹ that Northern Ireland should take in a number of refugees who at the end of the war had taken to sea in open boats. Between 1979 and 1981 there were 60 families from the ‘Vietnam boat people’ in Northern Ireland, mainly in the Craigavon area. For many however it was not a happy experience.

At that time the mid-Ulster area was in the middle of one of the worst periods of the Troubles; the Vietnamese were frightened of the British soldiers with their guns; they didn’t like the food or the weather; and once they developed a degree of independence, they began to slip away to settle in other parts of the UK. Within 20 years half of the families had gone.

The relative failure of this experience was fresh in the minds of Northern Ireland Civil Servants when a different war threw up another wave of refugees. The collapse of the former Yugoslavia in the 1990s led to state organised refugee programmes, with displaced people being supported with resettlement in the UK and also in Ireland. However, the attitude in Northern Ireland can be summed up by a memo from one civil servant to another: “...*should we take any refugees given our experience of the Vietnamese boat people?*”¹²

The Republic of Ireland was more welcoming, and in 1992 some 600 Bosnians were admitted as ‘programme refugees’ - that is, people admitted as the result of official approval by the Irish government.

¹¹ Cited in Emily Blee, ‘From Vietnam to Northern Ireland’ *Agenda NI*, January 2011: www.agendani.com/from-vietnam-to-northern-ireland/

¹² Public Record Office of northern Ireland ENV-8-1-116 refugees resettlement.pdf

At that time 600 seemed like a large number of people; no-one was anticipating the mass population movements that would follow in the early years of the 21st century.

Recent transformations

The Good Friday Agreement in 1998, while talking about building a diverse society, said nothing at all about refugees or immigration. Three years later, when the 2001 census was conducted, the percentage of those with ethnicities other than 'white' was increasing. In fact, it had doubled from the time of the 2001 census: up from 0.8% to 1.8%. This was still considerably lower than the proportions in the UK (19.5%) or the Republic of Ireland (15.5%), but it was a sign that something was shifting.

In 2001 the largest minority ethnic community was the Chinese community at 0.35% of the population, closely followed by the Indian community (0.34%). Neither of these could be described as 'newcomer' communities; however, both had developed roots in Northern Ireland over decades.

The really big changes, in terms of diversity, came in 2004 following the accession of eight central and eastern European countries (the A8) into the European Union and the subsequent decision by the governments of the UK, Ireland and Sweden to open up their labour markets to these new members of the EU.

Between 2000 and 2014, an estimated 175,000 long-term international migrants came to Northern Ireland, while 143,000 left, leaving a net total of 32,000. Local government districts in the west and south-west of Northern Ireland saw the largest net inflow of new residents, in particular: Mid Ulster (9,800), Armagh, Banbridge and Craigavon (9,300) and Newry, Mourne and Down (6,000). The effects on the economy and society were profound.

It became common to hear different languages in the street, to see new food stores opening up, and in the schools, changes had to be made to recognise a more diverse intake.

The economy was also transformed. Figures issued by the Department for the Economy (DfE) in March 2018 showed that migrant workers accounted for almost all the economic growth between 2008 and 2016¹³. The contrast with the local workforce was stark. While the number of UK-born people in employment fell by 10,000 in that period the number of EU immigrants in employment rose by 40,000.

The DfE report is explicit in its assessment of the economic value of immigration from the EU: "It is clear that between 2008 and 2016 employment recovery and growth was driven, particularly since 2014, by migrants born in the EU".

¹³ John Campbell (2018) 'NI Employment Growth due to EU Migrants' BBC NI website, 19 March: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-northern-ireland-43448620>

The pattern of inward immigration followed three distinct periods:

2000 up to 2008: This was the first surge of inward migration. The peak came in the year 2006-07 when Northern Ireland had the highest percentage of migrants in the UK (5.2 per thousand people). That amounted to approximately 11,000 people - equivalent to the population of a small town like Hollywood, Co. Down

2010 to 2013 The financial crash saw migration fall and then go into reverse: in this second period, more people left Northern Ireland than entered; we had again become a net exporter.

2013 - Present The third period, the one we are currently in, is a time when inward migration is again on the rise. The official figures released in August 2019 showed that for the fifth year in a row the migrant population has increased. In the previous twelve months the number of people coming to live in Northern Ireland was 23,600 while 19,400 people left, resulting in a net gain of 4,100.

These figures relate primarily to migrants who had come to Northern Ireland for the purposes of work or study, or to the families of such people.

While the patterns of inward and outward migration fluctuated there was another development taking place, one that was not driven by the economy, but by war, famine and upheavals in distant places. This was the slow trickle of refugees and asylum seekers.

[The beginning of the refugee crisis](#)

By 2002 there were enough refugees in Northern Ireland to justify the creation of an umbrella body, the Northern Ireland Community of Refugees and Asylum Seekers (NICRAS). The growth of the community up to that point had been steady, and that pattern continued up to the year 2015, when the 'refugee crisis' first seized the headlines.

In April of 2015 a boat sank off the coast of Libya and 800 people drowned - almost as many as those that had died in the Titanic disaster of 1912. It was far from being a one-off disaster: images of refugee boats in the Mediterranean began to fill the daily news bulletins. One image in particular captured the human tragedy, that of three-year-old Alan Kurdi, a Syrian child, of Kurdish ethnicity, who washed up on a beach, in the Turkish holiday resort of Bodrum. Many children before Alan had died making this same journey, and many more have died since then. This image however, seemed to mark a shift in public attitudes around the world, and within weeks the UK government pledged to resettle 20,000 Syrian Refugees.

Attention however turned to the 'jungle' camp at Calais, where in 2015 migrants from different conflict zones gathered in a makeshift "shanty town" on the outskirts of the city, hoping to make their way into the UK by stowing away on lorries, cars or ferries.

The images of vast numbers of people gathering on the UK's border fed into the EU referendum campaign of 2016, with one notorious billboard showing an image of crowds (actually taken at the Croatia-Slovenia border) with the words Breaking Point emblazoned

across the picture. The suggestion was that Britain's borders were not secure and that migrants posed a threat to the British way of life.

A study of the EU referendum by the British Election Survey in 2017¹⁴ found that "...increases in the rate of immigration at the local level and sentiments regarding control over immigration were key predictors of the vote for Brexit".

In a very short space of time what had seemed to be a humanitarian crisis, requiring empathy and understanding, had been re-framed as an existential threat to British identity. The linkage of the words 'refugee' and 'crisis' has remained to this day, as has the conflation of migrants and refugees.

Northern Ireland was not untouched by these developments, but the growth of the refugee community has had its own distinctive features. For a start, as has been explained above, the baseline here was much lower. The percentage of the population who were refugees in 2015 was lower than in other parts of the UK, and for asylum seekers lower still. The Law Centre NI used a number of sources to estimate numbers at that time¹⁵.

They stated that there were around 200 applications made for asylum in Northern Ireland in the year to August 2015 (less than 1% of the UK's asylum applications) and about 600 people in total seeking asylum in N Ireland.

