

Northern Ireland Affairs Committee

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

Wednesday 1 December 2021

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

Questions 125 - 156

Witnesses

I: Councillor Martin Reilly, Derry and Strabane District Council; Councillor Shaun Harkin, Derry and Strabane District Council; Godfrey McCartney, Community Development Manager, Armagh City, Banbridge and Craigavon Borough Council; Dolores Donnelly, Good Relations Officer, Armagh City, Banbridge and Craigavon Borough Council.



Examination of Witnesses

Witnesses: Councillor Martin Reilly, Councillor Shaun Harkin, Godfrey McCartney and Dolores Donnelly.

Q125 **Chair:** Good afternoon, colleagues, and thank you for joining us this afternoon for the minority ethnic and migrant people inquiry in Northern Ireland. It is proving to be a fascinating inquiry. I would like to welcome our witnesses in panel 1—we have two panels this afternoon—Councillor Martin Reilly, Mr McCartney, Ms Donnelly and Councillor Shaun Harkin. Lady and gentlemen, you are very welcome to join us, and thank you for finding the time so to do.

Let me open the batting, as it were, by asking you this question. We have been hearing from witnesses in earlier sessions of the paucity of data to help inform the formulation of public policy as it comes to helping, assisting and working alongside migrant and ethnic minority communities in Northern Ireland. Do you see this absence of data, which is very often all rolled up into Scottish data, as being an inhibitor to providing bespoke Northern Irish solutions? I do not know who wants to take that first. Shall we go to Councillor Harkin?

Councillor Harkin: Thank you for the opportunity to come and address the Committee today. I also want to thank Derry and Strabane Council for nominating me to do this today. I hope that I represent the concerns and the needs of our minority and ethnic community here in our district, but also right across the north, as well as I can.

I would agree that there is a paucity of information and data collection, and this is something that our council has attempted to address through a motion that would begin to ask for more information in terms of our population and people's backgrounds, and so on, in order to assist in this.

We will talk more about this through the discussion, but I would say that the way that our state is organised is very much along nationalist and Unionist lines. There are an increasing number of people here in the north of Ireland who identify as "other". One of the criticisms that I would have and that people from our minority and ethnic communities would make is that everything in this state is organised around communal green and orange tribal lines, and that, if you do not fit into those two main traditions or Unionist/nationalist identity, you do not count and you are invisible. That applies to the way that the Stormont Executive functions. It applies to the way that votes and decisions are made through Stormont. It applies in terms of people's visibility.

There has been this focus on the experience of minority ethnic communities here in the north because of what transpired through the Black Lives Matter protests that were organised here in Derry and Belfast. What we saw there was that, yes, it was during the pandemic, but it was really only those protests that were criminalised in the way that they were. Many believe that this is because it was people of colour who were



organising the protests, which were, of course, in solidarity with what was happening in the United States, but people were also giving expression to their own experience here.

The Stormont Executive and the five parties facilitated what happened in terms of what the PSNI did in Derry and Belfast. This was an act of institutional racism by the five main Executive parties. They rubberstamped it a couple of weeks later in Stormont by retrospectively giving the green light to the legislation that they had used in order to facilitate the crackdown. The crackdown, as people know, involved going to the houses of people of colour in Derry on the Friday night, knocking on their doors and threatening them with prosecution for planning and organising a protest.

If we want to talk about the paucity of information, it is about the way that this whole state is organised, from the Executive down, and the fact that none of the Executive parties saw what happened on 5 June 2020 as an act of institutional racism. That has become very clear in the months since. Thank you for that opportunity to make an opening remark.

Q126 **Chair:** Ms Donnelly, as a reminder, the question was about the real absence of data to inform public policy as it is shaped at the local level.

Dolores Donnelly: At a local level within Northern Ireland, each local authority area's demographics can be quite different. Within Armagh City, Banbridge and Craigavon Borough Council, the demographics have been changing greatly over the last 10 to 15 years. We foresee that the most recent census may give us quite fruitful data, once that information is circulated. We are always developing new techniques in developing data at a local level, where possible. As an officer, my manager Godfrey McCartney may be able to add to this, but for us as a council, because the demographics have been changing, our data collection is quite fresh and we could not say that there is an intentional lack of data.

Chair: Mr McCartney, do you want to chip in on that?

Godfrey McCartney: Dolores is quite right. Dolores and I are probably coming from a different perspective here, because we are officers of council and not part of the political machine. One of the things that we have to remember is that, since 1998, there has been a responsibility on councils, through the Northern Ireland Act, in terms of section 75. One of the key things that we would look at is the information that we can get locally. I do believe that, in racial terms, it might be the case that that needs refreshing, and I know that there is consultation coming out. I think it just hit my desk through an email this morning regarding the racial strategy for moving forward. That is a positive move; it is something that we would welcome and that, as a council, we will feed into as well.

There is a distinct differential in terms of the dynamics of local areas. For example, we have limited resources to deal with everything that comes in



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terms of our good relations policy. One minute, you could be dealing with issues for the PUL community, the CNR community or the BAME community, and there could be other things cropping up as well.

As a council, we are trying to innovate. If we take that environment and start to look at it in terms of a common need, where the common need might be education or employment, we are working with our partners in central Government to utilise, for example, good relations funding, and to put programmes in place that will create that inclusion and an outcome that will make a difference to people's lives and improve their quality of life. As far as we are concerned as a council, that is everybody. That is our black and minority ethnic community, that is our CNR community and that is our PUL community. That is everybody within the borough. We will use and glean the research that we need to do locally at that level to enable us to put these mechanisms of support in place.

