



Northern Ireland Affairs Committee

Oral evidence: The experience of minority ethnic and migrant people in Northern Ireland, HC 159

Wednesday 15 September 2021

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[Watch the meeting](#)

Members present: Simon Hoare (Chair); Mr Gregory Campbell; Stephen Farry; Mr Robert Goodwill; Claire Hanna.

Questions 45 - 68

Witnesses

I: Liz Griffith, Policy Officer, Law Centre NI; Lilian Seenoi-Barr, Director of Operations, North West Migrants Forum (NWMF); Ronnie Vellem, Secretary, Northern Ireland Community of Refugees and Asylum Seekers (NICRAS).

Written evidence from witnesses:

- [North West Migrants Forum](#)
- [Law Centre NI](#)



Examination of Witnesses

Witnesses: Liz Griffith, Lilian Seenoi-Barr and Ronnie Vellem.

Q45 **Chair:** Good morning to our witnesses and good morning, colleagues, for this, our second session in our inquiry into the experience of minority ethnic and migrant people in Northern Ireland. Can I extend from the outset a very warm welcome and our thanks to our witnesses for joining us this morning? It may be helpful for the record if you could introduce yourselves and the organisations that you represent.

Just to say, there are two housekeeping points. We have apologies from Mary Kelly Foy, Bob Stewart and Scott Benton. Does anybody have any declarations of interest to make?

Claire Hanna: Yes, Chair. As discussed, our witness, Lilian Seenoi-Barr, is a party colleague.

Chair: She is a party colleague. Lilian, you are here representing a group, rather than your political affiliation. That is fine. Claire, thank you for that.

For the record, could you just introduce yourselves and who you are speaking on behalf of? Let us start with Lilian, please.

Lilian Seenoi-Barr: Good morning. My name is Lilian Seenoi-Barr, and I am here on behalf of the North West Migrants Forum, a small grassroots based in Derry/Londonderry.

Liz Griffith: Good morning. My name is Liz Griffith. I am with the Migration Justice Project at Law Centre NI, and I am here today in two guises. One is to speak on behalf of Law Centre NI and the second is to speak on behalf of the Refugee and Asylum Forum, which also submitted evidence to this Committee.

Ronnie Vellem: Good morning, everyone. I am speaking on behalf of the Northern Ireland Community of Refugees and Asylum Seekers and on behalf of the Refugee and Asylum Forum.

Q46 **Chair:** Thank you very much indeed. Let me open the batting, if I may. Northern Ireland, as we know, has a small but growing migrant community. The new census figures will be interesting when they come out, with a significant settlement of people coming in from Syria. I wanted to ask each of you in turn, please, to give the Committee a flavour of your experience and your understanding of how seriously the issues and needs are taken, particularly within that paradigm of so much of public policy being tailored on the green-orange divide. Where does the migrant and the ethnic minority community fit in with that public-policy evolution and tailoring, particularly with access to public services? It is a pretty easy question to start with. Lilian, shall we go to you first?



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Lilian Seenoi-Barr: Thank you very much, Simon. As I introduced myself, I am Lilian and I am representing the North West Migrants Forum, an organisation that works directly with migrant workers, asylum seekers, refugees and people of colour who are now British or Irish citizens, or some of them may call themselves Northern Irish citizens.

I want to start by saying that I am a very proud Maasai woman. I am also a former asylum seeker, and now a British citizen. I am married to an Irish man. In the eyes of many, however, I am still an immigrant, a person of colour and a minority ethnic person, even though I have lived in Northern Ireland for the past 11 years. It is the only place I have ever called home in Europe.

You asked about our participation in legislation or the recognition of minority ethnic people in policy development. I can tell you that we are an afterthought. There is enough evidence to suggest that we are not really seen as part of the society. It is also important for me to mention that ethnic monitoring was not introduced into the Northern Ireland census until 2001. Effectively, that rendered minority ethnic communities in Northern Ireland invisible. Since then, we have been fighting for recognition, as we are often overlooked. That is down to the dominance of the “two communities” narrative, which does not truly reflect Northern Irish society.

Ronnie Vellem: Good morning, everyone. My name is Ronnie Vellem. I am really here representing NICRAS, the Northern Ireland Community of Refugees and Asylum Seekers. I am also part of the Refugee and Asylum Forum.

I will start by saying a few words about the organisation, and then I can touch on the question you have asked. NICRAS is an umbrella refugee-led organisation. It has been in existence since 2002 and it provides information, support, advice and educational opportunities. It is seen very much as a voice for refugees and asylum seekers. We have a broad membership made up of over 200 people from all over the world. People, mostly based in Belfast, who are seeking asylum and who have moved on to refugee status are welcome to be members of NICRAS.

Moving on to what you have said there in terms of migrant communities, the broad narrative has always been orange and green. It is left to voluntary sector organisations—for example, the likes of NICRAS, Law Centre NI and North West Migrants Forum—to advocate for people. Without that, there would be very little provision in terms of services and in terms of a broader outlook policy-wise.

To look at something very recent, during Covid there was an increase in—

Chair: Ronnie, you have frozen. We might have lost you. Whilst we are waiting for Ronnie to come back, Liz, do you want to fill the interregnum? He is back.