Estimating the size of the refugee and asylum seeker population

It is very difficult to determine the numbers of refugees and asylum seekers in Northern Ireland. This is partly because different definitions of these terms will yield different answers, and so before any estimate can be made it is important to be clear what we mean when we use words like refugee, migrant and asylum seeker - terms that are often confused in public conversation.

A fuller account is given in Appendix 2, but the main terms can be summarised as follows:

A refugee is a term loosely applied to all those displaced from their own countries, but it has a more precise legal meaning, particularly in the case of those who have achieved official refugee status from government. The most important (and most frequently quoted) definition is the one issued by the UN Convention on the Status of Refugees.

It states that a refugee is someone who:

Owing to well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion is outside the country of his nationality and is unable or owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country; or who, not having a nationality and being

¹⁴ <https://www.britishelectionstudy.com/news-category/2017-general-election>

¹⁵ Belfast Law Centre Briefing (2015) 'How Many Refugees and Asylum Seekers Are There in NI?' https://lawcentreni.s3.amazonaws.com/2015Briefing_HowManyRefugeesInNI_Oct.pdf

outside the country of his former habitual residence is unable or, owing to such fear, unwilling to return to it.

An asylum seeker is someone who is seeking legal recognition as a refugee and the protections that go with it. Governments do not immediately accept the claims of people who arrive within their borders claiming they are escaping persecution. The onus falls on the individual asylum seeker to prove that they are in fact under threat of persecution because of their ethnicity, nationality, religion, social group or political opinion.

An economic migrant, or a migrant worker is someone who leaves their country to work elsewhere. The term is usually applied to people who do not plan to live permanently in another country. Academics who come to work at a Northern Ireland university for a fixed period; medical personnel who take temporary contracts in the health service; or people from other EU countries who work in the food processing factories of mid-Ulster – can all be considered economic migrants.

An immigrant is someone who has come here, from another country, and settled permanently. People who are born here are not “immigrants”, regardless if they are members of a minority ethnic group.

When we try to establish how many people there are in each of these categories in Northern Ireland there are various sources we can turn to. The only truly comprehensive picture is the one provided by the national census, but that only occurs every ten years. The 2011 figures are now out of date, but they still provide a useful benchmark.

At that point the minority ethnic population was put at under 2%, but that only accounted for people who were not categorised as ‘white’. If we use a wider lens and look at those who were ‘born outside the UK or Ireland,’ then the 2011 census figures shows this figure to be 4.5% of the population. The largest group at that time were Polish, accounting for almost 20,000 residents or 24.2% of the foreign-born population.

Updating the picture since then we have had various pieces of information which help us track the changes:

- In March 2018 the Department for the Economy (DfE)¹⁶ released figures that showed Lithuanian migrant workers had become as numerous as Polish workers. Each group accounted for approximately 25,000 workers.
- In August 2019 the Northern Ireland Statistics Agency (NISRA) published its latest bulletin on inward migration. The figures showed that through utilising medical card data, Romanians were the group which increased in number most significantly in the previous year - up by 56.4%, overtaking the number of Polish migrants in the same

¹⁶ John Campbell (2018) ‘NI Employment Growth due to EU Migrants’ BBC NI website, 19 March: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-northern-ireland-43448620>

period.

- The same NISRA bulletin showed that different national groups had different reasons for coming to Northern Ireland. For people coming from Romania, Poland and Bulgaria the primary motive was to find work; while 80% of Chinese people came for education.
- In September 2019 the Polish Consul said that 10% of the Polish people in NI had left because of the uncertainty created by Brexit ¹⁷ and he gave the number who had left in the previous year as 3,000. This was part of a wider UK pattern which saw Polish workers returning home - partly as a response to Brexit and partly because of the recovery in the Polish economy.

The figures above are for migrant workers, and do not include asylum seekers. There are no solid figures for asylum seekers in the same way that there are for migrant workers. The official reporting on asylum seekers, combines figures from Northern Ireland and Scotland, making it very difficult to disentangle.

In addition, Northern Ireland remains outside the UK policy of dispersal which re-locates people who have claimed asylum within the UK borders. The fact that Northern Ireland shares a land border with the Republic of Ireland, with human traffic going in both directions, further adds to the difficulty of gauging even an estimate of the numbers.

However, a report issued by National Statistics in May 2019, entitled *How Many People Do We Grant Asylum or Protection To?*¹⁸ gives us our first real sense of the numbers.

It says that at the end of March 2019, 45,643 asylum seekers in the UK were in receipt of support under Section 95 of the Immigration and Asylum Act 1999; up 8% from the previous year.

Of these, 42,597 (93%) were in receipt of both accommodation and subsistence, and 3,046 (7%) in receipt of subsistence only. The majority (83%) were located in England, with smaller supported populations in Scotland (9%), Wales (6%) and Northern Ireland (2%).

That means that Northern Ireland is hosting a disproportionately small number of asylum seekers. The Northern Ireland population is 3% of that of the UK and that proportion is used as a rule of thumb by government planners. If we were hosting that percentage of asylum seekers, then our total would be 1,369. Instead, we are hosting 2%, which would translate

¹⁷ Lisa Smyth (2019) 'Almost 3,000 Polish People Left NI in Past Year Over Brexit Uncertainties' 19 Sept *Belfast Telegraph*.

¹⁸ www.gov.uk/government/publications/immigration-statistics-year-ending-june-2019/how-many-people-do-we-grant-asylum-or-protection-to

as a total of 913 asylum seekers.

There is one special programme however in which Northern Ireland can be seen to be taking a lead, and that is, the Syrian Vulnerable Persons Relocation Scheme (VPRS). The scheme was set up in 2015 to resettle up to 20,000 Syrian refugees across the UK. The First Minister and Deputy First Minister signalled to the UK Government their willingness to welcome some of the most vulnerable refugees into Northern Ireland with 50 to 100 arriving on a phased basis from December 2015.¹⁹

Under the VPRS refugees are expected to live in Northern Ireland for five years, after which time they can choose to return to Syria or apply for UK citizenship (as long as they do not have a criminal record). Those who arrive as part of this scheme are entitled to work, access a range of benefits given to people on low incomes, as well as receive housing support.

A consortium of voluntary organisations works with government departments on an integrated programme of support.

By February 2020 a total of 1,815 Syrians had been re-settled across Northern Ireland, 46% of whom are children and young people under 18 years old.

The response to refugees and asylum seekers in Northern Ireland

The arrival of new communities, and how they have been welcomed, has highlighted the best, and sometimes the worst, of Northern Ireland. On the one hand there has been extraordinary kindness by individuals and communities; on the other there have been vicious hate attacks. The range of responses makes it difficult to generalise, but a number of surveys will give us some measure of how Northern Ireland has responded to the arrival of people from other cultures.

The Equality Commission publishes a survey every five years into prejudice and tolerance. Its report *A Question of Attitude*,²⁰ issued in 2016, suggests that social attitudes have shifted quite markedly. Five years ago, 16% of those surveyed felt that minority ethnic communities were treated unfairly; that has dropped to 7%. And, when asked to describe their own attitudes, 77% described their feelings towards people from minority ethnic communities as 'positive'.