Councillor Reilly: Good afternoon. Like the previous speakers, I appreciate the opportunity to contribute here this afternoon. The lack of data certainly is an issue. One of the functions of local councils has been to establish a community plan. As part of that community planning process, we wanted to hear from every single citizen and people of every diverse background in relation to what they want their council to do on their behalf.

In 2016, our council set up the Foyle Race Equality Forum, where we allow people to come forward, to shape their community plans and to have their voices heard. The council has been doing things to engage with all its citizens right across council areas, and the more we do that, the better those community plans can be and the stronger the cohesion that will be delivered across council areas.

Q127 **Chair:** I just want to go back to something that Mr McCartney was saying, which was about resources. It ties in with what Councillor Harkin was intimating. It is something that we picked up as a thread going through this inquiry. That desperate desire to strike the balance between the orange and the green is the delicate prism through which a lot of policy evolution is looked at. Correct me if I am wrong, Mr McCartney, but I seem to take from what you are saying that you would like to do more, but that a lack of resources is a hindrance to doing more. At a time when there are fixed resources or fewer resources than you would like, what takes the trump hand? Is it that balancing between orange and green or is it thinking about those communities that are either relatively new to Northern Ireland or longstanding in Northern Ireland but still quite small?

Godfrey McCartney: This is where we come to the common needs plus model. That is what we are thinking about all the time in terms of our good relations and community development. Where we see that common need, and where we can step in and put in place programmes and mechanisms to support that, that is what we do. We try to make this something that is there for everyone within the borough.



To put it in context, if you were to take a look at some previous funding that was put in, without naming the fund, certain avenues of funding that have come in the past for a particular purpose may not have had the desired outcome. The funding may not have moved people from where they were to where they should be. What we are trying to do at a local level within Armagh, Banbridge and Craigavon is to ensure that we are getting the resources exactly to where they are needed. If we see a need within the black and minority ethnic community, we try to step in and to fill the gap that is there. It may be possible through some of our own programmes, but we are not averse to working with our partners. Where we can bring our partners in, we will do that as well.

Q128 Chair: Can I just pause us there for a moment? I have just jotted something down, which ties into my supplementary question. Councillor Reilly, you said “we allowed” members of the black community to take part in a consultation. Mr McCartney, you used language such as “when we see a need” and “we can put in place”. We have heard a trend of evidence from those speaking as part of or representative of the ethnic minority communities of Northern Ireland and a real sense that “there are none of us around the table; things are done to us and not with us”.

That slightly speaks back to the point eloquently made by Councillor Harkin, which is that you are either nationalist or Unionist, or you are “other”. By definition, the “other” almost seems to create a status of alien, different or not part of the community. Can you just say something about the collaborative way, how you engage and whether you have working groups or panels whereby you have representatives of those communities who are, by definition, currently unelected?

Councillor Reilly: I suppose it is worth clarifying what I meant when I said “allow”. That was allowing people from ethnic minorities the opportunity to participate, and giving them that sense that their contributions would be valued and were actively being sought. Through council programmes such as the grant aid programme and through the good relations fund, the council has allowed our finances to be directed towards ensuring that people from various community backgrounds who play a role in Good Relations Week are given funding to allow them to celebrate their cultural traditions and occasions that are important to them in their calendar.

Our council would be very keen to have that engagement with different people from across the council area in shaping the development of council programming, and specifically the cultural programming that we would do in terms of our city festivals throughout the year.

Q129 Chair: Ms Donnelly, you are charged with being the good relations officer. How do you forge these good relations?

Dolores Donnelly: A large portion of the work within good relations is keeping regular communication and contact with those within the community voluntary sector. That enables us as council officers to have



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an ear to the ground and to ensure that, where needs are identified or a new group is being established that represents a particular sector of the BAME communities, we are aware of this and can provide additional support, such as facilitation or mentoring support, or informing them of the various relevant programmes available across council services.

Q130 **Chair:** Is that ad hoc? Is it them coming to you or do you have a roundtable and a natter every now and again?

Dolores Donnelly: Currently, it is a more informal setting, where we have regular contact with a variety of support agencies, which then bring information to us on a regular basis. For example, at the moment, at regional level within the borough, there is a BAME working group, where statutory agencies and various service providers will come together. We share information. People inform us of issues, needs and what programmes are being delivered. It is very much a regular communication. If a specific need is identified that is of concern, we bring, on a cumulative level, all the resource together and discuss that need in order to ensure that we can respond as soon as possible. I hope that that answers your question.

Chair: It does indeed, and I am grateful.

Q131 **Scott Benton:** Good afternoon to all of our witnesses. What are some of the key issues and priorities for ethnic minority and migrant communities in your respective areas? What steps are you taking to address these? Perhaps I could ask Councillor Reilly to answer that question first.

Councillor Reilly: I suppose the thing that is foremost in people's minds through the council—we had our full council meeting last week—

Chair: I am sorry to interrupt, Mr Reilly, but we have the windows open for ventilation, so every time a hammer or a JCB goes off we are hearing it. Could I ask all of our witnesses to really speak up, so that we can capture what you are saying?

