



HOUSE OF COMMONS

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 157 - 180

Witnesses

II: Gareth Johnston, Acting Deputy Secretary, Good Relations and Inclusion Directorate, The Executive Office; Orla McStravick, Acting Head of Infrastructure and Racial Equality Division, The Executive Office.



Examination of Witnesses

Witnesses: Gareth Johnston and Orla McStravick.

Q157 **Chair:** Thank you very much indeed to our second panel. We are very pleased to welcome to our session Mr Johnston and Ms McStravick from the Executive Office. I am very glad that you could join us. I do not say this as a criticism of you—it will be delightful to hear what you have to say—but the Committee would really have appreciated hearing from the relevant ministerial voice as well. It is a shame, given what we hope is the agreed importance of this issue, that no Minister was able to attend today.

I invite you to talk as freely as if you were having a conversation in your own kitchen, as it were. We have been hearing from witnesses that they fear and feel that very little progress has been made on implementing the aims and actions of the racial equality strategy so far; that, as far as the Executive is concerned, and Stormont more widely, it is a box-ticking exercise and something that needs to be done; but that, given the inbuilt requirement to make this continual balance between green and orange, anything that is neither green nor orange is either forgotten or very much second-tier. I would welcome your thoughts on that summary of what we, as a Committee, have been hearing from witnesses from the communities that we are inquiring into.

Gareth Johnston: First of all, it is important to say that it is vital that we listen to the voices of communities from different ethnic groups. That is something that we have been trying to do in the Executive Office, largely through the racial equality subgroup but also in other ways through our contact with the community. I preface anything I say with that.

In terms of what we might think of as the traditional communities here—

Q158 **Chair:** Before you do, Mr Johnston, does it alarm, surprise or shock you that the view of very little progress and a box-ticking exercise is the pretty mainstream response that we have received? Does that come as a surprise to you?

Gareth Johnston: Let me say that, while we are at the mid-term of the strategy, so we will not have done all that the strategy set out to do, there have been significant steps forward. The Race Relations (Northern Ireland) Order has been reviewed. There will be legislative proposals that will be consulted on early next year. Just yesterday, we published for consultation a draft refugee integration strategy, and I can say something more about that later. We have more than doubled our minority ethnic development fund in size. We have increased our crisis fund for migrants. We have established a thematic group on Travellers and a strategic planning group on Travellers and Roma. There is the racial equality subgroup that I have just mentioned, and racial equality champions in each of our departments.



I would want to start by saying that there has been considerable progress made, but that does not mean—and I hear what you are saying—that there is not more that needs to be done, and done urgently. That is why, just in the last couple of months, we had a mid-term review of the 10-year strategy. We have spoken about that to representatives of the community and the sector, and out of that have come three particular areas where we recognise we need to make early progress.

One of those is training and development. Once you have officials who are properly trained in sensitivity and in meeting the needs of people of different races, a lot can flow from that in terms of services and policy. The second is recognising the need to progress the legislation, which I have just mentioned. The third is ethnic equality monitoring and the importance of having reliable data. We want to start with doing what we can to increase the coverage and reliability and employment data, but then to broaden that out into services—who is accessing our services and what the needs are.

I can understand, to some extent, why there would be criticism, but I would also want to set that in the context of what has been done.

Q159 **Chair:** You mentioned data there, and we have been hearing from other witnesses that quite a lot of the data seems to get wrapped in with Scottish data and that the main data generator is the census, which is almost out of date before it is printed because you are dealing with that 10-year gap. It is encouraging to hear what you have been saying there, but would you assess the position of Northern Ireland—and this may be because of the gaps in data—as being rather behind the curve in comparison with what is being done in the other three of the four nations? It strikes me that, very often, talking to policy people in Northern Ireland, it is as if these issues have just arrived and have just manifested themselves, rather than having been around for a very long time.

Gareth Johnston: For some time now, we have tried to make sure that T:BUC—Together: Building a United Community, which is the Executive's strategy on good relations—has encompassed the increasing diversity of our community in Northern Ireland.

In terms of comparison with other jurisdictions, absolutely, our legislation has fallen behind. The point of this consultation in the new year is to bring us back to a level where the legislation represents best practice. There would be other areas, and I am thinking particularly of how, as a community, we have been able to welcome 1,815 Syrian refugees over the last four or five years. That is more than our fair share, and I do not mean that in any pejorative way, but we have certainly welcomed more, if you did a straight arithmetic calculation of population, than we might have needed to do.

While there are always learning points to be made, I have been getting feedback from colleagues in England and in Whitehall on the fact that,



because we are a smaller community and jurisdiction, there is less distance between those of us who sit in the Stormont estate and people who are working on the ground, and the fact that we have been able to get everybody into one room and co-ordinate health services, education services and so on. I pay tribute to Ian Snowden and colleagues in the Department for Communities for the work that has been done. There are aspects where we have been able to set an example for other jurisdictions to follow.