¹⁹<https://www.communities-ni.gov.uk/publications/syrian-vulnerable-persons-relocation-scheme>

²⁰Equality Commission (2016) *A Question of Attitude*, Belfast
<https://www.equalityni.org/ECNI/media/ECNI/Publications/Delivering%20Equality/EqualityAwarenessSurvey-Attitudes.pdf>

Changes in attitudes have also been tracked by the NI Life and Times Survey, and in May 2017 it published a review entitled *Racism and Intolerance Towards Minority Ethnic Groups*. This showed that the percentage of respondents who have friends from different ethnic or nationality backgrounds increased steadily in the 2006- 2015 period.

For example, the proportion of respondents having Polish friends doubled between 2006 and 2014 (from 11% to 22%) and rose again to 27 per cent in 2015. In 2015, half of respondents who have contact with someone from a minority ethnic group said their most frequent interaction was more intimate than just a greeting. This includes 29% who described it as 'a close interaction such as a lengthy conversation', the highest proportion yet.

However it's not all good news. Both surveys also reveal a layer of self-admitted prejudice. In the Equality Commission survey 10% characterised their own attitudes as 'negative' and a further 14% located themselves in the non-committal 'neither positive nor negative' part of the spectrum. In the NILT survey a total of 28% of people said that they were prejudiced against people from minority ethnic communities, and while none of the respondents admitted to criminal behaviour, 11% of respondents admitted that they had called someone names to their face - which, if reported, would constitute a racially-motivated incident.

In the year 2016/17 the race hate crime overtook sectarian crime in the official PSNI statistics, and it has maintained that lead ever since. The rate fluctuates from year to year: the peak occurred in 2014/15 (916) and fell away in each of the three years following. The latest figures, for Jan - Dec 2019 show another uptick with 985 racially motivated hate crimes recorded.

The ugliness of race hate crime receives frequent exposure in the media: we have become used to seeing images of graffiti sprayed on doors, and to hearing reports of families driven from their homes. It is more difficult for the long slow processes of welcome and relationship-building to achieve visibility in the media. However, despite the stubborn hold of racism in some parts of society the general trend in the surveys is towards acceptance and welcome.

SECTION B Connecting with Refugee and Asylum Seeker Communities

Trying to bridge the gap

As part of this research, a small-scale study was undertaken with members of the refugee and asylum seeker communities. Two key questions were pursued. Firstly, what level of engagement does the youth work sector have with these communities? Secondly, what are the barriers to engagement and how can they be overcome? These issues were examined in a series of three focus groups and three interviews with parents. That is too small a sample to be representative and so the findings are no more than impressionistic. They do however point in some clear directions.

Youth Work Sector

To first of all provide some context, in a focus group with youth workers, it was acknowledged that at this point in time the youth work sector workforce is not particularly ethnically diverse. There are efforts however to change this, and to promote youth work within the diverse Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic (BAME) communities.

Traditionally the equality agenda in Northern Ireland has primarily focused on the two largest community traditions. The youth work sector has long championed the value of positive community relations, and of facilitating peacebuilding programmes, across and between both traditions. However the demographic landscape in Northern Ireland has markedly changed in the 22 years since the signing of the Belfast Agreement, and this has included an increase in people from diverse backgrounds, who are making their homes here, for a myriad of different reasons.

The youth work sector has a role to play in ensuring that young people, and their families, from newcomer communities, and those from well-established BAME communities feel valued, respected and have a strong sense of belonging. The youth work sector is not alone in this. All public bodies now have to respond to changing demographics. To give the most obvious example, the Police Service of Northern Ireland (PSNI) struggles with the issue of representativeness, recognising that women, Catholics, young people from working-class backgrounds and people from Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic communities are all under-represented. It is generally accepted that in order to be an effective police service it must reflect in its own composition, the diversity of the community it serves – hence all the recruitment campaigns are now marketed in such a way as to re-balance the workforce²¹.

The same imperative applies to youth work, a point conceded – indeed volunteered – by youth workers in a focus group. It is not in their power to change that, but it is helpful to recognise it as one of the barriers to engagement.

²¹Northern Ireland Policing Board Policing Plan (March 2020) *Policing Plan 2020-25* Outcome 3: 'The Representativeness of the Police Service.'

Perspectives from Parents

On the other side of this cultural gap are the refugee and asylum seeker families. They are adjusting to living in a completely new landscape and youth work, as practised across Europe and America, can be something that lies completely outside of their experience. For some, it is a gap that can be crossed quite easily; for others that gap can seem insurmountable.

At one end of the spectrum was a mother, who is very familiar with youth provision: not only do her children attend a youth club, she herself is training to be a youth worker, and has already attained a Level 2 qualification. Her adult son is also training to become a youth leader and it is clear that the whole family has invested heavily in youth work as a way of building identity in their new adopted country.

At the other end, a focus group with mothers from the Somali Community ran into difficulty, when it became clear that although we were discussing youth work, the women did not understand the term. This continued even when expressed in an alternative formulation like 'activities with young people'. At one point the discussion turned to how they might react to their young people going away on a residential. It was clear that the idea did not find favour, however it was only later, when it was explained to us that the phrase 'taking young people away' touched upon a fear of their children being taken from them by the authorities.

The confusion was undoubtedly caused in part by the fact that the focus group discussion was being facilitated through an interpreter, but at a deeper level it was expressive of a conceptual gap about youth provision in any form. Some of this could be overcome if promotional literature was available in a wide variety of languages, but this would mean more than simply translating existing publicity materials. A more fundamental approach would be required, one that led people into an understanding of the purpose of youth work, and the kinds of activities that it might include.

This communication problem had previously been identified in the study undertaken by staff at Stranmillis College in their report *Multilingual Minds*²².

Reporting on the gap between refugee communities and youth workers the authors commented:

Participants highlighted a number of barriers to access with respect to EA Youth Service for young people and their families including a lack of awareness as to the nature and purpose of a youth service per se; difficulty in understanding

²²Jones, S., McMullen, J., Campbell, R., McLaughlin, J., McDade, B., O'Lynn, P., Glen, C., (2018) 'Multilingual Minds: the Mental Health and Wellbeing of Newcomer Children and Young People in Northern Ireland and the role of the Education Authority Youth Service', Report commissioned by the Education Authority Northern Ireland

promotional materials due to language barriers; fear and suspicion with respect to the youth work sector; and lack of community engagement. There is also evidence of a paucity of knowledge about the newcomer community as a whole within the Youth Service.

Separated and unaccompanied children and young people

The fear of engagement in youth work was also highlighted as an issue impacting unaccompanied and separated children living within the social care system in Northern Ireland.

