



# Northern Ireland Affairs Committee

## Oral evidence: [The experience of minority ethnic and migrant people in Northern Ireland](#), HC 159

Wednesday 20 October 2021

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[Watch the meeting](#)

Members present: Simon Hoare (Chair); Scott Benton; Mr Gregory Campbell; Stephen Farry; Mary Kelly Foy; Mr Robert Goodwill; Claire Hanna; Ian Paisley.

Questions 89 - 124

### Witnesses

I: Michele Janes, Head of Barnardo's NI, Barnardo's Northern Ireland; Geraldine McGahey OBE, Chief Commissioner, Equality Commission for Northern Ireland; Paul Noonan, Senior Policy Officer, Public Policy and Strategic Engagement Team, Equality Commission for Northern Ireland.

Written evidence from witnesses:

- [Barnardo's Northern Ireland \(NI\)](#)



## Examination of Witnesses

Witnesses: Michele Janes, Geraldine McGahey and Paul Noonan.

Q89 **Chair:** Good morning, colleagues, and good morning to our witnesses as we begin another session of our inquiry with regard to the experience of minority ethnic and migrant people in Northern Ireland.

Colleagues, since we met last, we will all be aware of the sad passing of the former Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, James Brokenshire. James was a man of huge commitment, as we know, to Northern Ireland. He had great patience, friendliness and calm in often very trying circumstances. He always saw the best in people and tried to work a way through some very thorny issues. We mourn his passing and we send our deepest condolences as a Committee to his wife and to his family.

Let us turn to our question session this morning. Could I ask you, please, whether you think in broad terms the issues and needs of ethnic minority and migrant communities in Northern Ireland have sufficient recognition as a group with specific needs and are given sufficient priority by policymakers and politicians in Government today? Michele Janes, do you want to take that first?

**Michele Janes:** Good morning, everybody. I am Michele Janes. I am head of Barnardo's here in Northern Ireland. We are the largest children's charity in Northern Ireland. In the last year we worked with over 18,000 children, young people and families across more than 45 different services and programmes. We have over 25 years' experience supporting minority ethnic and newcomer children, young people and families here. Our evidence is informed by our service experience; that includes separated and unaccompanied children, children in families who are refugees and newcomers to Northern Ireland and also families in the Irish Traveller community.

Your question is about how they are supported or whether they are well supported here in Northern Ireland.

Q90 **Chair:** The question is recognition and priority. Those are the two issues.

**Michele Janes:** The experience of children is often overlooked in all policy around minority ethnic and migrant people. In particular, when we talk about refugees and asylum seekers, people often forget that children make up a large proportion of new arrivals in Northern Ireland. We have figures from the Department for Communities that show that children made up 47% of the people that arrived in Northern Ireland through the Syrian vulnerable persons relocation scheme.

For us, in all of the policies that have been developed, which are yet to be implemented here in Northern Ireland, there is a real lack of focus on children's needs and what we need to do to accommodate them when we are developing or implementing policy.



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We commissioned some research just before the lockdown started specifically looking at the experiences of Syrian refugee children here in Northern Ireland. It is called *A New Life for Me* and it explores in detail the experience of Syrian refugee children and their families. The report outlines how family dynamics and experiences in school influence children's integration into life in Northern Ireland. When we look at where policy has gotten to in relation to these children and any newcomer child in Northern Ireland, it has really been stopped.

There have been policies developed, as I have said, but, actually, they have not been implemented or they really do need to be refreshed. If you think about the racial equality strategy in 2015, the recommendations from the initial strategy still have not been implemented here. It really needs to be refreshed to reflect the changes that have happened in Northern Ireland. We are the only part of the UK without a refugee integration strategy. One of the key recommendations from our report, *A New Life for Me*, which is the voice of Syrian children here in Northern Ireland, was that integration is a two-way process. We need a strategy to inform that process.

From Barnardo's Northern Ireland's perspective, throughout all of this children must be a particular focus when considering integration and racial equality. Children are often hidden in the conversations, but they are very much impacted by the challenges that are faced by minority ethnic and migrant communities here in Northern Ireland.

Q91 **Chair:** Thank you; that is helpful. Geraldine, what is your take on this?

**Geraldine McGahey:** Good morning. My name is Geraldine McGahey. I am the chief commissioner of the Equality Commission. As an independent body established by the Northern Ireland Act 1998, we have a remit that covers this particular area.

My view would be that ethnic minority people have generally been overlooked in terms of policymaking. My reason for saying that is that section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act requires public bodies to ensure or take steps to ensure equality of opportunity between the people of different equality grounds, and one of those is particularly race. To do that, it requires public authorities to have robust data in relation to that sector. As we do not have any form of ethnic monitoring in Northern Ireland, I would say that all policy development to this date has been flawed, in that it has not been built on robust data.

The situation is showing green roots of development. There is a growing desire to be inclusive and to ensure that policy development is as comprehensive as it should be. The Black Lives Matter movement that took place last year has really spurred a commitment among our political leaders. We have seen some movement on their part to ensure that steps are taken. It has been a very negative picture to this point in time. The grassroots development that has taken place needs further encouragement and development. We very quickly need to see reform to



legislation, both in terms of the race relations order and the fair employment and treatment order, to ensure that public authorities take the necessary steps to ensure that the needs of ethnic minority people, regardless of their status or how long they have been here, are properly accounted for.

Q92 **Chair:** Mr Noonan, did you want to add anything?

**Paul Noonan:** Yes. First of all, to introduce myself, I am Paul Noonan. I am the senior policy officer; the racial equality policy is one of my areas of responsibility. I have been involved with the issue of racial equality in Northern Ireland for some time, having, prior to joining the commission, been involved in the campaign to have legislation prohibiting racial discrimination introduced in Northern Ireland some 32 years after it was first introduced in Great Britain.

I would note that it is widely accepted by stakeholders that very little progress materialised as a result of the first racial equality strategy, 2005 to 2010. That was followed by a five-year hiatus before the current strategy was introduced. The commission was critical of the content of the strategy. At the consultation phase we argued that most of the 11 actions set out were process-orientated, i.e. a review of the legislation and not reform of the legislation, so a review in the case for ethnic monitoring, a review of the minority ethnic development fund and so on.

In terms of the political priority given to the strategy, it is of note that the First and Deputy First Minister attended the integral meeting of its racial equality subgroup, established to advise the Executive on racial equality policy matters in 2016, but Ministers did not meet with the group again until February 2021. The racial equality subgroup, the body that advises the Executive Office, has recently had a review of progress; among the issues that it raised was the lack of access to Ministers and ministerial accountability for the racial equality strategy. I understand that it has been proposed that, going forward, Ministers will meet with the chair of the subgroup on a six-monthly basis; that is a development certainly that the commission would welcome.

Q93 **Chair:** Thank you for those opening comments. I have two further sub-questions that flow from them. Ms McGahey, I would ask you this as the chief commissioner for the Equality Commission. With perfect legitimacy, there is a resolute focus on trying to secure equality, parity or balance—call it what you will—between the two majority traditions within Northern Ireland, but focusing on that important issue often means that everything else takes a very minor role.

**Geraldine McGahey:** Yes, we have a history and it is totally understandable that what is perceived as green and orange politics takes centre stage, but our politicians are coming around to recognising that there are other issues to be dealt with in Northern Ireland. We have plenty of evidence to demonstrate to anyone who cares to look at



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Northern Ireland that for too long we have been dominated by green and orange politics.

As I said in my opening comments, things are slowly starting to change. We have seen evidence in the Assembly that all of the MLAs are keen to ensure that ethnic minority people have the rights and obligations that Northern Ireland has for them. They are keen to ensure that they are seen to be addressing the needs of ethnic minority people. A lot more has to be done. It is too easy within our Assembly to be divided on issues, especially coming up to election time. It is wholly understandable, but we are starting to see a movement. The North West Migrants Forum had an event in Stormont in September, which was a year on from a very public debate in relation to the racial equality strategy.

We now need to see that interest and that commitment translated into hard actions. It will be interesting to see if the election campaigns coming for the next election in May actually move beyond some of the green and orange issues and start to take account of other people in our society, who play a very valuable role.