Ronnie Vellem: I am sorry about that. I don't know what happened. If you look at what happened, there was a recognition that there was going to be more pressure on people because of Covid and there was an increase of £20 for people who were on Universal Credit, but nothing of the sort was put in place for people who are in the asylum process who were already living on £39 a week, which is a lot less than the people on benefits were getting. Whether we look at policy, legislation or the provision of services, as Lilian rightly pointed out, the migrant population is really an afterthought. Without the vigorous advocacy of the voluntary sector, people would really be falling through the cracks.

Liz Griffith: The Law Centre has been involved in providing social welfare and legal support over the last four decades. For sure, over that time we can see a rise in the number of migrant communities here in Northern Ireland. You heard last week about the number of people applying to the EU settlement scheme. Close to 100,000 EEA nationals and family members have applied. You will have also heard last week that we are at an all-time high for people in the asylum system here. We have had almost 1,800 people arrive through the Syrian resettlement programme. Very sadly, it was reported that the number of potential victims of human trafficking has doubled in the last two years.

Despite this growing migrant population, I would agree with the analysis of my colleagues Lilian and Ronnie. The politics is still often seen through the dominant lens of orange and green, and migrant communities are often overlooked. However, I would also say that it seems to us here at the Law Centre that sometimes Northern Ireland as a region is overlooked by the Home Office when it is developing policy. We can point to many examples of where it feels as if Northern Ireland is an afterthought when policy is being developed and scrutinised at Westminster.

Q47 **Chair:** Could you give us an example of that? Is that a reflection of the Common Travel Area? What would you highlight to us?

Liz Griffith: There are many examples. I suppose one would be the lack of a shortage occupation list tailored to the needs of Northern Ireland. The Migration Advisory Committee has repeatedly recommended that a shortage occupation list is devised for Northern Ireland to reflect the very real needs of employers and employees living in Northern Ireland. That has never materialised.

A more recent example would be the development of the BNO visa scheme. This is the visa scheme available for people leaving Hong Kong. One of the requirements to apply to this scheme is that you produce a TB certificate. When the scheme went live, that certificate could not be obtained in Northern Ireland. The Home Office has put together a very detailed welcome pack for people arriving through the BNO scheme, and it says on the pack that it is a UK welcome pack. Yet if somebody here were following the information in that pack, they would be sending their driving licence to the wrong place; they would be looking for school



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uniforms from the wrong agency; and they would completely misunderstand the role of local councils here.

That just gives you an example of how Home Office policy does not give equal consideration to the needs of Northern Ireland as a region.

Q48 Chair: That is an incredibly interesting point, which I know the Committee will have heard. Can I just go back to this green-orange balance? In fairness to politicians in Stormont and their officials, this is the dominant see-saw to get some sort of balance to. Lilian, I know you are not here with your councillor's hat on, but if you look at the general profile of those engaged in the political process in Northern Ireland, you stand out as one of a very small number. Correct me if I am wrong on that.

How would you like to see ethnic and migrant populations and communities in Northern Ireland engaging actively in the political process, standing for election and so on? If people are not engaged and maybe do not even vote, why would politicians spend any time thinking about their needs? They can be bypassed because they do not express a view in the ballot box.

Lilian Seeno-Barr: It is fair to say that when I got selected everybody in Northern Ireland was very happy and very excited to see one person. There was only one who was from a Chinese origin, but for the last five years we have not seen anybody who reflects minority ethnic communities anywhere. It is also fair to say that every level of leadership in Northern Ireland is all white, apart from Derry City and Strabane District Council, which now has its first-ever black person in council. You are right: the lack of minority ethnic leaders has contributed immensely to the lack of focus or prioritisation of racial equality or support for minority ethnic people.

In terms of getting access to politics, just imagine being in a community where hate crime has surpassed sectarianism and hate crime only affects 1% of the population. Just imagine the politicians or the leadership in Stormont or anywhere and you are attacked, and they do not defend you or even advocate for you to be protected. How would you engage in a political environment if you do not feel safe? You have to feel safe first or you have to feel welcome in that society if you are to fully integrate and fully participate in politics.

As much as we are political and as much as there are so many of us with great knowledge and a contribution to make in our society, it is very difficult to put yourself forward because the first thing you will think about is your protection, your family's protection and becoming a target because you have taken that step.

Chair: Thank you. That is helpful. You mentioned hate crime there, so let us turn to Claire Hanna.

Q49 Claire Hanna: Thank you very much. We are having a broad discussion



today about policy needs and policy deficits, but I did want to ask about the experiences of hate crime in Northern Ireland. Ronnie, perhaps you could open on that. Could you comment on the prevalence of hate crime in Northern Ireland and the communities that you speak for?

Ronnie Vellem: Hate crime is a big problem in the refugee and asylum community. Picture someone who is visibly different from everyone else in their community. Unfortunately, the person becomes a target. At times it could be low-level name-calling, but at other times it can move on to eggs being thrown or windows being broken. There have been instances of refugees and asylum seekers being physically attacked. People break into their homes; people have been beaten with cricket bats and told, "You are not part of this community".

Unfortunately, hate crime is a problem in areas where asylum seekers and refugees live. What makes it worrying is that there seems to have been very little prosecution of the perpetrators. That is something that PSNI should work on to send out a clear message; they should carry out visible patrols in areas where such instances seem to have been happening now and again.

Q50 **Claire Hanna:** Ronnie, you are right that intolerance of difference is the root cause of many of our problems in Northern Ireland. Liz, could you speak about what steps the Executive in Northern Ireland and the UK Government could take to improve outcomes in this regard?