Councillor Reilly: Last week, our council had a discussion at full council about the difficulties facing people claiming asylum, specifically given the tragedy in the English Channel. We were clear that it was not just that single incident, but that there were many other similar instances where people lost their lives trying to reach the UK to claim asylum. That is a concern that certainly exercises the minds of the elected members and, indeed, members of the public, as there was an associated rally on the streets of Derry at the weekend, at which both I and Councillor Harkins spoke.

Attached with that—and this follows on from part of what Godfrey said earlier about the need to change some of the legislation that affects people here—is that my colleague Lilian Seenoi-Barr, who has given evidence already to the Committee and who is also a councillor, recently tabled a motion about the need to reflect the legislation in employment law to track people based on their gender or community background, but



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it does not reflect the new diverse society that Northern Ireland is. In that sense, our legislation in employment law needs to catch up.

As well as looking at issues that affect refugees and the migrant community, our council is very strong in also dealing with issues that affect Travellers in our council area. As elected members, we sit on the north-west Travellers action group, which brings together the Western Trust, which leads on that, as well as other statutory bodies such as the Housing Executive. There are a range of ways in which councillors, the council and other statutory bodies come together to try to identify issues and to work to resolve them.

Q132 **Scott Benton:** Councillor Reilly, before I bring in other witnesses, in your first statement you said that there was a full council meeting last week to discuss issues around claiming asylum. Just to be clear, was that meeting regarding specific concerns about the Nationality and Borders Bill and, more generally, the Home Office's approach to asylum and immigration; was it more in line with day-to-day issues such as access to health, education and translation services; or did it encompass both?

Councillor Reilly: The meeting last week was our standard monthly full council meeting, where we can debate motions as well. We raised this issue in relation to the difficulties that people face trying to reach the UK to claim asylum. That is the point I was making in relation to that issue. The opportunities for people to claim asylum and the difficulties that they face in doing so was the main thrust of the conversations last week.

Scott Benton: Councillor Harkin, can I bring you in to answer that question, please?

Councillor Harkin: Thank you for the opportunity. There is a lot of good work being done in terms of community building in an attempt to make sure that the voices and needs of our black and minority ethnic communities are heard, but not enough is being done. Since the Black Lives Matter protests, it has been important for our council to regularly discuss the experiences and challenges that our more diverse district is facing, especially our BAME community.

One of the things that the council has been good at doing is turning over the council, so that it becomes a platform for organisations like the North West Migrants Forum, the Foyle Race Equality Forum that Councillor Reilly mentioned earlier, and many other organisations that are doing excellent work attempting to challenge racism but also fight for more positive contributions and delivery of services for everyone.

Right now, one of the biggest challenges facing our BAME community, and everybody, is that, last week, there was a report from the PSNI saying that there was a 40% increase in hate crimes and racism. That is quite alarming and quite worrying. There is a situation where we have a growing black and minority ethnic population here in the north. It is becoming more visible and more active. As Martin mentioned, we now



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have a black councillor in Derry and Strabane, who is raising very well the issues that her community are facing on an ongoing basis. There is more visibility but there also seems to be a rise in racism, which is of huge concern to the black and minority ethnic community, but also to all of us.

Over the last year and a half, while there has been a lot of good work, in terms of the repercussions of what happened coming out of the Black Lives Matter protest and not being fully dealt with, in a sense, the crackdown and the PSNI's actions did a lot of damage to community work or good relations, if you want to call it that. The ombudsman did a report, as you may have already heard from other witnesses, that found the Government and the police culpable for discrimination on that day.

I do not think that this is going to be bridged any time soon. While there is good work happening at our council level and there have been discussions in the Assembly about racial equality legislation—we are not there yet—a lot more needs to be done. It is not for a lack of trying from our minority and ethnic communities. They are banging the drum and knocking the doors. There is a lot of frustration that things do not happen quickly enough.

As Martin said, in regards to the discussion last week, it was about the treatment of asylum seekers and refugees. To be honest, Westminster's policies are very much being found wanting right now. There is a tremendous amount of frustration about that in terms of the hostile environment, which has a knock-on effect in the north of Ireland.

Q133 Scott Benton: As a one quick comment, because I am anxious to bring in both officers on this point, you mentioned that there is now one democratically elected councillor on Derry and Strabane Council from an ethnic minority background. That is positive. However, across Northern Ireland as a whole, both in the Assembly and in local government, progress has been very slow in getting ethnic minority people elected. Do you think the lack of ethnic minority democratic representation but also in civil society is a problem in terms of providing people with an outlet or a voice for their concerns?

Councillor Harkin: Yes, I agree. There are a lot of barriers. It reflects the experience that people have of not feeling fully included and not having access to what the vast majority of people might have access to. We have a more diverse population, but do we have translation services so that all communities feel that they can access information, understand everything that is going on and find ways of getting delivery on their needs? The onus is on political parties and on society more generally to try to break those barriers down and make sure that people are fully embraced and welcomed, and that everything that people need is put in place.

There is an attempt to do that. I do not think that we should be entirely negative, but a lot of people feel that it is taking far too long. The wheels



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are moving too slowly, but there is more visibility of this right now. There is more pressure on councils, statutory organisations and governing bodies to try to bring about those types of change.

Chair: This is a fascinating and wide-ranging subject, we know, and everybody has lots of questions and good answers. It is always a thing, when we have a panel of four that I either constrict the number of people answering the question or just ask you all for shorter answers. We have a lot of ground to cover, and I do want to cover it, to make sure that you can input into our report as fully as possible.