**Q94 Chair:** I will go out on a limb on this, though I am very happy to be corrected: 99.9% of policymakers and politicians in Stormont do not come from either a minority ethnic or migrant background. If I can summarise in terms, one of the impressions that certainly I have received from some of the witnesses in earlier sessions and in subsequent conversation is that there is a sense of tick-box delivery being done to people, rather than an open-hearted spirit to do things with people. Is that a concern that you share, from your professional experiences?

**Geraldine McGahey:** It is. I share that concern, but there are a number of reasons behind it. If you go back to what I said earlier about section 75, the availability of data, how policy is developed, how it is reviewed and how new policy is developed, there is a serious lack of data in relation to the ethnic minority sector. There is a failing on public authorities in that regard, but the other side of the coin is the representation of ethnic minorities in public life.

Ethnic minorities are a small part of our population. It is growing. I believe that census data cannot be relied upon in terms of its accuracy, for a number of reasons. However, public bodies need to take steps to ensure that there is representation from ethnic minority communications in terms of their boards, political representation, et cetera. That is down to political parties too.

We need to do an awful lot of work with ethnic minority communities. They are not a homogenous unit, they are very diverse and they do not necessarily have the confidence or the skills to be able to take part in politics or in a public debate or be part of that public body mechanism. We as Government and as public officials have a lot more work to do in terms of building that confidence, building the resilience and enabling the ethnic minorities to develop that voice.



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My conversations with ethnic minority communities over the past 18 months since I became chief commissioner have demonstrated very clearly to me that there is a strong willingness among members of those communities to take part in public life, but they do not have the support, they do not have the confidence nor do they have the platform from which to project their voice. There is a great desire among that community as well to try to find a way to unify their voice on certain issues. There are concerns regarding gatekeepers.

They are really very keen to have some form of support to enable them to identify issues that are coming to them, to have a voice that deals with specific issues rather than the sector as a whole. As we see the racial equality strategy now being developed and given a bit of a new impetus, there is a willingness, for example, with the Travellers subgroup, which forms part of the racial equality subgroup. Now we are starting to see real voices come through from those sectors to inform the debate, but we as a society need to do an awful lot more to work with ethnic minority communities to develop their voices.

**Q95 Chair:** Does your commission have a template of best practice that you share with Stormont or Northern Irish local government? How do you as a commission ensure that you are getting people in to hear their voices from the communities that we are talking about? How many sit on the commission or committees of the commission?

**Geraldine McGahey:** The appointment of commissioners, first of all, is undertaken by the Northern Ireland Office and the Executive Office in partnership. The recruitment of commissioners is undertaken in line with merit principles. However, we do strive to have representatives from various sectors. We do have representation at the moment from the ethnic minority community and the disabled sector, et cetera. We try to ensure that is continued. However, it is only one person from the ethnic minority communities and we could do with more, but people from those communities need to come forward to put themselves in the position where they can be appointed.

In terms of best practice and guidance that we issue, we issue a number of policy position papers and recommendations. We offer training and advice. Our website is full of best practice and guidance and we run a number of events over the course of the year to inform society as to their obligations and how they can support people. We are very vocal in terms of the need to promote the participation of people from ethnic minority communities in public life, whether that be political, boards or even involvement in their local communities.

**Q96 Ian Paisley:** This is really specifically for the commissioner, because the commissioner is probably going to be best placed to give us an overview of this. How prepared and receptive do you think Northern Ireland is and its policymakers are to the potential influx of Hongkongers in the years ahead, especially given that thousands of them have applied for BNO status and could end up choosing Northern Ireland as a part of the UK to



come and settle.

**Geraldine McGahey:** The public authorities are willing to engage and support. However, if we were to look at experiences to date in terms of asylum seekers, that is a very poor and scattered picture of ability to meet their needs. The Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission and the independent monitoring authority in terms of immigration have a role to play in this as well, as do many other stakeholders, but my view is that we as a society in Northern Ireland need to do a lot more to co-ordinate our approach to services for newcomers and asylum seekers.

The experience that is building up to the delivery of the refugee integration strategy will be most beneficial in terms of developing the services that we will offer to Hong Kong people. That strategy is currently with the Executive and we believe it will be imminently out for consultation. That will see a massive improvement in terms of how public authorities work together, both at local government and central Government level in Northern Ireland.

It is up to all stakeholders—the commission, politicians and public authorities themselves—to make sure that we do work in partnership and that we learn from the mistakes that we have made to date. This is a new opportunity when the strategy is sent out to consultation to really get our act together and make sure that we provide the service that these people need and deserve.

Q97 **Ian Paisley:** You think there is definitely an awareness and an alertness to the potential that there could be thousands of Hongkongers making their way not only to the United Kingdom but specifically to Northern Ireland.

**Geraldine McGahey:** Society does not recognise or have a grasp on the numbers that might be involved. There is awareness that they will be coming. The general public and general communities are very welcoming to newcomers. There have been very unfortunate incidents in the recent past where asylum seekers were treated quite badly in terms of suspicions. Media coverage of those events highlighted local politicians in terms of their suspicions and fears of these people coming into their community, but what the media did not show was the ability of the community to rally round.

There is a lot to be done in terms of raising awareness as to why these people are here and what their needs are and demonstrating to wider society that they are not a threat, that they need support, that they have been through trauma and that they need to come together and work with people, because integration is a two-way process. We cannot just expect newcomers to integrate into our society. We need to meet them halfway in this process.

Q98 **Ian Paisley:** Given we have practically full employment in my own constituency and many parts of the country, the influx of new blood and



new talent will be exceptionally welcome for a lot of companies in Northern Ireland. That is a unique selling point that we have.

**Geraldine McGahey:** Yes, I absolutely agree with you. The job vacancies that currently exist that cannot be filled demonstrate very clearly that we need new talent, because, as new talent and new people come into our society, it increases our diversity and enriches our society. It is to everyone's benefit that we get our act together, have a proper integration strategy, work with these people to make them part of our community and embrace their differences to make us better.

Q99 **Scott Benton:** Good morning to all our witnesses. Ms McGahey, in your opening statement you alluded to the lack of ethnic minority data in terms of monitoring different communities, in particular perhaps in relation to their religious orientation, for example. What steps do you think the Executive can take to ensure that they engage better with ethnic minorities in different communities to ensure they have that wealth of experience and background about how people live their lives, so, primarily, that can be reflected in public policy and the provision of public services? That is the first part.

The second part is specifically on the data. How do you think the Executive can go about increasing their data knowledge of those communities to again ensure that we learn from their experiences and embed that in public policy?

**Geraldine McGahey:** As I alluded to earlier, section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act places a responsibility and duty on public authorities to ensure equality of opportunity and to promote good relations. There is no legal obligation upon public authorities to gather ethnic minority data and knowledge on the wide issues, apart from four specific areas, which included health and social welfare, et cetera.

The Assembly currently recognises the need for that kind of information. As a commission, we have been very vocal for many years in terms of trying to ensure that there would be reform of race legislation to ensure that such data and information was available to everyone. The new drive that has been put behind the racial equality strategy on foot of the Black Lives Matter movement and on foot of the debate that members had in the Assembly has demonstrated very clearly that they are now keen to ensure that that legislation is in place and the data is collected and universally shared across the public sector, to the point where the Executive Office commissioned a report by Dr Russell in November 2020 to look at how ethnic minority monitoring could be embedded within the public sector in Northern Ireland.

They are currently reviewing the recommendations of his report, and that will look at reforming race equality legislation to ensure that data collection is embedded, but once that data comes forward, it is what you are going to do with that data that is becoming really crucial. That is where the spotlight needs to be shone, because we need to have some



form of a hub for analysing that data and ensuring that public authorities, whether they be local government or central Government, have access to the right data, that it is kept up to date and that there is analysis of the data itself, so that it is not used in isolation and that as many different strands of it can be fully analysed. Such a hub is established in England and Scotland, and we need the same in our own jurisdiction.

In addition to that kind of ethnic minority data and the development of race equality legislation, we as a Commission have also been calling for a reform of the fair employment and treatment order legislation, because that legislation focuses on two points. It focuses on the gender balance of employers and it also focuses on the religious breakdown, again on that green and orange divide. We would like to see that legislation changed, so that employers have information about the makeup of the workforce right across the spectrum in society, looking at minority ethnic issues, their religions and their nationality breakdowns as well, because any good employer will want to know that information, to be able to ensure that their workforce's needs are taken care of and that there is a good welcoming culture within their organisation.