Liz Griffith: The Law Centre's work has already been on immigration. We work on immigration, social security and employment. On the issue of racial equality, I feel it is more appropriate that I defer to my colleagues here on the panel. What I would say is that the Law Centre is very supportive of ongoing efforts to strengthen the framework of hate-crime legislation.

Q51 **Chair:** Liz, on that, would you like to see, effectively, a UK-wide approach to hate crime?

Liz Griffith: Again, Chair, I will defer to my colleagues.

Chair: I am asking for your personal view, from the Law Centre. A hate crime would be a hate crime, irrespective of where it manifested itself.

Liz Griffith: I feel there is a lot of work to be done locally. PSNI takes it very seriously, I understand, but there is more to be done. The solution is to be found locally and regionally, but, if progress is not made, at some point it may be appropriate for Westminster to step in.

One of the difficulties related to hate crime, particularly hate crime perpetrated against refugees and asylum seekers, is the ongoing lack of a refugee integration strategy here. That would go some way to address some of the issues linked to hate crime. As you will know, Chair, the refugee integration strategy was first floated as an idea back in 2005.



Sixteen years later, there is still no integration strategy specifically for refugees.

Q52 **Claire Hanna:** That is a really important point about the preventative approach. Lilian, could you pick up on those issues in terms of the steps the Executive could take to improve in this area? Could you give an assessment of the levels of confidence within black and minority ethnic communities in policing in Northern Ireland?

Lilian Seenoi-Barr: Thank you, Claire, for your question. Before I answer your question, I would like to mention that the minority ethnic community is such a diverse community, so experiences can differ depending on how you came to the UK, your immigration status, the circumstances that led to you coming to the UK, how you look and sometimes who you associate with.

Though there are vast differences between us, there is one thing that we have in common, and that is that we all experience racism and hate crime of some sort. I want to focus on that common denominator for every person of colour regardless of their immigration status. If you look at our submission on page 5, you can see the likelihood of experiencing racism versus a sectarian incident, using the 2020-21 PSNI statistics. The likelihood of a minority ethnic individual experiencing a racist incident in Northern Ireland is at least 17 times higher than the likelihood of a member of the majority Protestant or Catholic community experiencing sectarian incidents. That is 17 times higher for a person of colour.

If you look back to the overall population, as I mentioned earlier, in the census of 2010 we were only 1%. I want to give an example of just how your visibility can attract that hate from people. I want to mention what one of our focus discussion members said to us when we asked about their experiences of racism in Northern Ireland. This is someone who is from the PUL community—Protestant, Unionist and Loyalist background—who converted to Islam. She told us, “I grew up here as a white person who did not wear a hijab. About 16 years ago, I started wearing it. It was like I became a different person. Suddenly, anyone could ask me, ‘Where are you from?’ or, ‘Where is your family from?’ Even if you have a broad local accent, they do not see that. They just see the scarf. I have been told to go home. I have been told to speak English. When out with my kids, I have been insulted and called racist names, because there is just the assumption that you are foreign. It has been a really weird experience and has opened my eyes to what minority ethnic people go through here on a daily basis”. This is someone who is from this community and who converted to Islam.

For someone like me, my difference is very visible. You can imagine the attacks and the insults that we get. You asked what should happen or what Government should do. I would refer you to the recommendations that we made in our submission on what the Government can do. Northern Ireland is the only part of the United Kingdom that has no hate crime legislation. However, we did have an independent review of hate



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crime legislation, which was published by the Department of Justice in 2020. It has 34 recommendations for change. It adds the adoption of an aggravated offence model, whereby a hate crime aggravation could potentially be added to any offence. It is really important that the Government ensure the implementation of all the 34 recommendations that were made, because that will render us the protection we are looking for.

Q53 Chair: I want to ask a question that I asked last week just before I bring in Mr Campbell. In your experience, both personal and from the work that you do, is there any identifiable trend with regard to the magnitude of hate crimes, verbal abuse, racial abuse and so on coming from either of the traditional communities of Northern Ireland?

Lilian Seenoi-Barr: The answer is yes. You get attacked and you get racially abused depending on where you live and sometimes where you work. If you look at the trend from the already recorded hate crimes and incidents of racism, it is not recorded where it is coming from. I hope people will not take this as me saying that one community is more racist than the other; it is our reality on the ground based on where we live and where we work. If I am very honest, many people who come to my office who I help live in Unionist areas. That is not to say that people who live in Nationalist areas do not experience racism or hate crime, because they do. We have enough evidence to show that, but it is incredibly high in Unionist areas.

Q54 Chair: To clarify, it exists in both, but it is more prevalent in the PUL community.

Lilian Seenoi-Barr: That is correct.

Chair: Ronnie, is that your assessment as well?

Ronnie Vellem: Unfortunately, hate crime occurs across the divide. We have heard about incidents of hate crime in Nationalist and Protestant areas. Because of the history of Northern Ireland, you find that maybe there is more social housing in certain communities. It may be that means there is going to be a higher percentage of reported cases in those areas.

When we are looking at it in terms of tackling hate crime, we would not want to look at whether it is a Protestant or a Catholic problem. It is more of a general problem across the divide. We want to look at how we can tackle that and how we can work with community leaders within those communities, whether it is politicians or civic leaders, to see how they can support victims and work towards the integration of people moving into their communities.