Q134 **Mary Kelly Foy:** The Craigavon Travellers Support Committee told us that “Traveller issues are not a priority for own Government”. What is your view on this and how do councils consider and prioritise the specific needs of the Traveller community when it comes to policy making and service provision, especially as we know that child educational attainment and health inequalities were bad before but are worse now since the pandemic? That is to whoever wants to answer that one.

Dolores Donnelly: Within good relations, we have always had a strong working relationship with the various Traveller support organisations that exist within our borough. We have developed and delivered various programmes. We have supported and facilitated multiagency working groups to discuss the needs of the Irish Traveller community within our area. However, at a council level, compared to councils elsewhere within the United Kingdom, we have a limited statutory duty in relation to some of the services that need additional support—for example, attainment in education.

I could not really comment on all the areas where, unfortunately, the Irish Traveller community are maybe not developing as strong a voice as they should be over the period of time they have been provided additional support. It is a complex community of needs, which probably could take up the entirety of this meeting, but we have always had and continue to have a strong working relationship. Godfrey may have additional information to bring to that.

Q135 **Chair:** Would you like to see a parity of statutory duty on authorities in Northern Ireland as in England?

Dolores Donnelly: As an officer, I could not comment on that, I feel.

Q136 **Chair:** You can. That is why I have asked you. You are among friends.

Dolores Donnelly: As a resident living and working in Northern Ireland, Northern Ireland has complex needs because of its social and political history. At this moment in time, I do not think that that would be possible.

Q137 **Chair:** It might not be possible, but would it be desirable?



Dolores Donnelly: I could not comment on that either. I am not sure if it would be desirable either. I could not give an honest answer to that question of whether it would be desirable.

Godfrey McCartney: It is fair to say that we are coming from a different perspective as officers, and we have to, at all times, remain impartial and stay out of that political arena. That is what Dolores was trying to do there.

Q138 **Chair:** Sorry, let us clarify this. You are professional officers discharging, to the best of your abilities, those functions that your local authority is obliged to discharge. Ms Donnelly drew our attention back to the fact that there are differentials in the statutory duties between local government in England and in Northern Ireland with regard to educational attainment, which was Mary's question. The question that we have is not reserved to a political answer; you are professional practitioners. With your assessment down on the ground, would you like to see distilled through to local government in Northern Ireland key performance indicators with regard to educational attainment? You do not have to be a politician to answer that question. It is a professional assessment.

Godfrey McCartney: It is, yes. I suppose I am probably going to give a politician's answer.

Chair: It might be better if you give us a professional's answer.

Godfrey McCartney: There are differences between how councils operate within Northern Ireland and within England, Scotland and Wales. For example, we do not have the remit of education or health authorities. There is a distinct differential within that. If we had more control and if there were more mechanisms for us to improve it, I would absolutely say, as a professional officer, that that would be welcome.

I want to maybe pick up on the question as well. We have very good working relationships with those organisations that represent the Traveller community within the borough. Indeed, we would not stop at ourselves linking in with those organisations. We would have our health improvement teams, our environmental health teams and everybody linking into those. Some of the issues that you are seeing come through there are exactly what we are talking about—educational attainment, employment and skills, and everything that goes with it. We develop whatever programmes and support we can to assist and help, but that is where we are at the moment with that particular support.

Q139 **Mary Kelly Foy:** There are statistics that say that maybe 80% of Traveller children leave school without any GCSEs. It should be a priority to be where those people are and work with them, where they are and where they can best access those services. It is quite a shocking statistic. If you are out of school without GCSEs, it has an impact on the rest of your life, and that would only widen health inequalities in terms of future employment. I am surprised at the answers there.



Councillor Reilly: From an elected member's point of view, the way our council operates here compared to in England is different. We do not have responsibilities for education. In my earlier answer, I touched on the importance of the community planning process, which is where our council and other statutory bodies come together, identify particular pressures within our council, and try to plan for the future.

This issue is one that our council took some lead on. In 2016, our council established a needs assessment of the Traveller community within our council area. We have a Travellers action group in the north-west, but our council also sits on the Northern Ireland-wide Local Government Partnership on Traveller Issues, which is a body that we do not have control over. As local councillors, we can feed into that but, within our own areas and our own chamber, we are able to try to direct some attention to the needs of the Traveller community, which we do on a regular basis, and to bring in other statutory bodies. In our council area, that is led by the Western Trust, but we play a big part in shaping that by having locally elected members appointed to that board.

Councillor Harkin: This is tremendously important. The vast majority of people in the Traveller community here would say, in terms of how they are treated, "Out of sight, out of mind". When you look at educational attainment, skills and health inequalities, they are pretty terrible for the Traveller community. At an anecdotal level, the level of racism that Travellers face is shocking. It is almost common sense. I am not arguing that there is not good work being done. There are lots of examples, and Councillor Reilly pointed out some of the work that the Derry and Strabane Council has attempted to do.

I also worry that the pandemic has frayed some of those relationships. A lot of this comes down to resources, because those bodies are set up and then the issue is the follow-through. When the resources are not there to try to maintain the contacts and to do the follow-up, that is where things fall apart and you do not then get the working relationships that you need.

The guide for us on all of this is that we need more statutory responsibility, absolutely, where goals are identified and there is a responsibility for Government, statutory bodies and councils to work together to change some of these awful statistics in terms of what people's lives look like. Every step of the way, the Traveller community itself has to be directly involved. That is the only way that it will succeed. This is where the issue of resources is, because, if people are not available to do that community outreach and follow-up, it will fall short.