Currently, there is no requirement for employers to have that information. We have been pushing for reform on legislation on two counts, because it is only with that data that we will be able, as a society, to really understand how our society is made up and the kind of services that we collectively need.

Covid-19 has been a real strong spotlight on this particular issue. As a commission we have been writing to the First and Deputy First Minister, as well as the Health Minister and NISRA, our own statistics and research agency, to look at the data and to implore them that the data is broken down, so that society and all public authorities can be aware of the needs and the impacts of even just Covid on our entire society. We have not been able to produce the data and the information that you have been able to produce in England. We just do not have it. We cannot even start to look at the impacts of Covid on ethnic minority communities. That is a real disservice that we are doing to a very strong and vibrant part of our society. We are actually breaching our moral obligations.

**Q100 Scott Benton:** Notwithstanding the improvements to racial equality legislation that you have just alluded to in and around data, what is your current assessment of protections offered by the racial equality legislation for ethnic minority people in Northern Ireland?

**Geraldine McGahey:** It does not go far enough and it leaves various gaps within legislation where we are doing a disservice and we are perpetuating inequalities for the race sector. Our race legislation was developed in 1997, a long time after you had legislation in GB, and that covered a very wide spectrum. It was very comprehensive. However, it was amended in 2003 to take account of the race directive and, in doing so, it left out the issue of colour and the issue of nationality.



That in itself left difficulties for people to seek redress under the law, under those grounds. It also introduced other discrepancies that needed to be put right. In GB that was put right in 2010 with the single Equality Act. Those shortcomings were addressed and the legislation was amended to strengthen it. We in Northern Ireland still do not have that and we have been calling for that since 2009.

I am hopeful now that the review of race equality legislation that is currently taking place on foot of Dr Russell's recommendations will address some of those issues, but we wait to see. We have not had the consultation be issued to us or to any of the other stakeholders as yet, but we desperately need that legislation to be addressed. We have been calling for that now since the mid-2000s. We are now in 2021 and still nothing has been done. It is very shameful.

**Q101 Scott Benton:** Thank you; that is helpful. I think you have answered this question, but just to tie off this section, how do you compare the progress in terms of racial equality in Northern Ireland with what has happened within Great Britain, for example, over the last three or four decades? You have alluded to the two different parallels within various legislative realms and progress over many decades. Is there anything you would like to add that you have not already alluded to on that difference within what is essentially the same country?

**Geraldine McGahey:** Bearing in mind that we are all part of the United Kingdom, we are in the dark ages currently with the legislative framework that we have. We are in the dark ages in comparison to what is being operated in GB across the entire equality legislative framework, not just in terms of race. It is to our shame that we have not updated our legislation. To have been calling for strengthening of legislation and legal reforms from 2008 to 2021 without any movement is absolutely shameful, and it is not just the Equality Commission that has been calling for this. This has been recommended on foot of observations and reports in relation to CERD and various other international frameworks.

We are so caught up in orange and green issues and trying to maintain peace in line with the Good Friday agreement that the focus does not spread out over other issues in our society. We get to a certain point in terms of consultation or promoting legislative reform, and then our parties cannot agree and it gets put on a backburner.

The age GFS legislation in terms of age discrimination is an example at hand. The Assembly went out to consultation in 2016, various responses came back that required amendments to the policy position and then our two main parties could not agree in terms of what happened on that. Then we had a hiatus in terms of the Assembly not sitting, they came back into power, then we have Covid and the saga goes on and on. You cannot always say it is down to political difference. Other circumstances have interfered in the meantime as well, but as a society we need to sit back and take a look at where we are and what really needs to be done to bring this up into a modern age.



Northern Ireland had a long history of being at the forefront in terms of its equality framework and its legislative basis. We have lost that position and we are at serious risk of falling way behind and to being not a developed country.

**Q102 Mr Campbell:** Welcome to the witnesses. The issue of ethnic monitoring and the lack of it, which, Ms McGahey, you alluded to earlier, is an issue that came up with other witnesses before the Committee several weeks ago. There was an issue, which you may have read about as the press reported it, in terms of unfortunate attacks on ethnic minority communities. There was an indication about the lack of monitoring not ensuring that people knew exactly in what communities ethnic minorities were residing.

I made the point that if the majority of ethnic minority people who arrive in Northern Ireland end up living in unionist communities, it would not be really a surprise if the majority of attacks occurred in unionist areas. There was an unfortunate misinterpretation of that at the Committee, but that seems to me to be an example of the lack of monitoring in a very real sense, because people's lives can be put at risk. Are there any other issues in terms of services that would be available and whether the implementation of a monitoring process would enable groups like yourself and other Government Departments to better deliver services where they are most needed?

**Geraldine McGahey:** Absolutely, it affects every aspect of public life and public policy. Just to go back to the point that you made in terms of where ethnic minority communities are housed or where they are located, you are absolutely right, in the fact that that data is not available. I am aware of the discussions that took place in different fora and including evidence given to this Committee, where perhaps there was insinuation that attacks were taking place in one community more than another. I would have to say that there is no evidence really to support that.

As policymakers and as a commission, we do not have the evidence to say that attacks come from one community more than from another, for the very reasons that you have indicated. Academic researchers would agree as well. They cannot agree that there is any influence in terms of unionist or republican/nationalist views towards ethnic minority communities.

If we look at every aspect of public life, in terms of health, looking at ethnic minorities and their multiple identities and ensuring that services are tailored to their needs is important; in terms of immigration policies, for example, ethnic minority data is really essential for that, and in terms of our schools and the provisions that we give to newcomers and where they are actually located; and in terms of victim support for ethnic minorities who suffer attacks, we need to have data as to where that is taking place.



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We do not know the number of ethnic minorities coming in as asylum seekers and where they are located, because that data is not unique to Northern Ireland. If we do not know that, how can we ensure that services are located in the right place? We do not know the number of asylum seekers and newcomers who may have suffered torture in their previous life. We do not have support services for that.

Right across the spectrum of education, health, employment and housing, all of those issues need robust disaggregated data to be able to be tailored to the needs of the society at that local point. It is right across the spectrum, in terms of where we need ethnic monitoring.

**Mr Campbell:** I just wonder if Ms Janes or Mr Noonan had anything to add to that.

Q103 **Chair:** Let us hear from Ms Janes, just to have a non-commission voice. There is nothing wrong with a commission voice; let me make that very clear, but just in the sense of fair play and variety—our own equality, if you will.

**Michele Janes:** In some areas, the Northern Ireland Assembly and Executive have shown a real willingness to take an innovative approach with, for example, the consortium model that has been delivered around the Syrian VPR scheme in Northern Ireland, so this links to Mr Paisley's question as well.

We have been resettling families right across Northern Ireland, so we know that there are services in development. However, to Ms McGahey's point, because we have not got fully comprehensive data about where everybody is, there are myths that they are all in Belfast—that everybody comes and they just live in Belfast—and that is not accurate. A lot of families and children do flock to Belfast because that is where the majority of services are. It is where there will be more services to meet religious and cultural needs.

We know where the Syrian families have been resettled because we have been involved in that work. However, when we are involved in other work we do not have a full picture, and then it is really hard to develop and provide support in the right place at the right time for the right people. It is really important to get that information.

Geraldine might have another take on this, but a lot of our children and families will have contacted the Home Office and it is about how we share that data in order to inform the development of services here in Northern Ireland. I will give you an example. We have a range of services in our work with minority ethnic and migrant children and families. We have independent guardians here in Northern Ireland who support unaccompanied, separated or trafficked children.

When we first started this work, the Department of Health told us that we could expect around 12 children arriving every year in Northern Ireland.



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We are three years into that piece of work and we have supported over 121 children. That gives you an idea of the numbers that people do not know about. If you are designing a piece of work or support for very traumatised children and you are expecting there to be 12 and you have 121, that is a very different piece of work. It also shows you the lack of knowledge that exists in our systems that means it is difficult for us to inform what we need to develop.