Liz Griffith: As I said, Chair, the Law Centre does not work directly on hate crime. We recognise the expertise of those who do. The type of hate crime that my colleagues Lilian and Ronnie have talked about is hate crime and discrimination perpetuated by individuals against individuals or



communities. One thing I would like to draw the Chair's attention to is where that discrimination is coming from a public body or a public entity. I am thinking specifically about ethnic profiling occurring in and around the border areas and in relation to travel from the UK to Northern Ireland. That is a very different type of discrimination, but it is still addressed to people from migrant and minority ethnic backgrounds.

Q55 Mr Campbell: Welcome to the witnesses. I just want to go back initially to an issue that Liz raised, about any approach being a UK-wide approach. Liz, you had indicated that you would prefer, initially, a more regional approach with the police in Northern Ireland. I am just thinking that, for example, online abuse has been quite prevalent in the last 10 or 12 years, whether of a racial or a sectarian nature. Particularly in the recent European football championships, we saw that the black players who missed penalties in the final were subject to horrendous abuse. Almost all of it was online. Thankfully, there was a huge response in favour of them and in support of them.

Given that much of the hate crime is online, would it not be better if there were a UK-wide approach? These people might be anywhere in the world, but, particularly in the UK, if there are prevalent issues in the press, should we have a nationwide approach so that people know there is no hiding place?

Liz Griffith: That is a very interesting question. I do not mean to sound difficult or obstructive, Chair, but I am conscious that racial equality and hate crime is not one of our areas of expertise. I would propose that one of my fellow witnesses respond to you on that who could share real expertise in this area.

Q56 Mr Campbell: I am happy enough to move on to the issue of the Racial Equality Strategy. This question is initially to Lilian. I noticed in this morning's press that you were at Stormont. Was it yesterday? It was certainly recently. That was an invitation by my colleague Gary Middleton, who is a junior minister, to try to get a cross-party approach on the implementation of the racial equality strategy. Could you give us a very up-to-date report on how that went? Might that help kick-start the whole Racial Equality Strategy approach by the Executive in Northern Ireland?

Lilian Seenoi-Barr: I will just go back to your first question to Liz, and then I will move on to what you have just said in your question to me. It is going to be misleading to suggest that hate crime is more prevalent online than across the community, because the statistics that have been recorded by the PSNI are not online racist abuse; they are the ones that we have reported a of in-person experiences. They are the insults and attacks that we have been subjected to, as recently as BMCA being attacked and, in terms of asylum hate crime, as recently as the asylum seekers who were literally attacked in their own home environment.



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While it is prevalent—I am one of the people who has been constantly getting racial abuse and hate crime online, literally on a daily basis—and it is really important that the keyboard warriors are found and prosecuted, the hate crimes that we experience within our neighbourhoods and communities are the ones that are much more hurtful and traumatising. It is our neighbours, our friends, we want to believe, and our community members who are subjecting us to that racism.

Moving on to racial equality, I am delighted that Gary, being junior minister—I call him a Derry man these days, because he is close to me and very easy to get to—kindly invited us to Stormont after we requested to meet with MLAs to speak about a debate that they had last year on racial equality. Yesterday was one year since the debate, and the Executive are reaffirming their commitment to racial equality. The reality is that very little progress has been made, which is really disappointing. We have been talking about racial equality for the last 16 years. We know that Northern Ireland is the only part of the UK that does not have an updated Race Equality Act. We are still operating with a Race Equality Act that was developed in 1969 and updated in 2000. That is 20 years behind Great Britain. It is ineffective; it does not work.

Until today we cannot get a straight answer from our elected representative. While I am encouraged that each and every one of them who we met yesterday signed our pledge, I was incredibly disappointed to learn that there was no formal request from the Executive Office to the Department of Finance to resource the Racial Equality Strategy. They are still operating on a very small budget with very few officials dealing with racial equality. There is a lot that needs to be done, like ethnic monitoring, which will help us identify the gaps in equalities. That has worked really well in Great Britain since 2011, but there is no political will to implement racial equality in Northern Ireland. That is just the truth and the fact.

You want an update; there is no clear update that I can give you. All we get is words, lip service that “we are committed”, and we do not see any actions being taken 16 years on.

Ronnie Vellem: Just to go back to what you were asking in terms of a UK-wide approach to hate crime, Northern Ireland is probably in a better place. If you look at England and Scotland, those regions have a long history of people coming in from different countries, so they have developed legislation, policies and practices. There are templates there. We are not asking the Northern Ireland Executive Office or the authorities here to reinvent the wheel. There is good practice elsewhere that people can learn from. A UK-wide approach is helpful and very relevant when we look at hate crime, because there are places that we can learn from. Legislation has been in place in all these regions for quite a while. As much as Northern Ireland is playing catch-up, it has somewhere else to look up to in terms of what good practice exists.



When we look at the history of Northern Ireland in terms of the Troubles and issues around segregation, policies and legislation have been developed to try to bridge the divide between orange and green. It seems that some of that is not being brought across to look at other forms of discrimination in terms of hate crimes. As Lilian rightly pointed out, there does not seem to be the political will. I do not know whether it is because of the numbers, that politicians feel that the minority ethnic population is very small so they can just forget about it and not really put in place policies and legislation to address some of these issues.