Q140 **Claire Hanna:** Thanks to the witnesses. Councils are often trying to provide services and meet people's needs at the frontline. It is often a case of doing what you can with what is available. I wanted to ask you about your assessment of the Executive's frameworks and the UK Government's actions on racial equality. Just with an eye on the time, I



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am going to roll up a couple of questions. Does the Executive's racial equality strategy provide an adequate framework for your community relations services and delivery? Are there things that the UK Government should do to support your work? If we go to Armagh, Godfrey, could you comment on that?

Godfrey McCartney: I am not generally, in the scheme of things, going to criticise central Government for what they do, because they do fund us. Whatever the framework is, we do work within it in local government and maximise what we can out of it. I know that you are probably going to look at me and say that I have just answered this like a politician, but that is what we do. We drive the policy forward that is coming down through central Government, and we try to make the best of what we have to do it.

I did see the consultation coming out this morning and that will certainly be welcome. We will feed into that as well. Through, for example, our T:BUC strategy, we have a really good programme. We have really good integration right across the borough in terms of black and minority ethnic. We have really good relationships with our advice services, which feed into the support mechanisms that go into those services as well. We try to make the most and the best of what we have.

Q141 **Claire Hanna:** I appreciate that and the constraints that you have or perceive, but our inquiry is trying to identify the deficits in the policy, so that we can make recommendations and there are better frameworks for you to operate within.

Councillor Harkin, you mentioned the UK Government's immigration policy. Do you have any thoughts on the adequacy or otherwise of the Executive's racial equality strategy and on actions the UK Government need to take?

Councillor Harkin: Thank you, Claire. It is a crucial question because the Executive have cobbled together a racial equality strategy, which is late coming and not adequate. Work is being done and there have been big commitments made by the Executive, but we often see things put on the long finger here. That is the concern that I would have. It is what many members of and leaders in black and ethnic communities have expressed to me as well: they are being heard for a moment, but will that continue?

Not to pick on any particular political parties, but even in our council discussion last week there was talk about "room at the inn". We have a growing housing waiting list here in the north, with 43,000 people waiting for a home. The idea that a refugee should get a home is described in that way: "There is not enough room at the inn". This is the kind of misinformation that then allows racist attacks and graffiti to be put on people's homes. Unfortunately, there is still, right across our society, far too much tolerance of racist attacks on people who have moved from



other parts of the world to live here and happen to be people of colour, or people who have grown up here and are people of colour.

For me and for other people as well, in reference to what happened to the Black Lives Matter protest, that was not accidental. That was an act of racist discrimination carried out by the Executive and by the PSNI. This is very deep seated in terms of institutional racism and will not be undone by some emergency discussions that have happened at the Executive. We have a problem in general, in how our society is organised, with equality and basic rights for the BAME community but also for women, for workers and for the LGBTQ community. We have a tremendous amount of work, where it is not going to be enough to have a few discussions and policy papers put through Stormont. We need delivery on the other side of it, and there is a lot to do there.

As far as UK immigration policy goes, there is clearly a hostile environment for migrants and refugees.

Chair: Mr Harkin, we are not looking at the proposed immigration Bill, but we note your comments on that. You talked about discrimination. I presume that everybody on the panel would advocate for an introduction, if you will, of hate crime legislation in Northern Ireland. I am getting a nod from Mr McCartney and Councillor Reilly. Councillor Harkin, you do not really need to nod. Ms Donnelly, you would like to see that as well, so unanimity from the panel.

Q142 **Claire Hanna:** Councillor Reilly, could you pick up on any rating, assessment or feedback on the Executive and UK Government approach?

Councillor Reilly: I agree with Shaun's point about how the Assembly and the Executive have not delivered enough in this mandate. Far too much of the mandate was spent without devolution at all, and that has left us playing catch-up on a range of issues, including this one.

During the pandemic, it has brought to the fore some of the issues that we have talked about. In terms of what the Westminster Government can do, they also need to look at things like the fact that our council, and similarly with Armagh, are border councils. For example, the Syrian refugee scheme and the vulnerable persons scheme located people in our council area, but their visas did not allow them to travel to the Republic of Ireland.

For us as a council in the border area, we had citizens coming forward and offering help and language services, and businesses offering opportunities to take refugees on excursions for free, but they were limited in terms of the assistance that they could give because the refugees were not allowed to cross the border. Simple things like that make a big difference to people in terms of their opportunities to enjoy the new community that they have been placed in.

Q143 **Ian Paisley:** Thank you very much for your evidence so far. My first question is for the officials. Dolores, maybe I could start with you. There



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is a saying that I am sure you will be familiar with: “If it is not measured, it is not done”. Is ethnic monitoring undertaken at all by the council as a strategic policy and carried out annually? If so, how strong a picture and knowledge have you of the make-up of the various ethnic communities in your district, or is it all largely anecdotal?

Dolores Donnelly: My understanding is that the council does not have a specific policy to monitor its service users. We depend on information coming from the likes of our census. In relation to the variety of external funding programmes that the council administers on behalf of external statutory organisations, we do fulfil the monitoring requirements of those organisations. They can provide us with some additional information when the monitoring is complete. I hope that that answers your question, but there is no specific policy.