**Paul Noonan:** In relation to the issue of ethnic monitoring, the original racial equality strategy, 2005 to 2010, captured the essence of the importance of ethnic monitoring when it said that having a racial equality strategy without ethnic monitoring is akin to striving for good financial management without financial records. Really, the purpose of ethnic monitoring is to ensure that the racial equality strategy is working effectively, so it can give information on outcomes such as the number of people from minority ethnic groups accessing services, such as health, the outcomes from services, such as the education system, differences in morbidity and mortality and so on.

It is really an essential tool for measuring racial equality and finding out where there are problems, and then the availability of data allows public authorities to investigate what is causing a particular problem in terms of access or outcomes and take steps to address that.

In relation to the point that Mr Campbell made in terms of racial attacks, I find that the statistic contained in Justice Murrin's review of hate crime legislation is a very striking one: there is a one-in-31 chance for a member of a minority ethnic community to experience a racial attack as opposed to a one-in-1,777 chance of a member of the Northern Ireland community experiencing a sectarian attack. I assume the reason for that is because the ethnic minority community is smaller and more visible; people are often identifiable by the colour of their skin. Nonetheless, that is a very striking and very shocking statistic and we look forward to the response of the Department of Justice to Justice Murrin's recommendations to tackle this egregious problem.

Q104 **Chair:** The absence of data is coming through loud and clear, in terms of either absence in its totality or its amalgamation with Scottish data and, therefore, you are unable to carve out a separate Northern Irish perception of it all. If you are a politician or a policymaker today, you have to be pretty tin-eared, surely, not to understand the importance of getting racial equality right.

With this lack of hunger for data, commissioning of data or lobbying organisations such as the Home Office for data, from which sensible, grown-up public policy can flow, based on statistical evidence and knowledge, should we have a concern that the toleration, if you will, of the data and information vacuum underpins the growing suspicion that, in actual fact, there is merely lip service interest paid to this against the perpetual struggle of trying to balance the sometimes competing needs of the green and orange communities, and that, therefore, this is a



fundamental failure of local political awareness?

**Geraldine McGahey:** I know Michele will want to come in on this too. It is understandable how someone would view it as a fundamental failure of our political structures to have this issue addressed.

The reason why I was saying that I see green shoots coming is because, although there has been no action really taken on racial equality strategies from 2005, the debate that happened last year and the Black Lives Matter movement of the summer of last year really started to give a voice to black and ethnic minority communities in Northern Ireland. Our politicians are not unaware of our wider society and they are not unresponsive to public voices generally. It encouraged them then to look inwardly and see what exactly as a society and as an Assembly we are doing to address these issues. In fairness, that is where the debate came about in September of last year.

Q105 **Chair:** That may be right and that may point to these encouraging green shoots, but, as welcome as it may be that there was a renaissance of interest in this policy area, the fact that it took, for want of a better phrase, a civil rights movement, the Black Lives Matter movement, growing up from the murder of a black man in America by the police in order to reignite it of itself surely speaks to this concern that I have that, as a public policy challenge, it is just not taken seriously and is not on the Richter scale.

**Geraldine McGahey:** I would have to agree with you in many ways. It was not on the Richter scale at all. It did not appear on the radar in any meaningful way, and how our racial equality strategy was dealt with from 2005 to 2010 and then five years with nothing really drove home the fact that it was not an important issue. It did not get the credit, the determination and even debate that it deserved up until this point, and that is shameful on all of us and our ability as a commission to make sure that this was really front and centre stage. We did lobby greatly for this, but society and our politicians were not in a place where it was given meaningful time. That is now changing in fairness to them, but you are right in saying that there has been too long with no drive for change.

Q106 **Chair:** I have taken a note, as I am sure others have, of your line, Ms McGahey, that we are in the dark ages across the equality framework; that was a very powerful overarching observation of how you see it.

I want to turn back to Barnardo's. As a Committee we want to turn now to the provision of education. We know the importance of education. It is the provider of keys to all of life's doors, opportunities, aspiration and the like. From your point of view, Ms Janes, is the Executive doing a great job supporting minority ethnic children and young people in their educational experience in Northern Ireland? How would you rate it out of 10, 1 being shocking and 10 being absolutely marvellous? If it is somewhere in between, what could they do better?



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**Michele Janes:** Just to finish on your last question, I completely agree. What sort of message do we give our children, our young people and their families here in Northern Ireland if we do not know who they are, where they are and what they need? How can we plan to meet those needs if we do not know who they are, where they are and what they need? What value do they take from us not having that sort of data available?

How do we plan to meet their needs? When we think about minority ethnic children's education or experiences of education in Northern Ireland, one of the key groups that we need to talk about are Traveller children. We know that children from the Traveller community often have the poorest education outcomes, and that has not changed in decades. We know that there is work ongoing with the Department of Education. We know that there is work ongoing in the Education Authority here. We know this is a complex issue, and we know it is a complex issue that is influenced both by the community norms within the Traveller community but also by the experience of Traveller children when they go to school.

One of the key challenges for those children is the high drop-out rate between primary and post-primary, and we have developed a Traveller transition service. We have worked very closely with our colleagues in health and education to identify those children at that stage and try to support them on a group basis and an individual basis to continue with their education, but there needs to be more. We see there is a development of a strategy, and they have called them "newcomer children". Not all migrant or ethnic minority children in Northern Ireland are newcomers. We really need to think about our language, how we talk about our children and the message that gives them.

When we think about our Traveller children who are born here in Northern Ireland, we need to think about how our education system meets their needs in school. Again, that goes back to the data and information in terms of how many there are and where they are. How do we meet their needs if we do not know that information?

Many of our Traveller children tell us that they have been bullied in school. They talk about being called racially offensive names by their peers. Parents tell us that they do not consider that they have good relationships with schools, because schools do not communicate with them in a way that is accessible to them, and this applies to our families from refugee and asylum-seeking communities, where English is not the first language. Schools just send out letters written in English. If I do not read or speak English, there is a barrier straightaway to me accessing education and supporting my children to access education, so we need to do better. We need to think bigger than, "I will just put a wee letter in the post or send an email and that will be okay for everybody". It is not.

We need to look at the accessibility of our systems, whether that is in education or health. We need to look at the language we use, whether



that is verbal or written; if it needs to be a different language, we need to look at how we do that. Going back to the issue you have raised about only seeing it in orange and green, we are actually only seeing it as white Northern Irish English-speaking families, rather than our communities being made up of a whole variety of cultures now. We need to address the challenges around accessibility in our systems to ensure that we meet their needs when they are in school.

There has been some fantastic work that we have seen from schools in relation to the welcoming of the Syrian families in Northern Ireland. We saw the Department of Education identify additional funding to put into schools. Is it enough? No, it is not enough, because, again, there is not just children arriving in Northern Ireland through regulated programmes, like the vulnerable persons resettlement scheme. There are children arriving in Northern Ireland all the time, and it is about an equality of opportunity for them. If you arrive through a resettlement scheme, there may be money identified to support the school that you attend. If you do not arrive through a resettlement scheme, is there the same sort of resource available? There is almost a disparity in the treatment of people who arrive in Northern Ireland.

As Geraldine said earlier, they are not a homogenous group. We need to look at where they are. I keep going back to it: we do not have the data; how can we accurately and appropriately meet the needs of some of the most vulnerable children arriving here? There are huge issues around complex trauma. Geraldine highlighted this a wee bit earlier. Some of our children have witnessed some of the most horrific torture and violence, which we cannot even begin to imagine, and we need to ensure that the systems, whether in education, health or wherever they are, are offering trauma-informed services, but, again, we need to know where they are and how we can do that in order to support them in the right place at the right time.

Q107 **Chair:** That is a very powerful point. What about just the physical navigation around what remains a largely segregated educational system? You talked about funding to schools that are hosting and taking in new pupils from different communities. There was the famous anecdote that Warren Mitchell, the late actor, used to tell: that when he arrived in Belfast many years ago and he said, "You do not have to talk to me about all of this. I am Jewish", and somebody said to him, "Are you a Catholic Jew or are you a Protestant Jew?"

How do the schools get support to ensure that, for example, children coming from Syria are not asked that question, "Are you a Protestant Syrian or are you a Catholic Syrian?" How does the host school's cohort get prepared to receive new people? They will be small of number, great of need and needing a warm reception.