There is a lot of work to be done and, unfortunately, there seems to be a lot of talk and not much action on the ground, whether we look at the Racial Equality Strategy or the refugee integration strategy. People have talked about it, but if we look at what practically has happened, there has been very little. It is very disappointing. Politicians have to up their game in terms of whether they are serious about integration and tackling hate crime.

Q57 Mr Campbell: Hopefully after yesterday's event some action will start to occur. I would like to ask a question more to Lilian, because she had indicated about the prevalence and balance of attacks of violence on migrant and ethnic communities being not exclusively but more acute in Unionist or Loyalist areas. Do we not need to get some context? We need to understand that migrant and ethnic communities are about 2% of the population; we need to wait and see the output from the census, but they are around about 2% or 2.5%. If they are primarily located in Unionist or Loyalist areas, that might give a better context in terms of the greater likelihood of people being attacked where they are more likely to live rather than the perception that might have come across from your reply, Lilian, which is that ethnic communities are more likely to be attacked in Loyalist communities than in Nationalist communities. If we had that information, we could probably make a better assessment of how these things are coming about. Would that be a fair comment?

Lilian Seenoi-Barr: Absolutely, I agree. I want to reiterate that I do not mean that minority ethnic people do not experience racism in Nationalist areas, because that would be misleading. They do, and we have evidence to show that. It could be the fact that many minority ethnic people have been resettled in Unionist areas, and that is why it may be more prevalent there.

Without ethnic monitoring, we would not even know the detailed information that you are looking for because we are not keeping on top of it. That is about legislation. That is about the trends and the neglect. Our Executive have neglected the minority ethnic population here. So many people are being settled in an environment that probably has not even been prepared for that diversity. It is also important to remember that Northern Ireland is a very young country when it comes to diversity. It is only in 1998 that we got the peace agreement, and that is when other communities started to come here. A lot of minority ethnic people or



migrants were being settled elsewhere, including refugees. It is only in 2016 that our Government here worked really hard to request the British Government to settle refugees in Northern Ireland, because it has never been a place that would have been considered for refugees and asylum seekers.

Gregory, you are right. We do not have a clear picture, because we do not have enough legislation in place to allow us to have a picture of whether one community is more racist than another. I do not believe that it is. I just think that it is the way we are settled in different places. As Ronnie rightly pointed out, it could be to do with the availability of social housing. If I give you an example of Derry, most of our ethnic minorities live in Waterside, because they are nurses and doctors who work in Altnagelvin Hospital. Waterside is a mixed area, but the availability of houses could be in a predominantly PUL area. That could be the reason.

Q58 Chair: I just want to pick up on what Mr Campbell was asking around the census and indeed the data. There is a big lacuna in terms of the data and the picture that one can extrapolate from that. I guess I know the answer to this question, so I am asking it just to get the answer on the record, but it is this. Down on the ground, at the grassroots level, irrespective of where the ethnic minority communities are living or in what type of housing they are housed, do you consider that there is enough political engagement amongst local politicians, be they councillors, MLAs or political organisations, with their communities or their base to say, "This is something we do not do. Irrespective of which tradition you come from, racial abuse, hate crime, victimisation or driving people out of their homes is something we do not do in a civilised society"? Is there enough of that going on or do they just turn a blind eye and pretend it is not happening?

Lilian Seenoi-Barr: I am really glad that you have asked that question because that has been the most depressing thing for us. Our leaders will not stand with us when we need them and they will not protect us or ask for us to be protected. They shy away, and that is because that there is an assumption that racism and hate crime does not exist in Northern Ireland. People deny it or they sweep it under the carpet because they want to show a different persona of where we live. In fairness, we do have politicians who are very robust when there is a hate-crime attack; they will condemn it. You never hear the issues of minority ethnic people discussed unless there is a hate crime or there is racism that has happened and hit the media. That is when our politicians will be proactive, but there are those who will shy away from speaking up.

In fact, recently, as Mr Gregory Campbell will know, he instigated hate crime within our community by just asking why there were no white people on a programme that actually had a white person in it. Gregory and I met and spoke about that issue. We have resolved it, but recently this summer a councillor from the DUP also instigated hate through social media when the Home Office brought asylum seekers to an area in



Belfast. They were subjected to horrific racial abuse. Their photos were circulated on social media; they were called illegal immigrants when they are here seeking sanctuary. I must acknowledge and recognise the efforts that the PSNI, at that time, took to protect that community and the asylum seekers who came. If our politicians can use language that fuels hate, we are the people who actually feel, see and experience that hate.

Chair: I do not necessarily want to rake over those old coals, but, Mr Campbell, you were named in the exchange there. I feel like you may want to say a word or two.

Mr Campbell: I am not going to elaborate, Chair, but I am going to make it absolutely clear that I engaged in no hate crime whatsoever. I robustly stated my view publicly and privately to Lilian, and she knows that and understands that. It does do a disservice to this Committee and those witnesses who come before the Committee to assert that someone who has been the victim of hate crime over many, many years has engaged in a hate crime. I just wanted to state that for the record, Chair.

Chair: We hear you. This has been a very fruitful and calm session. I do not want to move away from that, but what clearly comes out—a number of people have referenced this—is the very malign influence that social media, or antisocial media as one should often call it, can have on these things, where the anonymity of the keyboard can cause so much division, hatred and fear. General responsibility is required there.

Let us go back to our trend of questioning, and we will look to Robert Goodwill to pick up the baton.