Q144 **Ian Paisley:** It does. That is very helpful. Godfrey, turning to you with the same issue, do you have specific statutory monitoring activity on this, or do you also rely on the census?

Godfrey McCartney: It is a mix and match. As Dolores says, we are running and providing programmes, so we gain direct data from that in terms of the BAME community. The other side of that is that, through our community planning model, we would do some general research and there would be information through that. It is a mix of both—some anecdotal and some through those particular mechanisms.

We certainly rely on the census but we also rely on our other partners. For example, we work very closely with our PSNI colleagues. They report through our police and community safety partnerships in terms of hate crime statistics et cetera. We work with our colleagues in the educational authority and the Housing Executive, et cetera, in terms of some of the issues.

Q145 **Ian Paisley:** Is there room for you to have our own mini, localised—I do not want to use the word “census”—monitoring of the ethnic pattern in your own district? Would that be useful or would it just become cumbersome?

Godfrey McCartney: It would be useful. I will caveat your second comment, which is to say that we are stretched. There is no point in my saying that we are not. We are underresourced at the moment and have a lot of additional pressures coming through Covid support, et cetera. If we are going to do it, it needs to be a manageable process.

Q146 **Ian Paisley:** Just looking at the monitor, both elected officials nodded that it might be useful to have a localised measurement on that. The last time census figures were available was 2011, and the next census is published next year, which will show a pattern and an outcome. In the last 12 months, have the elected officials proposed or brought forward a debate, or initiated an action in the council, about measures that would be about measuring and monitoring ethnic minorities within your district or a debate about the plight of ethnic minorities?



Councillor Reilly: Yes, we have done. We did so very recently in terms of a motion that Councillor Seeno-Barr brought in relation to the monitoring of the employment of ethnic minorities, above and beyond what the legislation currently requests. That legislation dates back to the days of the Good Friday agreement.

In terms of the issues that face people in society here, we deal with that through things like grant aid as a way of monitoring that. We do it through Good Relations Week and through grant aid processes, where a number of groups—the Filipino, Japanese, Kabalikat and Polish communities—and a range of people fed into council for grant aid for different projects.

Q147 **Ian Paisley:** Would you agree that it is all a wee bit haphazard and anecdotal?

Councillor Reilly: It can be if you just look at it in terms of projects that have been successful for funding through grant aid. A better demographic from the likes of the census would be beneficial.

Councillor Harkin: Councillor Reilly mentioned one of the discussions that we have had but, over the last year to 18 months, we have had quite a few motions go through council about the challenges that our BAME community faces, with actionable items. That has led to special council meetings, where we have had representatives from many different BAME communities come in and talk about what they would like to see, how to make our society more inclusive, proposals they would have for the racial equality strategy at Stormont, and campaigning to end the situation where asylum seekers or refugees cannot cross the border to do basic things, especially in border counties. There have been quite a few and we would be happy to share that with the panel.

In terms of monitoring, yes, if people feel that it is going to lead to more inclusion, but my concern right now is when people feel they are being targeted and that they are somehow a problem community. Unfortunately, that has been the legacy of the Black Lives Matter protest, where a lot of people felt criminalised by the actions of the PSNI, although I do not think it could have happened without the full support of the Executive.

Q148 **Ian Paisley:** Are you saying that, if your council were to put in place some way of monitoring and measuring ethnic diversity locally, that might be considered negatively by ethnic minorities?

Councillor Harkin: First of all, we would need to ask the minority and ethnic communities themselves. The thrust of it is to say, "Yes, if it assists in the delivery of services and breaking down barriers, but, if there is a sense that the state, the council or the statutory bodies are not on our side or not there to help us, it could feel that this is another thing where they are monitoring us because, rather than being people who are



appreciated for our contribution to society, we are somehow a grouping that the eyes of the state need to be on”.

Q149 Ian Paisley: It is useful that you flag up that concern. Awareness is key in all of this. We have heard from members of the Jewish community that they consider things that are said about their identity to be antisemitic. How do you respond to views that your council has put forward motions that the Jewish community in Northern Ireland would feel are antisemitic? Is there a way of the attitudes in the council addressing some of that going forward?

Councillor Harkin: My partner is Jewish, and I proudly named my child, who was born two weeks ago, Rónán Eli.

Ian Paisley: That is a lovely name.

Chair: Congratulations on the birth.

Councillor Harkin: Thank you very much. His older brother is called Aodhán Lev, and we are very proud of our Jewish tradition. This week, we are celebrating Hanukkah every night of the week. It has been brilliant. Our children are learning Jewish prayers. I am learning them from my partner and her parents.

On the anniversary of the Holocaust this year, our council passed an extremely strong motion, which I proposed, about commemorating the Holocaust and making sure it would never happen again, which committed the council to campaign against all forms of antisemitism and racism. These are important symbolic, actions. We then had a follow-up meeting, where we heard from different organisations about how they would combat discrimination and antisemitism in the real world.

The Covid pandemic has opened the door for organisations. Even last week, there was a rally at Belfast City Hall, with some speakers who were, once again, spreading antisemitic myths about Jews controlling the world and being behind this pandemic—absolute nonsense. We also have people putting on yellow stars, pretending they are being treated the same way as Jews were being treated in the 1930s by fascists and talking about going to concentration camps. This is around us and needs to be systematically challenged.