**Michele Janes:** I am not sure that they do get the support they need to prepare for that. I am not sure that Northern Ireland was prepared at all, given the way that we received the Syrian families. How do they continue



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to do that? Schools have actually done quite a good job. We see children who came to us speaking Arabic and maybe a bit of Turkish who now speak Arabic, Turkish, English fluently and some of them are even speaking Irish, so their ability to pick up language is one bit.

When families initially arrive in Northern Ireland we spent a whole week with them in a welcoming centre. There is a lot of work done to talk about our culture, our challenges and a bit about the dynamics here from everything around religion, about issues around what flags are, what flags mean and things like money. Our money is very difficult for people to understand because there are too many different varieties of it.

In terms of the religious bit, I am not sure that schools are giving the information. What we have found with our Syrian children specifically is that they will go into school and sometimes they are put into classes below their age range because we want to improve their English, but that then causes difficulties in them being able to build relationships with peers of their own age.

We have just seen children embracing their education, embracing being with other children and embracing the peace. People might think that that is a bit strange saying you are resettling families in Northern Ireland because they want peace. They are fleeing torture, war and trauma, but, actually, although we have had some incidents of racial hate crime, our children mostly have settled very well in school, and the orange-green bit has not been reported to me as being one of the key issues.

The key issues are those that I spoke about earlier around our Traveller children, communicating with the parents and engaging with parents in a manner that they understand, so they feel part of their education. We now have children from all over the world here, through our guardian scheme. Education is so important. They value it. They respect it. They want to learn. They want additional help to learn. We have some fantastic success stories. We have to ensure that they get the support in the system where they are at, because they will bring great things to us.

**Q108 Chair:** That is a point well made. As a Committee, we were at Queen's University the other week and we heard there from a number of the staff about their outreach and engagement. What is your view about how the universities are working to try to ensure that those at the right age who have recently arrived in Northern Ireland, or have been there since the age of 12 or 13—something of that nature—are alert to the opportunities and possibilities of university education?

**Michele Janes:** Queen's is my local university, so I know about them.

**Chair:** Other universities are available, of course.

**Michele Janes:** Yes, they are. Queen's has been a real support to us in terms of our work and providing a number of staff from the university who will provide translation and have been teaching staff here English



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and Arabic in order to improve our communication. In terms of access to higher education, I received some communication only on Monday, where Queen's were reaching out to say, "Are there any young people in your communities, whether from minority ethnic backgrounds, refugees, asylum seekers, Travellers or children who are in the looked-after children system, that we could support to access higher education?" Through schools we have seen a great uptake in terms of university placements.

The other thing I want to say is a lot of our children here in Northern Ireland leave Northern Ireland for university, but the children who I know of who have gone on to further or higher education from our arrivals from the Syrian families have stayed here in Northern Ireland and availed of Queen's. They have provided additional support and wrapped around some of those students, so there are excellent opportunities. We can always do more.

**Chair:** We can always do more, exactly, in all areas.

Q109 **Mr Goodwill:** In my constituency in Scarborough, we currently have 242 Afghan refugees who will be shortly going out all over the country, hopefully some to Northern Ireland. If our experience with the Syrian refugees we previously took is similar, then the schoolchildren probably have the least of the problems. Currently, some of them are at the top of their class, never mind catching up with the others. So far as the Afghans are concerned, many of the men speak good English. Some, in fact, worked as interpreters.

The problem we will be facing is with the women, who do not speak good English and who will not be in school getting an education. I just wondered if you have any plans to try to extend English education to women, which will help them not only speak English within the household, which is a good way of getting English right through the family, but will also get them into employment. Often women from Asian backgrounds are not encouraged by their husbands to go into employment. That is a great opportunity lost in our society.

**Michele Janes:** That is an excellent point. There are a couple of huge barriers for women in relation to learning English. For any families arriving here in Northern Ireland through the Syrian scheme, all family members were offered English language. Not everybody can access English language in one place.

Again, place is really important, but also we need to consider when we are planning English language classes that women predominantly, especially in these families that have come, are looking after children, so if we are going to provide English language classes, we need to provide really quality childcare, where the women feel that their children are safe and close by. Given the amount of trauma that they have experienced, in some of our families they want to keep their children really close by.



We also need to talk to them about how they want it, because some women do not want to learn English alongside men. Some do; some do not. We have seen some really successful initiatives here in Northern Ireland. For example, a lot of our women have accessed their English at the women's centre or things like a natter at the library. Before Covid, there would have been groups running in some of the libraries across Belfast, where women would go along and do a craft or an activity and learn their English that way. That way they build relationships, make friends and learn more about their communities.

We need to teach English in creative ways. Sitting in a classroom for some people is not an accessible way to do that. We had a piece of work here in Belfast called FLIP, the family learning integration project. We identified very early on that in order to engage a number of the families arriving here in Northern Ireland in the whole education of their children, we needed to help them improve their English. More of the men would have gone out to work, so it was really important that the mum, the wife or whatever role that the lady played felt that she was part of that. It is quite an empowering experience to feel part of that.

One of our key lessons we learned is that it must be flexible. It must be adapted to meet the specific needs of the ladies and also remember they are not a homogenous group. Just because they are a lady from a minority ethnic community, it does not mean that they learn the same as another lady from the same minority ethnic community.

As we understood more about the needs of our children and families, we adapted our services to make sure we were meeting their needs. When women said to us, "I cannot go to a classroom", we said, "Okay. Where is the best place for you?" That might have been in somebody's home. That might have been a Zoom thing. It might have been face-to-face learning with one other person. It might have been in a group. It might have been, as I said, a single-sex group. It might have been in the local library.

We have to ensure that, whatever we do, we adapt it to meet the needs of those who need us rather than us deciding today, "Actually, everybody can just go to an English language class. We have provided one". That goes back to what the Chair said about ticking a box. We cannot do this by ticking boxes. We need to be creative, flexible and responsive in our approaches to make sure we meet the needs of people who are coming here.

**Mr Goodwill:** Thank you; that is very encouraging.

Q110 **Mary Kelly Foy:** Welcome. I wanted to go back to the Travelling community, if I may, for a few minutes. We know that this group face huge inequalities in health and very low life expectancy due to jobs, poverty, housing, education and all of those wider determinants of health. Michele, you have covered there quite a bit about the education attainment and the inequity there, but I wonder if the commission thinks



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the Government understand these wider determinants and these specific needs that the Travelling community need in order to have a healthy life expectancy. Specifically around education, do you think that the Government are addressing it and even understand it?

**Geraldine McGahey:** I will go first and it might be beneficial for Paul to come in as well, because he is doing some work on the ground with the various Departments in relation to Travellers.

The Department of Education is starting to become aware of the need to get a better handle in terms of education of Traveller children. Schools in Northern Ireland receive an extra sum of money for every Traveller child that is enrolled in the school on a particular day within the academic year. It is called the school census day. There is no real accountability for how that money is spent. More recently, the publication of the Northern Ireland Audit Office's report in terms of how targeting social need funds are being spent by schools, which has highlighted the fact that there is no real accountability in how these extra sums are spent, is forcing the Department of Education to re-examine how they are delivering education programmes, particularly for Traveller children.

The success rate or the achievement rate of Traveller children is deplorable. To think that maybe up to 80% of Traveller children leave school with no GCSEs is a shocking statistic. Our education system is becoming more aware of the need to offer education in a way that meets the cultural needs of the Travelling community and their lifestyle. Paul, I know, has been involved in meetings with the Education Authority and Travelling reps over the past number of weeks in terms of how that is going to be developed to deliver a better outcome for children in the education system, so I might just hand over to Paul in that regard.

**Paul Noonan:** I would like to point out that, as a result of the efforts of the commission as a key driver around this issue of Travellers' education, in 2010 the Department set up a taskforce on Traveller education, which involved stakeholders, parents, teachers, representatives of all the education bodies, Traveller NGOs and so on. They plotted the way forward for the next 10 years, centred on a series of principles, which included treating every child as an equal child, an expectation that Traveller children should be able to access every area of the curriculum, that outcomes for Traveller children should parallel the range of outcomes for all children, that Traveller parents should have the same entitlements and responsibilities as all other parents, and that parents should have access for their children to the school of their choice.