Q59 **Mr Goodwill:** Thank you very much, Chair. I hope that Liz can give us an insight into or a picture of the asylum system as it operates in Northern Ireland. I suppose I should put on record and own up to the fact that I was UK Immigration Minister for a while. One of the great joys was welcoming refugees from Syria and attending citizen ceremonies, but one of the great frustrations, of course, was people claiming asylum with no real grounds to do so.

First of all, Liz, can you give us an idea of the numbers? In places like Kent, we are seeing very large numbers. I am guessing that not too many of them are retaining their inflatables to make the trip across the Irish Sea. I am guessing that you are getting more visa overstayers or maybe foreign national offenders. What are the numbers that we are looking at over the Province?

Liz Griffith: Thank you for that question. I am smiling, because, as a former Minister, you will be aware that one of the issues that we are constantly grappling with here is a lack of regional immigration data. I am unable to tell you the official figures published by the Home Office for how many people have claimed asylum in Northern Ireland. What I am able to tell you is that as of the end of June 2021, so a couple of months



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ago, there were just over 800 people living in asylum accommodation here. Those are 800 people from 51 nationalities. That tells us the number of people being supported. It does not tell us the number of asylum seekers who fall outside of asylum support.

I have to say that we would be very grateful if the Committee were minded to make a recommendation about this, but we do need to improve the availability of immigration data. At the moment, the absence of this data makes it very hard for our organisations to counter fearmongering. People make wild claims about Northern Ireland being swamped by asylum seekers. That is simply not true, yet we are unable to put our finger on the data that would enable us to knock that back categorically.

Q60 Chair: Liz, on the point about data, surely that also speaks to a policy evolver's problem. If you do not have the data, you cannot work out a base and you cannot work out a trajectory. You cannot sculpt policies to meet need if you do not have bespoke data to assist you in that endeavour. That is the other downside of the absence of it.

Liz Griffith: That is correct. The rationale for the fact that we have a paucity of immigration-related data here is that, for a long time, the Home Office operated Scotland and Northern Ireland as one immigration region and it was impossible to extract the Northern Ireland data. To be frank, I have always found that slightly hard to get my head around.

Chair: HMRC can always manage to find the data. It is quite extraordinary nobody else can.

Liz Griffith: You are right, Chair, that the absence of that data makes it very difficult for organisations to plan their support services. That is our organisation in the voluntary and community sector, but it is also the Department of Education, the Education Authority, the health service and all of these organisations that have a vital role to play in supporting asylum seekers. To some extent, we are in the dark. We would welcome your assistance on this issue.

Q61 Mr Goodwill: I would endorse those comments and I hope that one of the recommendations will be to have better data. It is not just about the immigration and asylum system itself, as you say. It is about support for schools where they have children without English; it is the legal system; it is health in terms of some of the issues with FGM and so forth. If nothing else, we can move forward on that.

Can I ask you, Liz, about the experience and problems you have in dealing with asylum seekers? It might be helpful for the Committee if you could give us the typical timescale for a person who is rejected and removed and the timescale for a person who is accepted and given status to remain. It would be interesting for us to know how long that process takes.



Liz Griffith: The Law Centre's area is the law. We support people with their asylum applications and through any subsequent appeal. Unfortunately, the protracted processes and the very significant delays cause many problems for individuals and their family members.

I would say that the quality of initial decision-making from the Home Office is an issue. Approximately one in two asylum claims are overturned at appeal. That is a very strong indicator, in my view, that the initial decision-making is wrong or flawed. In the submission submitted by the Refugee and Asylum Forum, we give an example of a woman who was a victim of torture. Her asylum case was initially refused, and in the refusal letter—these generically produced refusal letters—it suggested that this woman had inflicted the injuries on herself. There was no substance to this allegation; there was no evidence for it, but it took this woman five years to go through the appeal process to obtain the medical evidence that she needed in order to have that decision overturned. I would strongly make the case for improved and more timely Home Office decision-making.

Q62 **Mr Goodwill:** That is a very worrying case that you draw our attention to there. Conversely, do you get cases where—maybe because an interpreter says, "This guy is not from the country he says he is from; he is making it all up"—you would not offer somebody support because you see their evidence to be fraudulent, or would you always give the person the benefit of the doubt as you support them through the system?

Liz Griffith: In order to take and represent a case through the court system, we are in receipt of legal aid and we can only draw down legal aid if we meet the merits tests. We would not be representing people where there is no merit, because the legal aid system would not permit us to do that.

One emerging issue that we are dealing with here is that there has been an increase in the number of people claiming asylum and, alongside that, we are seeing a reduced number of legal practitioners who are able to provide representation. This is a growing concern for us, because having the expertise of a qualified immigration solicitor is absolutely key. Again, that is something that the Committee might want to look at: the availability of quality immigration advice. Particularly for asylum seekers but, beyond asylum seekers, for migrants in general, immigration advice is key.

Q63 **Mr Goodwill:** I was going to ask you what more the British Government could do to support you in your work and support asylum seekers. I guess better legal support would be No. 1 on the list. Are there any other areas where the UK Government could do more to support asylum seekers to get resolution of their case and, in the cases where they do make a good case, to be granted asylum as quickly as possible?

Liz Griffith: I am sure I could give you a long list of things that I would like the UK Government to do here.



Chair: Maybe by written submission, Liz.