Q150 Ian Paisley: Your evidence is fascinating. What I picked up was that some people from an Israeli or Jewish community perceive comments by outsiders to the Jewish tradition that are negative to Israel as antisemitic. Do you perceive that that is widespread and is a fair interpretation?

Councillor Harkin: For me, there is no contradiction between standing and campaigning against antisemitism and standing up against apartheid Israel. My partner is from the United States. The opinions of young Jewish people in the United States are breaking away from support for apartheid Israel, because they can no longer stand over the type of violence and discrimination that is dished out every day to the



Palestinians. It is very important that we distinguish between what is Jewish and what is the political project of Zionism. Zionism is a political project that is in defence of apartheid Israel.

Q151 **Ian Paisley:** Some people from a Jewish background would find what has just been said antisemitic. There is a view that to express that position about Zionism, as it is called, can be perceived that way. I suppose it is about the person who takes the offence and not so much always about the person who is giving the offence. If a person takes that as offensive and, therefore, antisemitic, do you agree that that is problematic in our language and being more aware about that would be helpful?

Councillor Harkin: I am very aware of some of the criticisms that are made about the Palestine solidarity movement. There is a claim that to support Palestinian freedom and to criticise the apartheid state of Israel is antisemitic. I disagree with that. I oppose antisemitism from my toes to the top of my head. The vast majority of people I know who stand in solidarity with the Palestinians are the same people who come out and organise when fascists turn up in different parts of the north.

To be quite honest, there is a contradiction here. The many people who are part of the far right in the north of Ireland, or right across the island, are the real antisemitic forces. These are the people who look to the 1930s as some kind of model for what they would like to see in the future. That is not what you are going to see in the Palestine solidarity movement.

Chair: I think we are treading on the toes of the Foreign Affairs Select Committee and I would be reprimanded by their Chair, Mr Tugendhat, so I am going to end that and turn to Stephen Farry.

Q152 **Stephen Farry:** Good afternoon to our witnesses. I just want to come back to the issue around how we welcome refugees to Northern Ireland, and in particular the local government experience in that regard. Starting with the officers, I would like to ask about relations with the Northern Ireland Executive and, where relevant, the UK Government in that respect.

Are the discussions two-way or is it really one-way traffic, essentially saying, "This is what is happening and this is what we would like you to do"? Would you see a differentiation between how services and support are rolled out across Northern Ireland? In particular, is there a difference between what happens in the Belfast area compared to what happens in Derry and Strabane or Armagh, Banbridge and Craigavon?

I will just wrap all of this up as one, so maybe just relay some of your experiences in relation to the Syrian resettlement scheme and your expectations in relation to the roll-out of the Afghan scheme, hopefully in the next few weeks, in Northern Ireland.

Dolores Donnelly: I sat on an operational planning meeting representing the council at a higher level on the delivery of the



vulnerable persons relocation scheme for the Syrians. I found it an extremely positive experience, because information was always a two-way approach. At a higher level, you are sitting at the table with all the relevant partners, discussing the needs, in preparation for each group arriving. It was not a case of meeting every six months as standard. Each group of arrivals was discussed individually. If there were particular needs or something identified, they were discussed. It was never presumed that all groups arriving were standard and the same. I would hope that the concept of the VPRS programme would continue for the arrival of Afghan refugees.

The positive aspect of that approach was that relationships were being built at a higher level, and we were then also able to circulate that information and understanding of the programme down to the local level when it came to working with relevant partners at a local level, such as Barnardo's, Extern, the community voluntary sector, the education sector and the Housing Executive. Overall, it was extremely positive.

However, you mentioned the difference between Belfast and Greater Belfast, and elsewhere in Northern Ireland. There is certainly much more availability of services for asylum refugees in the Belfast and Greater Belfast area. Traditionally, in the Armagh City, Banbridge and Craigavon area, we would not have had many asylum seekers or refugees. They would all have accessed services from Belfast. That initially created some complexity for us and it is an ongoing process of developing those services where possible or utilising services that are already based in Belfast. I do not think it is possible for our council area to duplicate the services in Belfast, because you have to recognise that it is a greater, urban population, where our council area is geographically a rural setting. I hope that covers that question.

Stephen Farry: That is super. Thanks, Dolores.

Godfrey McCartney: Staying on that comment and going over what Dolores said, because I am in total agreement, some of the support is what we would have built around that as well. We would have provided training and facilitation for the refugees arriving in terms of language and translation services. One of the things that we have taken out of that as well is that we are developing a welcome pack for the borough, which we will have in situ for anybody who is new to the borough and needs to find out about what services are available. We are also working closely with PCSP and our colleagues in PSNI around the whole aspect of human trafficking and making the new arrivals into the borough aware of all the different facets that go with that. If it operates in the same way as it did with Syrian refugees, we certainly would not see any difficulty with that taking place.

Councillor Reilly: Back in 2016, our mayor at the time led on co-ordinating that within council, because quite a number of elected members wanted to play their role in welcoming refugees. The mayor convened meetings, which all of us could attend. As well as what Godfrey



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said about providing training and educational opportunities for refugees, we had training opportunities for people from here to learn how best to interact with refugees and to learn more about their customs and traditions, so that we could reflect them in our language and behaviours when dealing with citizens from those places.

Attached to that was something that I covered earlier. In our council area, while not universal, as Councillor Harkin indicated earlier, the vast majority of people applied a “refugees welcome” approach, and many businesses and people volunteered their time, experience and language skills. The difficulty that we found was that the services those people were quite prepared to give for free were not able to be used, because of the visa restrictions, in that people could not travel into the Republic of Ireland on short-stay visits or excursions. That was an issue.