It set out an expectation of these principles would be realised inside 10 years. The report was published in 2011. It is now 2021, 10 years on. There is currently a concern among education professionals working with Travellers that things have not only not improved in many respects but have actually worsened as a result of the pandemic. A number of parents withdrew their children from schools. They are not now re-registering. Other parents are taking advantage of a legal loophole with respect to



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home education. There is still a major issue with transfer from primary to secondary school, so the problem is as bad, for lack of a better word, as ever it was.

One positive development, which our chief commissioner alluded to there, was the very recent establishment in the last number of months by the Executive Office of a Travellers thematic group, on which I represent the commission and on which there are a number of other stakeholders. This group itself has decided that the first issue that it is going to try to address will be the issue of education. There are a number of meetings scheduled in the coming weeks to try to take that forward.

The Traveller thematic group has access to a cross-departmental group of high-level officials, so we hope that the fact that that access is available means that there is the opportunity to try to make some progress to bring about some change, but, as ever, the proof of the pudding will be in the eating; it is very early days in terms of assessing the efficacy of that particular intervention—the establishment by the Executive of a thematic group.

**Q111 Mary Kelly Foy:** It is just staggering, is it not, that it has taken so long and, in fact, things are getting worse? Does the Education Authority work alongside the likes of charities such as Barnardo's, Michele? I saw a little raised eyebrow.

**Chair:** I noticed Michele smiled there, so I am going to hedge my bets and suggest the answer is no.

**Michele Janes:** We do work together on it but we could work together better. It is shameful that there has been a lot of talk, a lot of writing and a lot of getting together over the last 10 years, and we have not seen any progress in relation to improving outcomes for Traveller children here in Northern Ireland. We can all go to meetings and we can all write things that sit on shelves. We need action. We need to see something tangible that is going to impact and change the outcomes for our children. Again, what message are we giving them if we continue to sit around and talk about it and they are not actually seeing anything happening?

**Q112 Scott Benton:** Over the last 10 to 15 years within the UK Parliament great progress has been made in terms of ethnic minority representation, certainly in general elections from, for example, 2005 and 2010 onwards. However, in terms of Northern Ireland, my understanding is there is currently not a single MLA who comes from an ethnic minority background. I am just interested in your thoughts as to why this may be. Is it, for example, because the four traditional main parties have usually been perceived to be tied up with a particular religion?

Maybe that has presented barriers, in the minds of some people from ethnic minority backgrounds, to joining those parties and putting themselves up for election. I appreciate that is changing, certainly with a few political parties having a notable record in recent years. Is that



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potentially the reason, or is it something more structural within society, which maybe we would have seen in Great Britain, for example, in the 1970s and 1980s, which presented similar communities with barriers to being elected to public office? Ms McGahey, you could answer that question first, and then the other witnesses, if they would like to chip in.

**Geraldine McGahey:** We need to recognise that our ethnic minority communities in Northern Ireland are a small proportion of our wider society. Currently, according to the census, it is 1.8%. It may be as much as 4% of our society. Many of them have been here for several generations and have established their own life. They are professional people and contribute greatly to society.

In terms of being a political representative, our political parties in Northern Ireland are not unwelcoming to ethnic minority people. By the same token, there is not an embrace of ethnic minority people, so they are fairly neutral in that regard. We do now have a councillor on Derry City Council who is from an ethnic minority. We wish her well in her continued political career and hope the new elections in May will see her re-established on that council.

As I said earlier, our ethnic minority communities, from the conversations that I have been having with them, are keen to be involved in public life on a number of different fronts, whether that is political parties or local community organisations. For them it is about having the time, space and confidence to be involved.

For many of our newcomers and more recent entries into Northern Ireland in particular, they are so busy trying to become established and to get their feet, their families and their careers settled that they do not necessarily have the capacity to be involved in political life, but that does not mean to say they are not interested. They are very interested and they are very aware of what political parties have to offer for them. They are keen that they will be given support to be able to become involved in wider public life. For them, it is getting involved in boards of governors. They would love to be represented on a whole range of public bodies, but we need to spend time building that capacity within them.

If they do not come forward for selection and if they do not apply for positions in public bodies, we need to find out why that is. Is it because they feel intimidated? Is it because they feel they are not going to be recognised? To be quite honest, we do not actually know the answer to that yet. That is why it is one of the key priorities for the Equality Commission in this current remit of our corporate plan to look at participation in public life not just by ethnic minority communities but by women generally and disabled people. We are doing some work in terms of capacity-building and looking to see where they can be supported. We are looking to work with the Commissioner for Public Appointments to address this issue as well.



It is the responsibility of the entire public sector to inform their local citizens and service users as to what they can contribute to the decision-making of those organisations and to remove the fear and any potential barriers that there are. Again, if they do not talk to their constituents and service users, how can they be fully aware of what the barriers are for those people? It is a mountain of work to be done by all involved, and something that there is a willingness to grasp.

- Q113 **Scott Benton:** Thank you; that is very helpful. Do you think there are any specific actions that political parties, local government, potentially yourselves or ethnic minority communities themselves could or should be taking to remove those barriers to entry in public life? Is it more in terms of, as you have just alluded to, giving support to enable them to put themselves forward for public office and potentially raising awareness of the opportunities via governing boards, bodies and so forth? Is it more in terms of giving support and raising awareness, or do you think there are any specific actions people could take? If so, who should be leading on that work?

**Geraldine McGahey:** There are two aspects to the work. There is the support-giving, awareness-raising and confidence-building within ethnic minority communities. That is on one front. On the other front, had our race equality legislation been changed so that employers and boards could take more positive action to encourage participation from people from ethnic minorities, that would be an added bonus.

Public bodies need the support in terms of a legal framework to allow them to have positive discrimination, for want of a better term, in terms of bringing people on board from ethnic minority communities, in the same way that legislation allows for positive action to be taken in terms of ensuring that women are represented, or any of the other groupings in society, for particular appointments or positions within boards. That needs to be encouraged within the public sector in terms of ensuring that ethnic minority communities can actually take positions within public life.

- Q114 **Chair:** I am going to ask you a data question, which I am going to guess nobody will know the answer to, because we do not precisely know the size of cohort that we are talking about. Would it be a safe assessment to suggest that there will be fewer of those communities who have got themselves on to the electoral roll than who actually could? I am thinking particularly of people who have come to Northern Ireland from a country where there is not a tradition of having an electoral roll with women being able to vote, or indeed in some instances anybody being able to vote.

**Geraldine McGahey:** That is a very interesting question and I am not sure of any great amount of work that has been done in analysing that. It is a piece of work that we could take up with the Electoral Commission, in terms of looking at how we might encourage others to register, but they have been doing a campaign fairly recently. The electoral register has been renewed over the summer and there was quite a positive campaign



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in terms of people registering to vote. I am not aware of a specific campaign in terms of ethnic minorities or newcomers into our society to participate in that. I am not sure if Paul or Michele are aware of anything.

**Michele Janes:** I know through the TEO racial equality subgroup that information was provided in a range of languages. We certainly supported a number of families and got the information out to lots of the families that we work with and through other groups, such as the Refugee and Asylum Forum.

There is a suspicion about putting your name on registers: "Why do people want my information?" If you have come from a country where that is not the case or where that may potentially lead to unwanted attention, that is an issue. We know what the issues are. We just need the confidence and the resources to do the work within the communities to get that sort of information.

**Paul Noonan:** I understand that the Executive Office is shortly going to undertake a review of its public appointments policy. There may be some scope there to look at this particular issue. Certainly, there is room for improvement. The most recent public appointments annual report issued by the Executive Office last year, which covers 2017-18, indicates that only five members of minority ethnic communities were appointed to public positions.

**Chair:** We are certainly hoping to see the Executive and it would be quite interesting not just to see how many have been appointed, but how many applications they have received. If you are not receiving applications, you cannot conjure them up from thin air, can you? You have to have a pool of people to choose from to fill those positions.

Q115 **Stephen Farry:** Good morning, folks. I will just ask a quick follow-up. As well as the issue about representation of ethnic minorities on various public bodies and in elections, on the other side of the coin, to what extent is there any data or awareness of the willingness or perception of barriers in terms of people contacting their elected representatives for help? Do they see elected representatives as being something foreign to them and it is not something they would engage with, or do people see MLAs, councillors and MPs as being fairly open and accessible?