Liz Griffith: Yes. Focusing specifically on the legal aspects, one issue is the difficulties for people accessing the very specialist medical and legal reports that are needed to support an asylum claim. An asylum seeker living in GB or in the Republic of Ireland has access to specialist torture services and experts who can document the physical and psychiatric effects of torture. We have nothing comparable here, so it is another barrier that people in the asylum system face to get the legal resolution that they need.

In terms of how to improve the asylum system per se, I am sure my colleague Ronnie at NICRAS and Lilian would have very concrete recommendations, particularly around the levels of asylum support.

Q64 **Claire Hanna:** Liz, perhaps you and others could pick this up. Have you had an opportunity to do an assessment of the impact of the Nationality and Borders Bill that is currently going through Parliament? Do you have any feedback on those proposals and what they will do to people here currently and potentially arriving?

Liz Griffith: Thank you for that question. This is where I am speaking on behalf of the Refugee and Asylum Forum, which has prepared a very detailed analysis of the impact of the current Bill going through Parliament, which is implementing the new plan for immigration provisions. It is safe to say that we are gravely concerned that these proposals will cause harm to individuals and communities. We also see that, from a Northern Ireland perspective, a number of these proposals are treading on devolved competencies and they are encroaching on, if not restricting, devolved powers in a number of areas. Those provisions should be a matter of concern for yourselves.

There are many examples of where provisions contained in the legislation will run counter to what the Northern Ireland Executive are trying to achieve through their strategic priorities, specifically in relation to racial equality and modern slavery but also the Together: Building a United Community strategy. This is all about bringing communities together and welcoming all without prejudice. We will not be able to do that if the new planned provisions are implemented and newly arrived asylum seekers are shipped off to some reception centre. It will completely undermine Northern Ireland's strategic priorities here.

Q65 **Claire Hanna:** Thank you very much. We appreciate that you have provided an analysis of that in your submission. Ronnie or Lilian, do either of you have comments on that Bill or concerns about it?

Ronnie Vellem: If I could add to what Liz has said, it does run counter to what the competencies of the devolved Government are. If we look at the Geneva Convention, there is this wide scope in terms of how people seeking asylum should be treated when they are fleeing to areas where they think they will be safe. It very much takes into account that people



might at times have to rely on very unconventional means of getting out of one country into another country. If we look at the new model that they are proposing, they are trying to criminalise that, which is very counter to what the Refugee Convention is all about. It is all about providing sanctuary.

The new model is very much about restricting people coming in. On one hand, the UK Government are talking about trying to clamp down on illegal routes, but we are also talking about safe routes. Their proposals do not really take into account the fact that, by putting in so many restrictions or barriers, people have to rely on these unconventional ways or means to get into the UK or to move out of their countries. The new asylum model that they are talking about is very much retrogressive in terms of why the Geneva Convention and the Refugee Convention came about after the Second World War. There was a realisation that the persecution that had occurred did so because people had not been given easier ways of moving away from areas where they were not safe. Now we are going back to such practices where people are very much being kept away and their lives are being put in danger because we have put up so many barriers to people moving out of conflicts or unsafe zones.

Q66 Stephen Farry: Good morning. I just want to turn to the topic of the Common Travel Area, which was briefly mentioned earlier, in terms of its current and future operation. Problems are encountered on the basis of, first of all, the fact that the Common Travel Area applies only to people who are either British or Irish citizens. There may well be many people who are excluded from that, and that may impact on their lives, particularly those who are living in border areas. Secondly, even when we are talking about people who are British and Irish citizens, to what extent is there either a reality or a perception of some degree of profiling people in terms of the checks that happen, and how is that experience felt?

Liz Griffith: It is funny; there is a lot of talk, and rightly so, about the border and a hard border, but the reality is, if you are not a British, Irish or European national, for many years there has been a hard border, which is the land border. My colleagues Lilian and Ronnie will be able to give you many examples of how this has caused serious hardship, particularly for families living close to the border. Refugee children settled through the Syrian resettlement programme are at schools miles from the border and they are not able to participate in school trips or football matches that take place on the other side of the border. One thing that our organisations have proposed is that, in particular, people who have been granted refugee status in either jurisdiction should be afforded some kind of mutual visa recognition or a common refugee visa, so that refugees can travel and participate in activities north and south of the border.

If I can just go right back to one of the first things I said, one issue is how little consideration has been given to the needs of Northern Ireland. In the new plan for immigration consultation, there is barely any



reference to Northern Ireland. The extent to which these new powers, which have been implemented primarily to address the Channel crossings, are going to be applied in the land-border context is unclear. If so, what will the proliferation of increased powers to search, seize and arrest look like on a land border? They will be contentious, clearly, in the context here and arguably inconsistent with the principles of the Belfast/Good Friday agreement. There are an awful lot of worrying provisions in the new plan for immigration that have not been given due consideration by the UK Government.

Q67 Stephen Farry: To develop on that, Liz, as a follow-up question, we seem to have a situation where the Home Office is saying, "There will be no physical checks on the land border, but at the same time there may well be checks happening somewhere". There is also uncertainty around documentation as to whether people are going to be required to apply to do electronic entry registration on every occasion that they cross or otherwise. Those things are all very much up in the air. Are those the types of issues that you are concerned about or does it go beyond those as well?