Q153 Stephen Farry: On that visa issue, just to put a marker down, that may well get even more complicated on the back of the Nationality and Borders Bill, with requirements for electronic travel authorisations, just for all four of you to keep an eye on that.

Councillor Reilly: Our council has already passed motions about the common travel area and the difficulties that people experience due to that.

Stephen Farry: That is useful to know, Martin, thank you.

Councillor Harkin: I am very proud of the welcome that the Derry and Strabane district gave to the Syrian refugees who came here. There was an event to welcome them to the city, which was attended by many people. It is right that we do that, given the hundreds of years of people from our district heading to all parts of the world and seeking a better life after fleeing war, poverty and challenging situations. Many people worked to make sure that the Syrians were able to find their way here.

Unfortunately, I have become aware of members of the Syrian population feeling frustrated that they were maybe abandoned. This is partly anecdotal, and we are asking for a report into this right now, but we have heard of instances where the follow-through was not there. I often think that this is down to resources. Once people are in the housing system, trying to access benefits or jobs, or to get training, there are often not enough resources, and people can get left behind. We are going to be looking into that right now. That is important because I think Afghan refugees will get a similarly huge welcome to our district area, and rightly so, but we do not want a repetition of services that become difficult to access, such that people end up getting frustrated.

On the second point about people’s experience in Covid, there will need to be a report done on this and an inquiry across the board in terms of the responses to Covid, but many of our migrant populations work in industries like food processing, where there were a lot of risks and they faced a lot of health risks. There were strikes by health workers to try to



protect themselves. People face challenges and discrimination. For anybody who is struggling, in terms of accessing services or financially, that struggle will have doubled during the pandemic.

Stephen Farry: That point you make around the follow-up is very valid, and we have heard it from others. There is frequently a very good, strong initial welcome, but the issue is where people are three months, a year or three years on from their arrival and how successfully they are settled, integrated into society and being supported. That is useful.

Q154 **Chair:** We are going to have a vote in the not-too-distant future. I have one final question, which is principally to our two councillors, with respect to our two officers. It is a political question. We all know of the importance, as elected representatives, of getting our policies right for as many people in our communities as we can. Reverting to the question that I opened with about the orange/green balance, in your traditional communities, for want of a better phrase, do you find any who take the point—which particularly Mr McCartney has mentioned, but not exclusively—about resources being tight? “Why the hell are you spending money on these people? Why the hell are you doing that? Why are you doing that? Why are you not helping our people?” How do you find the response on the ground, or is it, as an issue, understood? Councillor Reilly, what is your experience?

Councillor Reilly: It is sensible that we address this. There is an orange and green issue here, and those who do not fit into the orange or green directly can sometimes feel excluded. I recall my time as mayor of the city, which happened to be during the inaugural UK City of Culture. I know that colleagues in Armagh are looking to win that title in 2025. For us, that year was really crucial. Every single citizen, regardless of orange or green, or whatever their background was, got a chance to play in shaping the calendar and making their traditional events—

Q155 **Chair:** I take that, but that was not quite my question. My question was whether you find resistance to the delivery and evolution of ethnic and migrant minority-supporting policies by elements of the traditional communities, who would say, “Look, there are more of us than there are of them. Resources are really scarce. What are you doing spending money on this small group of people?”

Councillor Reilly: We do not see as much of that resistance after the UK City of Culture year. That is the point I was trying to make. During that year, we brought everyone together, and people across the community saw the benefit of everyone working together. It is not totally eradicated but it is not as strong as it was.

Q156 **Chair:** Councillor Harkin, I am going to give the last word to you in this session. Our Division bell is ringing, so I am going to have to suspend the session, but I want to hear from you briefly before I do.

Councillor Harkin: Thank you for the opportunity. What you are raising is a huge issue. It is not one community or another where there are



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people who will scapegoat minorities. This is something that exists. Sometimes this comes from the top of society, when decision makers are trying to explain why there are not enough resources. Migrants are sometimes an easy scapegoat to blame for the lack of housing. We have a health service crisis right now, here and across the water. Sometimes migrants can get blamed: "Why should we be providing for newcomers when we cannot provide for the people who live here?"

The key to this is that we provide the resources for the people who live here and for those who are trying to make it here. We are one of the wealthiest societies on the planet. Unfortunately, a minority of individuals hold a lot of wealth. We need to look at how we redistribute wealth to build more houses, to fix our health service and to reduce inequalities. When we can do that, along with strategies that challenge racism and discrimination, we can make some headway. That change is going to come from below. I am not very confident that it will come from the Stormont Executive or Westminster, which is why the work that people are doing in communities, the work through trade unions to challenge sectarianism and racism, and the work of our BAME communities, are all—

Chair: Mr Harkin, I am going to have to cut you there, I am afraid, only because we fear the Chief Whips more than anything else. Can I thank the four of you very much indeed for your attendance with us this afternoon and for the clarity of your answers? I spent 12 years as a district and county councillor, and those of us who get to Westminster occasionally forget the importance of local government in providing that granular, down-on-the-ground service, when I know you have all been hugely stretched over the pandemic. On behalf of the Committee, thank you to all of your councillors and, indeed, all of your officers for all that you have done to support your communities during this very testing and trying time. Can I thank the four of you very much indeed?