**Michele Janes:** Can I come in first?

**Chair:** Yes, please.

**Stephen Farry:** Michele used to be two floors up from me for many years.

**Chair:** Is there anybody you have not worked in an office next door to, Stephen?

**Stephen Farry:** She was my next-door neighbour for a while.



**Michele Janes:** I have some really lovely examples and have had contact from a number of MLAs, MPs and local councillors here in Northern Ireland about supporting families, whether that has been families who have arrived through the Syrian scheme or whether that is about helping them with applications for benefits or access to what they are entitled to or any issues. That has not been a barrier at all. There has been lots of welcome, and I have had specific approaches from across all parties in relation to the Afghan scheme.

I have not had a report that anybody has found that difficult. Where MLAs or MPs have had difficulty, whether that has been about communication or about verifying some information, they have lifted the phone. That has been a really positive experience in relation to the resettlement scheme that we did with the Syrians. It has built relationships locally. We have been building confidence about people and services that previously may have seemed to be a bit inaccessible or there was suspicion about, to ensure people are getting help when they need it. That has not been an issue, Mr Farry, at all. We would signpost, and we continue to signpost, to constituency offices.

Q116 **Stephen Farry:** That is very encouraging. Is there anything from the Equality Commission perspective, Geraldine, on that?

**Geraldine McGahey:** Just to add to what Michele has said, we do not have specific hard and fast data or evidence in relation to this, but we certainly have many examples where elected representatives would contact the commission on behalf of someone who is seeking advice. I have heard from many of my conversations with individuals about the working relationship that they have with their local representatives, whether that be at council, Assembly or MP level. We have no evidence at all to indicate that there would be a reluctance for ethnic minorities to contact local politicians or seek their help or guidance. Many of them are very good at seeking advice and guidance from a whole range of quarters, including politicians, so, no, I do not see that there is an issue there at the moment.

Q117 **Claire Hanna:** Thank you very much to all of our witnesses. My question specifically is about the Syrian vulnerable persons relocation scheme from 2015 and any lessons we might learn ahead of resettling Afghan refugees. Michele, would you mind answering how you think it has gone and what can be improved?

**Michele Janes:** The consortium model that was embraced here in Northern Ireland was very successful and that was initiated by the Department of Communities and the Executive Office when we agreed in 2015 to take Syrian families. The consortium model is unique to Northern Ireland and the cost of implementing the resettlement scheme was lower in Northern Ireland compared to the rest of the UK.

The consortium allowed statutory, voluntary, community and council-level organisations to work together, including policing, pooling their



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strengths rather than spending time bidding against each other for contracts to deliver the work. Basically, what happened was, when we agreed to resettle families in Northern Ireland, we brought round the table those who had some knowledge, experience and expertise and we asked who could do what. We kept our eye on the outcome at all times. We wanted to provide a welcome to these families. We were inviting them to come to our country and, whatever we did, we needed to do well. It was not about, "I do this and you do that". It was, "Whatever happens, the families are to have a positive experience and a positive welcome here in Northern Ireland".

We believe this should be the foundation for the design for future schemes and we have advocated strongly for that. It is not just about those organisations at the core of the consortium in terms of the statutory, voluntary and community sector. It is about those grassroots organisations in communities that continue to support families in their integration journey, if you like.

The scheme was initially designed, because it was an emergency response, without the input of Syrian people or refugees, and when we started welcoming families to Northern Ireland, their voice and their feedback informed the evolution of the scheme. Every time we welcomed a group of families to Northern Ireland throughout that process, no matter what we did, we asked them whether this was working and whether it was right for them. Given that there are already families that have arrived from Afghanistan in the UK, we have an opportunity to engage with them directly in the design and development of the Afghan welcome.

This is a biggie for me. Any families arriving through any of these schemes or arriving in Northern Ireland on their own, if they have made their own way, have all experienced significant trauma, especially if you are coming on a scheme. We know, the Home Office knows and the people in-country from where they are coming from know that they have had to have experienced significant trauma to be accepted on to the schemes, including the children.

Some of the stories that I have heard from the children are absolutely heart-breaking, but mental health issues and support are not issues that are discussed openly within these communities. We found there are real language issues. There are no direct translations of certain words that we would use to describe mental health and social care. That is either not available or does not accurately reflect the meaning behind the words in another language.

Social care is something that is often regarded, but it is informal and reliant on family networks. Here is the thing: if I have left my family in Syria or Afghanistan, or if I have lost them on the journey here and I do not have those family networks, we have to make sure that whatever we



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do to support families when they arrive in Northern Ireland builds those again for them.

I will give you an example. Barnardo's provides keyworkers, so staff to support families and to wrap around families. There is no direct translation in Arabic for this, so we talk about a responsible person; we use that instead. However, that does not describe the role in English of keyworker and may give families an inaccurate impression of the role. We have families who say, "You are my friend. You welcomed me here", but we want to ensure families are embedded within the communities that they live in. It is important we work with communities, understanding and reflecting their culture in the design and delivery of support. That will foster open and clear communication.

Mr Paisley made a point earlier on about the Hong Kong families who may make their way here, and it is the same whether they are from Hong Kong, Syria, Afghanistan, Eritrea, Somalia or whatever country. We are receiving refugees into the UK that are highly trained professionals, but their qualifications and their training is not recognised here or it is very costly to convert. There is an example way back in 2015 where a poor man lost his life. He was training here. He was a dentist in his own country in Syria.

What do we need here in Northern Ireland? We need medics. We need dentists. We need people who can work in social care. We have all of these professionals who are arriving into the UK and we are not making it easy for them to be able to work and support their families, so we must improve the provision of employment, training and volunteering schemes for volunteers. We have found volunteering schemes have been excellent in helping in the development of English. We have found that in sport as well. Football, rugby and all of those sports are a great way to help in the development of English, especially for children. We really do need to think about the whole employment issue carefully. It has become an issue where families are really focused on ensuring their children—

**Chair:** You have frozen. The ice age has arrived. I do not know, Michele, if you can hear us or not.

Q118 **Claire Hanna:** Those are really important points, including about working and the extent to which we freeze people and thwart their ability to integrate. I do not know if the rest of you might be able to pick up on Michele in an earlier answer mentioning the disparity, perhaps, in terms of services and a pathway for people who are arriving on, say, the formal schemes versus people who are arriving through other means, who are having to chart their own course and in each case reinvent the wheel and create their own pathway through public services. Is there more that can be done to basically stop each new arrival having to navigate through the same challenges and bureaucracies as others?

**Geraldine McGahey:** Unfortunately, we as an Equality Commission do not really have a remit in this regard. It would be the Northern Ireland



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Human Rights Commission or the independent monitoring authority in terms of immigration. My experiences with regard to this are very limited.

In terms of some of our own recommendations for ethnic minorities in terms of the transition period between asylum seeker status and refugee status and that time delay, that is where we find that people are at their most vulnerable, where they are at risk of being exploited because of the time that is taken to get national insurance numbers, et cetera, to actually be able to get into employment and draw down benefits.

That process is much longer than the 28 days that the Home Office allow before people have to be relocated and found alternative accommodation, so we would probably urge that the UK Government do something to address that issue, in terms of ensuring that that time lag is shortened as much as possible and that people get benefits. In terms of the welcoming and the integration, unfortunately, I do not have much to say on that. I am not sure if Paul would have either, because it is not within our remit.

**Claire Hanna:** No, that is fair enough. I had intended to ask Michele.

Q119 **Mary Kelly Foy:** We know housing is another factor in life expectancy and health outcomes. I want to specifically ask about the Travelling community again. Could you let us know some of the challenges regarding housing support and provision that are facing the Travelling community? Do you think that the Traveller accommodation strategy that was recently published goes far enough in trying to address those problems?

**Geraldine McGahey:** If I may, I might just start on this and then Paul can come in behind me with his experience at actual policy level. There have been a number of reports produced over the years in terms of Traveller health outcomes on an all-island basis way back in 2010, and then we have Traveller housing needs or accommodation needs surveys undertaken by the Housing Executive, which has responsibility, almost at six-yearly intervals.

The current strategy that has been developed on foot of the Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission's investigation into Traveller accommodation goes some way to setting the framework, but the proof of the pudding, as Michele has said previously, will very much be in the eating. It only provides a framework in terms of addressing the need and actually identifying the need.