The official definition of an unaccompanied child is as follows:

An unaccompanied child is a person under the age of 18 who has been separated from both parents and other relatives and is not being cared for by an adult who, by law or custom, is responsible for doing so.²³

During the focus group with staff from Voices of Young People in Care (VOYPIC), it was acknowledged that separated and unaccompanied children and young people have particularly deep-seated anxieties. They may have been brought into Northern Ireland by traffickers, or they may have made their own way here. The Northern Ireland Executive describes Human Trafficking as involving:

The possession of people by force, threat or deception to exploit them. It is the illegal movement of a person into or through a country.²⁴

VOYPIC facilitates a weekly youth group with care experienced young people however participation from separated and unaccompanied young people is limited. As one staff member explained:

“These young people aren’t interested in activities or participation; they are interested in survival”. If they seem guarded or suspicious, she said, that is because they have learned to be that way. Their lives are ‘on hold’

For others, Northern Ireland offers freedoms they had not experienced in their home countries, and they want to avail themselves of all the opportunities that are now open to them. The Somali mothers were quick to list the things they liked. Uppermost on their list were things they thought would benefit their children: free education; the chance to develop life skills; free healthcare; sports opportunities for boys *and* girls; and the opportunity to meet with children from other cultures.

²³Department of Health Northern Ireland: www.health-ni.gov.uk/publications/protecting-unaccompanied-children-and-child-victims-human-trafficking-and-modern-slavery

²⁴ www.nidirect.gov.uk/articles/human-trafficking

All of these would suggest that organised youth activities would be regarded with enthusiasm, but there were inhibiting factors as well.

In the focus group the mothers from the Somali community seemed reluctant to voice criticism of life in Northern Ireland (though it seemed permissible to make light-hearted comments on the weather). When probed however it was apparent there was an element of fearfulness about racial hostility or harassment. That aspect of Northern Ireland life is well-documented elsewhere²⁵. The essential point is that widespread low-level racism can inhibit young people from diverse ethnic backgrounds entering unfamiliar situations, and even when no racism is apparent, the fear of it can still block the engagement that youth workers seek to encourage.

Culture, Faith and Traditional Norms

In the interviews and focus groups conducted for this report, however, the fear of racist harassment was secondary to a much more common concern, which was usually indicated with reference to 'culture'. When unpacked this meant a concern with the possible transgression of religious codes and traditions. For example, for people from the Islamic Faith, the importance of halal, the dietary code prescribed in the Qur'an, was highlighted as being of fundamental importance, and there was a concern that young Muslims could find themselves in situations where the dietary code might be broken.

The need to respect prayer rituals was also stressed, particularly if young people were to be away from home for any length of time. When these issues were discussed with youth workers there was good understanding of the sensitivities, or the 'cultural competencies' required to work with multi-ethnic groups. In other words, it is not just about cultural awareness, in the sense of knowledge about a particular group gained through reading or studies; it means having the practical skills to navigate situations where there are conflicting values.

One interviewee who has gained that cultural competence through working with diverse ethnic groups, described how she always checks the prayer times, the availability of a quiet room for prayers, and how when there were no prayer mats she was able to improvise by offering flip chart sheets to use in their place.

In one sense, adherence to dietary codes and prayer rituals are easy to manage as there is particular guidance that can be followed. The harder issues are those where the rules or norms are less clear.

²⁵See for example: Knox, C. (2011) Tackling Racism in Northern Ireland: the 'race hate capital of Europe' *Journal of Social Policy*, 40 (2), 387-412, or, Jarman, N. (2019) 'A different difference: hate crime and discrimination towards individuals of Muslim background in Belfast' *Institute for Conflict Research*.

Gender Equality

For youth workers who have been trained to promote gender equality, sometimes it can be challenging when engaging with groups which might seek to preserve more traditional attitudes to female roles. There can be a range of spaces where youth work values can be tested, and practitioners can be challenged by different things, in different contexts. This is not only reserved for engagement with people from minority ethnic communities – however it is important to have an awareness that different communities have different cultures, values and norms; understanding and recognising this will improve engagement.

A college lecturer who organises educational programmes for young people from Syrian communities explained how gendered their curriculum choices can be. *“The girls often take up subjects that relate to their female roles. That means beauty, make-up, hairdressing. Boys on the other hand are distributed across the whole curriculum. We have one young man who is on his way to becoming a doctor, another who wants to go into retail”*. She continued by sharing, *“We try to encourage girls into other diverse career-oriented courses; however, it is not uncommon that at the age of eighteen, they can ‘vanish’. And you hear later they have gone to Birmingham or Cardiff or somewhere, for an arranged marriage”*.

Another youth worker however said that many of the young Muslim women she has engaged with are very ambitious. *“There are a number of young Muslim women from the Sudanese community, who are involved in a youth project. When chatting about their hopes for the future, they all shared how they want to be doctors, or scientists, and this is also clearly reflected in their subject choices for G.C.S.E or A-Levels. The value of education is definitely something many of these young women hold dear.”*

The college lecturer commented how *“Gender can also be a factor when sports or leisure activities are organised. Whilst team sports are supported for boys and girls alike, football for example can often be regarded as a sport just for the boys.”* Of course, this can be a general challenge for youth workers in lots of settings, and part of the role is to encourage discussions with young people, and to break down this kind of stereotyping.

It is however important to be mindful and respectful when working with young people with strong held religious beliefs; and to engage creatively when trying to include young women for example, in activities. For many Muslims, the importance of adhering to Islamic code with regards to physical contact between young men and women is crucial. However, it is also important not to make blanket assumptions.

In short, when reaching out, and engaging with minority ethnic communities, no standard gender code can be assumed. However, understanding and having awareness of different religious codes is helpful, but this needs to be accompanied with engagement, and asking questions.

One common attitude among all the parents in the focus group was that the children and young people should have the opportunity to play together and be able to do this in a safe environment. The word 'play' is key to their understanding of what young people want. The activities most frequently suggested were ball games, indoor sports, swimming and basketball – all things that might be described as wholesome fun. That seemed an obvious and unproblematic approach to the parents in the survey, but it is striking how at odds it is with the current orthodoxy in Youth Work policy. This passage from an EU policy document *A Framework for Youth Work with Refugees*²⁶ is not untypical:

The field of youth work needs to shift its focus away from prevention/intervention and positive youth development models to one that examines the complex social, economic and political forces that affect the lives of young people and adults. Social and economic patterns of racism, sexism, classism and homophobia are some of the main problems confronting youth today.

These may well be the issues that confront young people but the parents in the refugee and asylum seeker families have a completely different set of expectations: their hope is that Youth Work will provide opportunities for positive, life-affirming activities for their children and young people.

This clash of expectations is at its most pronounced when we look at the issue of trauma. The three-stage model of trauma in refugee and asylum seeker children was set out in an article in the British Medical Journal as far back as 2003.²⁷

The authors suggested that the stresses which most refugees are exposed can be understood as occurring at three different stages:

- (1) While in their country of origin.
- (2) During the flight to safety; and
- (3) When having to settle in a country of refuge.

The result, they say, is “consistently increased levels of psychological morbidity among refugee children, especially post-traumatic stress disorder, depression, and anxiety disorders.”