Liz Griffith: In 2009, 12 years ago, the Equality and Human Rights Commission did a piece of work looking at racial profiling in the Common Travel Area. It said that the practice of singular nationalities and people visibly from a minority ethnic background should be ceased immediately. That recommendation sadly still stands one decade on. There is so little attention given to this. There is no equality impact assessment of people who are being identified by immigration enforcement. The Home Office is not collecting or publishing equality data. We just do not know how the existing checks are playing out, although Lilian and Ronnie will be able to give you many anecdotal examples. This is the existing state. This is why we are so worried about the implementation of the new plan for immigration.

Q68 Stephen Farry: We are not just talking here about the land border on the island of Ireland. This also applies in terms of Irish Sea crossings, too. You are nodding, Liz.

Chair: For the record, could you say yea or nay?

Liz Griffith: Sorry, yes, absolutely. This ethnic profiling happens on travel between Great Britain and Northern Ireland in addition to travel across the land border from the south.

Lilian Seenoi-Barr: The issue of the Common Travel Area is something that is very close to my heart, because I am somebody who has been impacted directly by racial profiling and also supporting people who are currently going through the same challenges. I got my British citizenship in 2018, but before that I had been travelling a lot. For people who do not know the Maasai community, we are travellers; we travel a lot. It is good to discover the environment that you live in.



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You may be thinking that the racial profiling that I experienced was crossing the border between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland. It was actually from Northern Ireland to Scotland. This was not something that happened once. I got my refugee status in 2012, and each year I like going to Edinburgh. Every time I travelled to Edinburgh I was stopped, and I was the only person. Our car was the only car that would be stopped when everybody else was allowed to move. I would be asked how I got my refugee status and how I got my travel document when the Home Office already hold that information. When I travelled to Brussels through Belfast, I was still stopped and detained. I was asked how I got my travel document and if it was even mine in the first place. It was just because I looked different. I had a different hairstyle at that point, which looked different from my travel document photo.

I applied for a British passport hoping that this would stop. In 2019, when I went to Scotland again, the same thing happened to me. It really does not matter whether you become British, Irish or you maintain your citizenship. You will encounter racial profiling travelling across the border. It is getting worse because of the new immigration legislation that is coming in, particularly after Brexit. We have seen people being stopped well before there was an agreement. What was shocking for me was that in 2018 the Prime Minister in the United Kingdom and Taoiseach in the Republic of Ireland quickly came together to issue a memorandum of understanding—I even know the time it happened, because it happened in May 2018—to protect the Common Travel Area and the citizens of Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland.

I do not know whether they forget or whether it is the same trend, but Northern Ireland has now become a global community and there is stand-alone legislation that discriminates against people who are not born in Northern Ireland or who hold passports from other countries who have the legal right to live, work and study in Northern Ireland. These are not foreigners. These are people who live within our society. Most of them would have indefinite leave to remain, so they are not looking to leave. They have been allowed to live on the island of Ireland, but will have to apply for a visa to travel across the border.

Ronnie Vellem: I just want to add to what Lilian has said in terms of racial profiling. It is a big problem for minority ethnic communities. I have had quite a few incidents where I have been stopped. The first time I was travelling to Dublin on business, I was supposed to attend a meeting and I was using a travel document. In my travel document it would have listed the countries I could travel to without a visa, and Ireland was one of them. We got to Dundalk and the train was stopped. The police moved in and very much targeted me, because I looked different. They said, "Can I please see your travel documents?" I showed them the travel document, and they said, "Can you please just step out? We need to talk to you for a while".



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After a while, without an explanation, I was asked to go to the police station. The train had left, and I was told, "The legislation has just changed. You cannot travel to the Republic without a visa, even if you have a travel document". That was it, and then I was put on the bus back to Belfast. We can look at the restrictions being placed on ethnic minorities. They limit the opportunities for people, whether that is doing business in the Republic or just travelling for leisure.

In another incident, I was working as a key worker for the Syrian refugee project for Extern and I was supporting families in Newry. Somehow I missed the turning to Newry. Just as I missed the turn, I could see a car pull out; it had been parked just by the road behind me. Once I realised I had missed the turn, I was going to turn back to go back to Newry, but before I had even had the opportunity, I was stopped by the police and they said, "Can we please see your travel documents?" I showed them and I explained where I was going. They asked where I was going, and I explained that I was going to Newry but had just missed the turn. I went through the whole process where they had to phone the Home Office to see whether I was a refugee. I said, "Do you know what? I hold a British passport. I don't have it here, because I didn't need it. I was travelling to Newry". It took more than 30 minutes for them to go through that whole process.

What really struck me was the way I was stopped. As soon as they saw that there was a black person driving that car, they stopped my car. I do not think they were stopping every car along the road there. Unfortunately, racial profiling is very much in existence. I had been stopped that first time in Dundalk when I was using that travel document. I remember I was coming from France and I was asked to step aside.

Chair: Ronnie, I am sorry to interrupt. We are pressed for time, because we have our second session keyed up. We have got a very good and worrying picture from the experiences that you and Lilian have—

Stephen Farry: Chair, it is worth saying that, from the responses, this is an issue both for the UK Border Force and An Garda Síochána in the Irish Republic as well.

Chair: Yes, indeed. That is a point well made. I am going to draw this panel to a close. Let me thank, on behalf of the Committee, our three witnesses for your attendance and answers to our questions. I hope from your point of view it has been useful. It certainly has been from our point of view, and we are grateful for your time. We will now turn to our second panel, please.