Statistics have shown that approaching 70% of Travellers are now living in settled accommodation and have moved away from a nomadic lifestyle. The question should be asked, "Why is that?" Is it because it is their choice or is it because it is something that they feel compelled to do because of the lack of accommodation to accommodate their nomadic lifestyle or indeed the condition of any of the sites that are available?



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There have been publications and media coverage fairly recently about the standard of accommodation in Southern Ireland, where the standard of housing has been so deplorable as to be declared unfit. Rubbish has not been collected from the sites. There is no drainage or sanitation.

The 13 concerns that the Human Rights Commission had in relation to the sites in Northern Ireland or the lack of them covered issues such as the standard of accommodation and health and safety risks. Addressing the nomadic lifestyle and people's choices will provide a strong framework and give impetus to the Housing Executive to come up with a new strategy.

The strategy is looking to not just deliver accommodation but to actively engage with the Travelling community to identify their needs and then react to those needs. The emphasis has changed very much in this particular strategy, where it will be the Travelling community who will drive the agenda. Paul, have you anything that you might want to add from your work on the thematic group?

**Paul Noonan:** I have not really at this stage. You summed up the current situation very succinctly there and that is it. The proof of the pudding is in the eating as regards the new Housing Executive strategy. It says all the right things, but will it deliver new provision on the ground? The level of provision has been static for a long time. There have been no new sites provided in recent years, so that will ultimately be the proof. It is right also to acknowledge that progress has been made with respect to issues such as site licensing and health and safety, but there is still some distance to go.

**Mary Kelly Foy:** Thank you. That is a really interesting point around that 30% who are still living a nomadic lifestyle and whether it was their choice or not. I would be very interested in the outcomes of that, because it would be so sad if that was the case: that the nomadic lifestyle is being destroyed, if you like, because there is not the provision there for stopping sites, et cetera. That will be really useful. Michele, do you have anything to add?

**Chair:** Mary, I am not sure Michele was in for the question.

Q120 **Mary Kelly Foy:** It was around housing and mainly the housing provision for Travellers. Do you have anecdotal evidence around whether or not the Travelling community are now becoming more settled and living in houses because of the lack of provision for Travellers?

**Michele Janes:** I do not have any quality data that could help you at all, which is one of the key takeaways from this. In terms of our experience, we have a number of families who are settled in Belfast, but I am not sure that that was through choice. I wonder, as you do, about whether it is about the quality of the site, whether that is a safe place or the right place for children at that point, and whether they have the choice to stay



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because the site has not been maintained or it does not have the services that it needs. I do wonder about that as well, yes.

**Q121 Stephen Farry:** Just on the same theme of housing, just in a more general sense, how do you feel that the Northern Ireland Executive at a Government level, and more specifically the Housing Executive, recognise and understand the needs of migrant and ethnic minority communities in relation to housing? Do you feel there has been sufficient action taken in this area to address those very particular circumstances?

**Geraldine McGahey:** The commission has issued a policy position identifying key inequalities in housing right across the spectrum of our society, but one of our recommendations would be in relation to temporary accommodation. How are the cultural needs of people who are homeless or in a position where they need emergency accommodation being catered for?

There has been some evidence as well that various cultural and religious aspects of people needing temporary or emergency accommodation are not really being catered for. One of the African communities was able to provide evidence whereby women with children were put into temporary accommodation or hostel accommodation with people who had other social problems, whether it be drug-taking or a different lifestyle that they felt was offensive and did not accommodate their needs. As such, that is a failing. We need to have a better strategy in terms of how we deal with homelessness generally, but specifically for emergency housing that we are giving to newcomers in our society.

We also have an issue—this is going slightly off track in terms of newcomers, asylum seekers and refugees—in terms of migrant workers generally. There have been some issues in relation to people being in tied accommodation, where their employer is providing accommodation. This has been an issue particularly for Roma families. That has led to great overcrowding within those houses, but people do not know their rights in terms of being able to get out of that situation.

It is a requirement for the Housing Executive to make their rights known, to take the responsibility seriously and to increase provision, but wider society and other stakeholders have a responsibility to ensure that those rights are communicated to people and understood by ethnic minority communities. That is how I would address that. Paul, do you want to add in terms of the work that you have been doing with housing?

**Paul Noonan:** I would highlight that, as a result of the pandemic, housing conditions have worsened for those who are most vulnerable, in terms of a reduction in income and also a rise in housing costs, a phenomenon that has been described by the Housing Rights service as creating a perfect storm.

**Q122 Stephen Farry:** Thanks; those are some very useful and tangible examples for us to take forward. Michele, is there anything you want to



add on that general question around how responsive the Housing Executive is to the needs of these communities?

**Michele Janes:** I have a positive example in terms of the work alongside the Housing Executive in relation to the resettlement scheme. However, it is temporary accommodation and I would share concerns about whether that meets the cultural needs of some of our families.

Also, because of the lack of new build or the lack of additional housing being added to the housing stock, housing is limited and we are relying a lot on private landlords to provide accommodation. Sometimes that is not in areas where there might already be a community established or where there might already be people who speak your language or understand where you have come from. That has got better. We are now six years into the scheme and we have tried to place families close together with other people who may come from the same area or they are coming and it is extended families.

It is not just about getting the physical house. It is also about what is in the local community. We had families that were being placed, for example, in one area where there were no mosques. There was nowhere where they could go and pray. There were no halal shops. There was nowhere they could access food. Getting an interpreter there was the cost of somebody driving from Belfast, for example, to Newry or up to Derry/Londonderry.

It is wider than just the quality of the house and the availability of the house. It is more about how we ensure that our communities are ready, physically and emotionally, and have the information. Geraldine made a great point earlier on: integration is two-way, and we need to ensure that our communities are ready to receive more families.

In terms of the housing, I understand that there is a programme of works. That should be for everybody who is here and it should be of a high quality.

Q123 **Claire Hanna:** How does the availability of services and support for families and minority ethnic families living in Belfast compare with other areas of Northern Ireland? A lot of that will come down to critical mass of building community and services, but how is that currently going?

**Michele Janes:** It is very challenging. You are right that there are lots of services here in Belfast. There has been a development of services up in the north-west, in Derry/Londonderry, but it has been more about personalities, who is there and whether some groups have settled and formed support or been able to access funding to develop pieces of work.

There has been a great example up in the north-west, but I will give an example in Newry. Down in Newry there were a couple of Syrian doctors who had settled there prior to the resettlement scheme, so when we were launching the scheme and were involved in the scheme, they volunteered with us and then they became key people in that area who welcomed



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families who moved down there, but that is not the same everywhere. We know that some of the families who arrived were professionals in their own right or had businesses back in Syria, so then they, through community interlinks, were able to transport halal meat.

It is about supporting families to build networks that are wider than Belfast. Although you and I might think that going from Belfast to Newry or up to the north-west for the day might be a bit of a journey, it is not when you have been on the journey that some of our families have been on. They will do what they have to do.

Just to make a point around some of the more cultural needs, this was really difficult during the pandemic, because a lot of the help and support that was being offered from the Northern Ireland Government did not take into consideration any cultural needs at all. If you were getting a food box, it was a food box. It did not take into consideration that you may have religious or cultural needs at all. It is that whole bit about really embracing section 75 as far as we can and ensuring that we are not just looking at it through the lens of the white Northern Irish whatever you want to be here. We need to reflect that our communities are changing and have lots of different needs. We need to ensure that what we are offering them reflects that and considers specific needs and not just our own.

Q124 **Claire Hanna:** How much does the placement and where people are living depend on housing availability? Is that the driver? To what extent is preference, community, schools and stuff plugged in?

**Michele Janes:** You are spot on. The primary driver was about where we had accommodation, but we also had to take into consideration that in Northern Ireland we took more families who had specific health needs, so it was important that they had access to the healthcare quite quickly.

At the start it really was where we had houses, but we worked really hard to ensure that if, say, your extended family or a member of your extended family was coming in another cohort down the line, we tried to find housing close to where you were. We were not successful in all cases, but we tried really hard to do that. The first point was what housing we have.

**Chair:** Can I thank you all very much indeed for your time in joining us this morning and for answering our wide and varied questions? You have certainly given us a lot of food for thought. Your engagement with this process and the inquiry has been most helpful and very much appreciated. Thank you very much indeed.