This all makes perfect sense. Even without the terrible experiences that drove families from their home country, and even without the frightening experiences in their enforced flight,

²⁶Rambaree, J., Berg, M., and Thomson, R: (2016): 'A Framework for Youth Work with Refugees: Analysis further to the expert seminar: *Journeys to a New Life: Understanding the role of youth work in integrating young refugees in Europe* <https://pjp-eu.coe.int/en/web/youth-partnership/refugees-seminar>

²⁷Fazel, M. and Stein, A. (2003) 'Mental health of refugee children: a comparative study' In British Medical Journal Online, August 2003: https://www.researchgate.net/publication/10655664_Mental_Health_of_Refugee_Children_comparative_study

the circumstances of refugee children in poverty are consistent with those that create mental health problems in children. To list just a few there is the stigma of being different, consistent low-level racism, poverty, lack of language skills, parents on shift work hours and parents who themselves may experience issues with their mental health.

And yet, despite the presence of all those causal factors, the survey of refugee and asylum seeker children conducted by the staff of Stranmillis College for the *Multilingual Minds* report produced a finding which suggested that the standard view may not apply here:

For the children and young people in our sample, both self-report and teacher report indicated that symptoms of emotional problems, conduct problems and prosocial behaviour were in the average range. A number of the interviewees perceived mental health needs among newcomers to be largely similar to children and young people from NI. This may indicate resilience despite the difficult circumstances described above.

If youth workers were to adopt the more orthodox view and decide to foreground mental health, they would need to tread very carefully. For many South Asian and African communities mental health continues to be a taboo area.

In some communities, mental health problems are rarely spoken about and can be seen in a negative light. This can discourage people within the community from talking about their mental health and may be a barrier to engagement with health services.²⁸

That doesn't mean it won't erupt as an issue within youth groups, but it may have to be handled indirectly, rather than head on.

The college lecturer who works with Syrian young people said that she raises it first of all as a societal problem that affects Northern Ireland's young people, keeping the focus away from refugee and asylum seeker children in the first instance.

"We talk about the suicide rates, and about the pressures on young people in Northern Ireland. Then, after a bit, the stories start to come out..."

In describing her approach, she was careful to lay emphasis on the need to refer young people to other, more appropriate agencies if the problems require further attention.

²⁸ Mermon A., Taylor K., Mohebati L.M et al. (2016) Perceived barriers to accessing mental health services among black and minority ethnic (BME) communities: a qualitative study in Southeast England. *BMJ Open* 2016

This was an echo of a piece of advice given by a staff member from VOYPIC when the issue of mental health was discussed: the main message she would give youth workers, she said, was *“to do your own job well and not try to solve individual cases or act as social workers.”*

All of these issues had also arisen in the first focus group with youth workers. A pragmatic note was struck, when one of the more experienced workers said that in many ways the situation was not much different than it had been for her working in hard-line areas during the Troubles. Of course, children had been traumatised, but youth workers had to get on with their job, deciding on a case by-case basis how to deal with mental health traumas. The difference was that then they had an intimate understanding of the local culture. Now the task is to get closer to newcomer communities and gain an understanding of the internal dynamics that shape the experiences of the young people. It’s a big challenge.

APPENDIX 1: FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

Do asylum seekers receive large handouts from the state? Asylum seekers do not come to Northern Ireland or any other part of the UK to claim benefits. Most know nothing about welfare benefits before they arrive and have no expectation that they would receive financial support. People seeking asylum are often living on Home Office support equivalent to just over £5 a day.²⁹

How many asylum seekers are successful in their applications for refugee status? The UK asylum system is strictly controlled and complex. It is very difficult for people seeking asylum to provide the evidence required to be granted protection. The decision-making process is extremely tough, and many people's claims are rejected. In the year ending Sept 2019, 48% of initial decisions resulted in a grant of asylum or other form of protection. In other words, by a slim margin the majority of claims were unsuccessful.

Does Northern Ireland take in more refugees than other places? No. There are approximately 26 million refugees in the world at this time living outside their own countries. Most of them (80%) are living in countries that neighbour their own. For example, Turkey is currently providing safety to 3.6 million Syrians. This makes it the biggest refugee hosting country in the world. The UK is host to about 1% of the world's refugee population. And, according to the most authoritative source of information, the Migration Observatory based in Oxford University, the refugee population in Northern Ireland - that is, those who have been given settled refugee status - was put at no more than 0.04% of the total population in June 2019.³⁰

Has Northern Ireland more hate crime than elsewhere? There have been many well-publicised cases of racially motivated hate crime in Northern Ireland, and even more crimes that have not been reported in the media - in many cases, not even reported to the police. Hate crimes against people because of their ethnicity, their religion or their national identity are depressingly common throughout Ireland and the UK. Northern Ireland is slightly above average within the UK for the incidence of race hate crime, but it is by no means the 'race hate capital of Europe' to quote one wildly misleading headline. When there was a surge in hate crime in England at the time of the EU referendum in 2016, Northern Ireland did not experience the same increase. That said, the current level is cause for concern

²⁹Gov.UK: <https://www.gov.uk/asylum-support/what-youll-get>

³⁰Migrant Observatory Oxford (2019): 'Where Do Migrants Live In the UK?' <https://migrationobservatory.ox.ac.uk/resources/briefings/where-do-migrants-live-in-the-uk/>

APPENDIX 2: GLOSSARY OF TERMS³¹

Asylum seeker - An **asylum seeker** is someone who is seeking legal recognition as a refugee and the protections that go with it. Governments do not immediately accept the claims of people who arrive within their borders claiming they are escaping persecution. The onus falls on the individual asylum seeker to prove that they are in fact under threat of persecution because of their ethnicity, nationality, religion, social group or political opinion. Not every asylum seeker will ultimately be recognized as a refugee, but every recognized refugee is initially an asylum seeker.

Climate migration - The movement of a person or groups of persons who, predominantly for reasons of sudden or progressive change in the environment due to climate change, are obliged to leave their habitual place of residence, or choose to do so, either temporarily or permanently, within a state or across an international border.

Displacement The movement of persons who have been forced or obliged to flee or to leave their homes as a result in order to avoid the effects of armed conflict, violations of human rights or natural or human-made disasters. An internally displaced person is one who has had to flee their home but is still within the borders of their own country. For example, in Syria there are many people who did not become international refugees but who had to move to another part of the country.

Direct provision This term describes the situation in the Republic of Ireland where asylum seekers are accommodated in centres which provide food and board. This system does not operate in Northern Ireland.

Economic migrant An economic migrant, or a migrant worker is someone who leaves their country to work elsewhere. The term is usually applied to people who do not plan to live permanently in another country. Academics who come to work at a Northern Ireland university for a fixed period; medical personnel who take temporary contracts in the health service; or people from other EU countries who work in the food processing factories of mid-Ulster - all of these are economic migrants. So too are people from Ireland or Great Britain who go to work in medicine, IT, or education in Australia, Spain or Germany.

Emigrant / Immigrant An emigrant is a person who leaves their own country in order to live somewhere else. An **immigrant** is someone who has come here from another country and settled permanently. People who are born here are not 'immigrants', regardless if they are members of a minority ethnic group.

³¹These definitions draw upon the United Nations Master Glossary of Terms (2006)

Human Smuggling The UN Protocol against the Smuggling of Migrants by Land, Sea and Air, adopted in 2000 defines human smuggling as "... the procurement, in order to obtain, directly or indirectly, a financial or other material benefit, of the illegal entry of a person into a state party of which the person is not a national".³²

Human Trafficking The Palermo Protocol provides the first internationally recognised definition of human trafficking: "Trafficking in persons shall mean the recruitment, transportation, transfer, harbouring or receipt of persons, by means of the threat or use of force or other forms of coercion, of abduction, of fraud, of deception, of abuse of power or of a position of vulnerability or of the giving or receiving of payments or benefits to achieve the consent of a person having control of another person, for the purpose of exploitation. Exploitation shall include, at a minimum, the exploitation of the prostitution of others or other forms of sexual exploitation, forced labour or services, slavery or practices similar to slavery, servitude or removal of organs."³³

Programme refugee A programme refugee is someone who has been given entry to the country as part of a special group under a special government programme. For example, the Syrians who came into Northern Ireland under the Vulnerable Persons Relocation Scheme.

A refugee is a term loosely applied to all those displaced from their own countries, but it has a more precise legal meaning, particularly in the case of those who have achieved official refugee status from government. The most important (and most frequently quoted) definition is the one issued by the UN Convention on the Status of Refugees. It states that a refugee is someone who:

Owing to well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion is outside the country of his nationality and is unable or owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country; or who, not having a nationality and being outside the country of his former habitual residence is unable or, owing to such fear, unwilling to return to it.

Refused asylum seeker A person whose asylum application has been unsuccessful, and who has no other claim for protection. Some refused asylum seekers voluntarily return home, others are forcibly returned.

Stateless person - A person who is not considered as a national by any state, and who therefore has no legal protection in any state.

Unaccompanied child An unaccompanied child is a person under the age of 18 who has been separated from both parents and other relatives and is not being cared for by an adult who, by law or custom, is responsible for doing so.

³² <https://www.cps.gov.uk/legal-guidance/human-trafficking-smuggling-and-slavery>

³³ Ibid.

REFLECTIONS ON LEARNING



Unity in **Community** Project

REFLECTIONS ON LEARNING

April 2020

Joanne Stainsby

Good Relations Development Officer

Israel Eguaogie

Community Support Worker

Introduction

Over the past few years Youth Link: NI staff members have engaged in a community development initiative with Newcomer Communities, including people from refugee and asylum seeker communities.

Staff members have reflected on the journey and work undertaken, in order to share key aspects of their learning from this “Unity in Community” project.

Joanne Stainsby, Good Relations Development Officer

“I have been in a privileged position over the past few years, because my role in Youth Link: NI has provided me with the opportunity to reach out, engage with and learn from, young people, parents, volunteers and grassroots groups, from across a number of vibrant, diverse minority ethnic communities, cultures and faiths.

I have heard many stories, some challenging, some uplifting, but all of them have served to motivate me to do better and reminded me about the importance of valuing people, connections and relationships.

As a youth worker, the focus of my work is championing young people, however this project has also highlighted the importance of working across sectors, with different groups and ages, to understand the bigger picture and to grasp more fully our differing perspectives.

Without doing this, I could never have appreciated the issues and concerns of people from different backgrounds to my own; or really appreciated how their experiences and outlooks impact how they view the world generally; and Northern Ireland in particular.

The young people and volunteers I have worked with, represent a range of diverse communities and have all taught me so much. Their sense of humour; their honesty; and their commitment to building something authentic, have been enlightening. I would like to extend my gratitude to everyone involved, for taking me under their wing, and sharing something of their culture with me.

The Ubuntu philosophy, “I am because you are” has been reiterated and brought to life, in this position of privilege that I have had in this role, and it will impact me for a long time to come”.

Israel Eguaojie, Community Support Worker

“It has been a privilege working with Youth Link: NI. My post as a community support worker has given me an opportunity to understand youth work and further develop my learning in a youth work context.

I was first introduced to youth work through the Youth Link: NI Project, “Reach Out – Enrich Within”. This project aimed to engage with and promote youth work within Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic Communities. It was an interesting experience and changed my perception of the value of youth work as a methodology.

From the grassroots group, Nigerian Community in Northern Ireland (NICONI), 8 volunteers participated in the OCNNI Level 2 Award and Certificate in Youth Work Practice, facilitated by Youth Link: NI. I was one of these volunteers. This learning experience empowered us to set up a youth

group, which initially targeted young people within the Nigerian Community, “NICONI Youth Initiative”.

However, the group began to attract young people from other diverse African Communities across Belfast. This was a learning curve for me. As an African from Nigeria, I could see that there was a need for young people from the different African communities, to integrate amongst themselves and to build relationships across communities. This prompted the rebranding of the youth group name to reflect this diversity and to encourage young people and volunteers from different African backgrounds, to be get involved.

Youth Link: NI supported both the NICONI youth initiative, and subsequently Diverse Youths NI. The group received practical, hands-on support with governance, activities with young people and forward planning.

Working for Youth Link: NI over this past year has given me an opportunity to support other BAME community groups, and their young people. I have been able to listen to and learn from young people and their families and have increased my understanding of the challenges faced by people within the asylum seeker and refugee communities in Northern Ireland. ”

In conjunction with our Line Manager, Brenda McGrann, the following represents our combined reflections on the delivery of the Unity in Community Project. It is not designed to be a blue print for action but represents themed reflections on learning, to support others who are or will work with ethnically diverse communities across NI.

“The child that is not embraced by its village, will burn it down to feel its warmth”

African Proverb ~ Origin unknown

Reach Out - Take Time - Listen

Being curious and learning about other communities, cultures and faiths is an important enabler in improving understanding, and is a first step in developing cultural and intercultural competence.

A practical way that youth workers can approach this is to broaden their awareness of the diversity that is part of wider society. This could involve attending events beyond the boundaries of youth work, particularly those hosted by Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic (BAME) community groups, advocacy organisations and diverse world faith groups. This will help to increase understanding of issues that are impacting people from diverse communities. For example, attending workshops on hate crime, events celebrating Black History Month and Islamic Cultural Awareness Sessions, can all support youth workers with their overall general knowledge of other cultures, faiths and traditions.

Reaching out to and meeting with grassroots BAME community groups, will demonstrate that your organisation is interested in engaging with diverse communities and is keen to increase its understanding of the issues that impact on young people and their families.

It will also provide the opportunity to learn more about the work of different groups, as well as promote the work and profile of your own organisation.

Collaboration and Meaningful Partnership Work

“Often the minority experience is that minorities negotiate whereas majorities assume.” D.A Wilson, 2015³⁴

The Youth Link: NI Unity in Community Project focused heavily on relationship building and making connections within and across diverse communities, cultures, faiths and traditions.

Many grassroots BAME community groups are volunteer-led. Some have a centre base / premises, others do not. Therefore, it may take a number of attempts to reach them, or to receive a response. Our experience was to be persistent with trying to reach groups, and utilise a range of communication strategies.

We approached our engagement with grassroots BAME community groups with a shared acknowledgement that development and learning was necessary. We were keen to gauge the breadth of work that is going on. We wanted to gain more understanding of the strengths within these communities, as well as the issues and challenges experienced by them, both at organisational levels, as well as young people, and their families.

³⁴ Wilson, D.A 2015; The Current and Future Task of the Youth Service in Northern Ireland -Envisioning Our Young People as Citizens of a Shared Society and an Interdependent World

Over time we were able to discuss potential ways that we could collaborate.

There are many examples cited by grassroots BAME community groups of positive experiences of partnership work, however there have also been experiences of tokenism, box ticking and exclusion from project design.

Things to consider when building partnerships:

- Building trust takes time and commitment. It will not happen overnight. However, in our experience, this investment is necessary, to develop meaningful partnerships.
- Managing expectations of groups and individuals can at times be challenging. However, being clear from the outset, about what each party can bring to the table, may alleviate potential misunderstandings or disappointments.
- Do not presume that all groups will necessarily have the same systems and processes in place, as an established youth organisation. Some may be unfamiliar with the legislative requirements and good practice guidelines for working with young people, in the context of Northern Ireland.

If this is the case, supporting groups to be aware of policies and procedures for good practice, as well as relevant legislation, must take precedence. As youth workers and established youth organisations, it is crucial to model best practice and ensure that young people and those who support them, are kept safe.

Parental Engagement

“It can take a lengthy period of time to gain the trust of people from African communities; and this particularly applies to parents. Continuous and proactive engagement will help to earn their trust.” Volunteer, Diverse Youth NI

When it comes to working with young people from Newcomer Communities, including those from the refugee and asylum seeker communities, parental engagement is crucial and the role played by the grassroots BAME community groups is often critical in facilitating this engagement.

Together we worked to organise parent information sessions to raise awareness of key issues impacting on young people, for example, keeping young people safe online. We also introduced a taster youth work session, which gave parents the opportunity to experience sample activities and meet with youth workers in order to gain more understanding of youth work in practice.

Such engagement with parents and grassroots BAME community groups can also reveal their perceptions of what youth work may be, which can vary within and among different communities. The parental engagement sessions highlighted for us that youth workers have more work to do to, in order to address some misperceptions and to build trust in order to alleviate fears.

“Many parents from Newcomer Communities are interested in programmes that support their children to engage in education. They are keen to encourage their young people to

engage in activities that will enhance career pathways, improve wellbeing and health, promote diversity & integration; and preserve their language and heritage.”

Parent, Nigerian Community

Things to consider when planning for parental engagement:

- Facilitate initial engagement in places, spaces and at times, where parents are most comfortable. These might not necessarily be in your centre or neighbourhood.
- Parents from Newcomer Communities may not be proficient in the English language, therefore it is important to establish language needs, including the need for interpretation and translation services and associated fees.
- Hospitality, particularly sharing food, is a key aspect of community and culture, therefore it can be a useful demonstration of welcome and respect, to provide this during sessions. It is vital to consider food options and cultural / religious protocols and to use suppliers who understand and can meet these requirements.

Start where (young) people are at – needs and strengths-based approaches

“Young people want a place of their own to engage with each other without fear of intimidation and rejection. This helps to promote self-confidence and growth.”

Volunteer Youth Leader

It has been our experience that young people from diverse BAME communities want to engage with the wider community through activities that promote inclusion and integration whilst also having the space to explore their own heritage, cultures and issues that directly impact on them.

Our learning has been informed by our collaborations during 2019/2020 with grassroots BAME community groups, which led to the establishment of Diverse Voices - a group of 20 young people, aged 14 -18 years old, from Sudanese, Somali, Nigerian, South African, Zimbabwean and other African heritage backgrounds. Young people’s faith identities were Christian, Muslim and some with no religious affiliations. The group met most weekends over a sustained period of seven months.

Young people were involved in youth activities within their respective communities, however few of them had previously engaged in mainstream youth provision.

As part of Diverse Voices curriculum delivery, the young people participated in sessions exploring identity, culture and heritage and achieved OCNNI certification for this. They also worked as a team and developed new skills in film-making, in order to capture and express their experiences of life as young people in Northern Ireland.

Feedback from the group identified the value they placed on being able to meet up with others and establish new friendships, which otherwise would not have been possible.

However, it is without doubt that the partnership approach with grassroots BAME community groups and the engagement with parents, were significant contributory factors and enablers to the success of Diverse Voices. We established ‘buy in’ over time and we took on board what the communities and young people expressed as their needs, preferences and strengths.

“As a child of an asylum seeker, where isolation and mental health issues are prevalent, this Diverse Voices programme has given my daughter a chance to come out of isolation and interact with other young people her age. I haven’t since seen her so happy. Keep up the good work, you are helping transform the lives of those who come from disadvantaged backgrounds.” Parent

The sustainability of Diverse Voices and other similar initiatives, was raised as an issue of concern throughout the life of the project. The community groups and young people are all too aware of the need and desire for more long-term, strategic support and capacity building within their communities. Otherwise there is an increased risk of disaffection, alienation and segregation.

Things to consider:

- Using a strengths-based approach from the outset, recognises and values the capacity, skills, knowledge, connections and potential in individuals and communities. Youth work ought to reach communities and young people as equal partners, experts in their own situations and active participants in shaping engagement and desired outcomes.
- An integrated communities model is where people – whatever their background, culture, faith etc. – live, work, learn and socialise together, based on shared rights, responsibilities and opportunities. It is imperative that those from the larger / dominant / well-established communities in Northern Ireland, as well as those responsible for the governance and delivery of regional and local services, work together to break down barriers.

At local level, youth workers ought to consider and adopt ways to reach young people and families from Newcomer Communities, on mutually inclusive terms, promoting safety and respect for diversity, rather than absorption.

- Funding for work with and by refugee, asylum seeker and BAME communities tends to be mainly project based and short-term in nature. Positive outcomes for young people and communities can best be achieved by the availability of longer-term funding which has some symmetry with the longevity of the needs being addressed and which helps sustain the consistency and quality of the work undertaken. This aligns to the wider discourse on short-term funding arrangements to tackle long-term societal inequalities.
- Throughout this work, many young people expressed the challenge of navigating different ‘worlds’ and managing different (and sometimes competing) expectations (at home with their family; at school; with their peers; as well as how they are perceived by wider society). Political discourse and developments, (e.g. Brexit) undoubtedly have an impact on young people from diverse communities, particularly in relation to their sense of belonging, safety and feeling of welcome (or otherwise). Socio-political issues, as discussed below, have a direct impact on young people and those growing up in Northern Ireland from BAME communities, need the space and support to make sense of all of this, as part of their personal and community narratives.

Social and Economic Marginalisation

As the Unity in Community Project drew to its conclusion, the COVID- 19 pandemic and the associated lockdown, were underway. Without doubt, this crisis has further exposed a range of inequalities in our society and impacted strongly on those most marginalised, including those from BAME and refugee and asylum seeker communities, who engaged in this project.

The responses of the youth, community and voluntary sector to support vulnerable people, have been recognised as invaluable (<https://www.volunteernow.co.uk/hargey-pays-tribute-to-voluntary-and-community-sector-for-continued-efforts/>).

Practical help and solutions being provided by community and voluntary sector groups across Northern Ireland as part of the COVID-19 response at this time, are welcome but noted by many as often required under 'normal' circumstances also. We need to be aware that when supporting engagement of people from BAME and refugee and asylum seeker communities, many are unlikely to have access to a bank account and have to survive on £37.75³⁵ per week. At the point of writing, Asylum Seekers were not included in the £20 per week uplift afforded by the Government to those claiming Universal Credit during the pandemic.

To support participation and engagement in youth work provision, it is paramount to consider and plan for practical solutions to navigate barriers, particularly when engaging people who are experiencing quite profound challenges.

From our experience these might include:

- **Expenses:** It is crucial that people are not out of pocket for *any* length of time. Therefore trying to ensure that expenses such as travel, are reimbursed as quickly as possible, is particularly important.
- **Access to the Internet:** Be conscious that peoples' access to the internet and/or technology may be limited; therefore try to identify creative solutions to this issue, in order not to create further disadvantage or exclusion if using technology to engage or deliver programmes (for young people or volunteers)
- **Food:** When and where possible try to budget for subsistence (being mindful of cultural dietary requirements)

Wider Socio-Political Considerations

Being conscious and aware of what is going on in the 'world' is very important when you are engaging with young people whose family and heritage may be globally diverse. Young people may still have strong connections with other places and countries – they may likely have family and friends there.

For example, during the initial phase of this project, there was civil unrest and subsequently a revolution in Sudan. Young people from the Sudanese Community were very engaged around what was happening, therefore supporting them with the space to discuss the issues and facilitate a

³⁵ <https://www.gov.uk/asylum-support/what-youll-get>

practical session, where they could make posters to raise awareness, was an important and valuable way to engage young people, on their own terms, who were new to youth work, around what was important for them.

As noted previously, Brexit was a topic of concern for many of the young people who engaged in this project – they had different views, however they all shared examples of having been drawn into discussions around racism, xenophobia and islamophobia. In such circumstances they felt challenged to present reasoned responses, to what were often described by them as unreasonable positions. Such experiences would be challenging for all adults and young people alike.

Youth workers are well placed to support young people to explore their values and beliefs. However, it is also important for youth workers to reflect and be mindful of how our own values, beliefs and backgrounds as practitioners, shape and influence how we view local, community and global events.

Things to consider:

- Participating in training and awareness workshops can provide a good basis for youth workers to learn more about other communities and engage in practical discussions within and across sectors, that consider how our role in supporting *“people from minority ethnic backgrounds to participate in (and to be) represented fully in all aspects of life”*³⁶ in Northern Ireland.
- Seeking out opportunities to improve understanding, as well as increase interactions with people who may have different experiences of the world, will certainly help to get a sense of the issues that can impact on diverse communities.
- Youth work is political in nature, as it seeks to facilitate young people’s active participation and inclusion in their communities and in decision making. A consideration, when working with young people from BAME and refugee and asylum seeker communities, is how to engage young people in political participation in a changing world of economic tensions, crisis of democratic institutions, digitalisation, social media, fake news and other influencers of the public opinion.

Additional practical considerations

Engaging with communities for the first time, may require different approaches perhaps from the way you usually work. Therefore flexibility and creativity will be useful.

- It is useful to be aware that some communities may structure their week in different ways from what your organisation does, and this may require some negotiation.
- There are striking cultural differences in relation to ‘time’. As a youth worker you may plan for an event to start at 9.30am – in some cultures, there is the unwritten understanding that really means 10am! Considering this and planning around it is

³⁶ Racial Equality Strategy Northern Ireland 2015-2025; Office of First and Deputy First Minister

important, as well as thinking through how to address the challenges this may present, in ways that are collaborative and respectful.

- Youth Link: NI, in collaboration with other agencies, developed a workshop series, **Diverse Perspectives**, that aims to support youth workers and volunteers to reflect on their practice, promote intercultural approaches and facilitate opportunities to directly engage with different communities, cultures and faiths. In a spirit of shared learning, an outline of sessions and some resources are included in the next section of this document.

The Youth Link: NI Common Good Project also complements this workshop series, supporting Youth Workers and Young People to think about how we can collectively work together to create a shared vision, and build a society that is inclusive of everyone who lives here.

Final Thought

The most fundamental thing that we will take from this project is to always remember to see the individual first - be that a young person, or adult. There can be a temptation to group people, for example in terms of cultural, faith or heritage backgrounds and although of course, we can enhance our intercultural competencies, through enhancing our knowledge, awareness and skills, we should not lose sight of the fact that people do not fit neatly or comfortably into boxes. Therefore it is crucial that we recognise this when we approach all aspects of our work, holding awareness that every individual has multiple identities.

Athi Silevu, is Volunteer Youth leader. She composed the following poem that captures the feelings that many people experience when they are seeking refuge and asylum in Northern Ireland and across the world. We are sharing this with her permission.

Destitute

I am destitute
I have no destination
I have no motivation
And therefore no determination

I am destitute
In enforced solitude
So I have an attitude
Although I have an aptitude

No ability to choose
I am destitute
As a result of systematic demoralisation
Although in deep depression,
I continue to seek solutions

The aim is to break my spirit
And leave me in shambles
Little do they know
I have already been set free from my shackles

I am unbreakable
And I would seek asylum all over again
For I know in the end my
children will be safe again

But for now
I am Destitute

Athi Silevu

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Youth Link: NI would like to extend sincere gratitude to all the staff, volunteers, parents and most importantly, the young people, who partnered with us and contributed to aspects of the Unity in Community Project in 2019/2020.

We particularly acknowledge the following organisations and groups:

Belfast City Council <https://www.belfastcity.gov.uk/>

Belfast City of Sanctuary <https://belfast.cityofsanctuary.org/>

Belfast Metropolitan College

(Regional ESOL Co-ordinator for the Vulnerable Person Resettlement Scheme NI)

<https://www.belfastmet.ac.uk/>

Diverse Youths NI

Education Authority: Intercultural Education Service

<https://www.eani.org.uk/school-management/intercultural-education-service-ies/newcomers>

Nigerian Community of Northern Ireland (NICONI) <https://www.facebook.com/NiconiUK/>

Northern Ireland Community of Refugees and Asylum Seekers <http://www.nicras.btck.co.uk/>

Northern Ireland Somali Association (NISA) <http://www.nisomaliassociation.org.uk/>

Belfast Friendship Club - Small Worlds <http://www.belfastfriendshipclub.org/small-worlds/>

St. Malachy's Youth Centre

Sudanese Youth Group

Sudanese Community of Northern Ireland (SCANI)

Voices of Young People in Care (VOYPIC) <http://www.voypic.org/>

Yallaa <http://yallaa.org/home/>