That said, I absolutely want to emphasise that the purpose of these consultations that are coming up—the one that we launched yesterday and the one on legislation that we will launch in the next year—is to hear from people, particularly those directly affected by the issues and questions that we are discussing, about their experiences, to hear what we can do better, and to seek to put those into practice. Orla may want to say something more, but we are very much in the mode of continuous improvement, and want to remain so.

Q160 Chair: As a *modus operandi*, that is encouraging to hear. We have heard from several witnesses a belief that quite a lot of these policies and initiatives, which are all benign and well-meaning, are done to, rather than with and alongside, communities. You referenced there some very useful and welcome consultation, in terms of what is being consulted upon rather than who is being consulted. What input into the documentation, the questions and the nascent strategies have the communities with which you are engaging been involved?

Gareth Johnston: Just to give one example, we had a meeting a couple of weeks ago with the race relations subgroup. That was a meeting that was attended by Ministers, just to emphasise the practical involvement that Ministers are having here. The subgroup has done a lot of work in looking at priorities and has come up with a list of seven that it sees as key moving forward. Some of those are reflected in what I have said already. There are others that are specific to Departments over here, like the review of hate crime legislation or the work that is being done in the Department of Education around bullying in schools and, as part of that, particular issues around racial bullying.

Through that subgroup and the contacts that it has, we have been able to have an element of input into designing what the agenda is in the first part, and then we want to do more in designing our responses to it. Orla might want to say something more.

Q161 Chair: Before you do that, you say “an element of input”. Give me a rough percentage.

Orla McStravick: If we take the Race Relations (Northern Ireland) Order work, it is a real priority for us to enhance our legislation and bring us to at least on par with legislation elsewhere. A lot of that was review work at the start, which is why it does take some time, and then there is legal analysis of it in terms of how it can be done practically. We have certainly



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engaged our subgroup on several occasions in that, both to brief it on the outcome of the review, and to work with it in identifying, “Here are some things that, from our perspective, might be easily achievable. Here are some challenging issues that we welcome input on”.

We also provided a bit of funding to the subgroup to go and seek external input from an academic from a university in London, in order to explain what we were proposing to set out and what that meant, so the subgroup could provide a more detailed response to that. We are taking all of that now before we even move to put proposals to Ministers around what a consultation and any new Bill coming out of that might look like. That is an example of where we have worked very closely with the subgroup at all stages to identify what we will consult on and propose in terms of a new Bill. Equally, when we get into the consultation stage, we will have the wider consultation and continuous consultation with the subgroup coming out of that. That is just one example.

The other one is probably the refugee integration strategy. In looking at how we would develop that, we did a number of things. We commissioned research to go out to work with refugees and asylum seekers directly, and get their experiences of life here, in order to directly inform the strategy. We also did a strategic insight lab, joining with our colleagues in the Department for Communities. It was a wide range of stakeholders. It was not just the subgroup, but it had voluntary community representatives, Government Departments, local government representatives, and representatives from external jurisdictions. It was, again, to look at how we achieve successful integration here in the long term.

Those two pieces, as well as some direct engagement to sense-check some of the outcomes with that with what we called our critical friends, which were some organisations in the sector that work directly and specifically on supporting refugees and asylum seekers, were all used to draft the refugee integration strategy, which, as Gareth said, came out for consultation yesterday.

In the context of the stocktake, the next steps for that are around working with the subgroup and the wider sector on how we take those key priorities forward and then being a partner in the development and implementation of those. That is maybe just to give a bit of a flavour.

Q162 **Chair:** That is very useful. Might you be able to share with us—not now but in a note—the membership of this subgroup?

Orla McStravick: Yes. I think it is published on our website, but there is no problem and we can share it.

Q163 **Chair:** Thank you. That would be helpful. Let me ask my final question in this session. The traditional balance, as we know, is orange and green. MLAs have to refer to themselves as “nationalist”, “Unionist” or “other”. We have heard a lot about this term “other” making you feel different



before you even start. It is a class or a subset, set apart. We know that there is a huge problem of direct political involvement and engagement by members of migrant and ethnic minority groups in the political process in Northern Ireland. Do the politicians know and recognise that there is a growing group of "other"? Is any thought ever given to finding a different terminology that suggests that you can be a citizen of Northern Ireland without being a Unionist or a nationalist?

Gareth Johnston: The term "other" is not one I would recognise in terms of language that we in the Executive Office would use. As to what might be the practice in the Assembly, it is not my area of expertise. That is governed by the Northern Ireland Act and, ultimately, might be an issue for the NIO. Orla might say something more, but the emphasis that we are trying to bring through our engagement, for example, on T:BUC is that we are a diverse community.

We all have different characteristics. We all have something that we bring to the community. Increasingly, the whole question of intersectionality is one that is coming out. I was asked about it earlier this afternoon at the Northern Ireland Assembly Committee. It is recognising that we are all individuals, so I hope that our language in the Executive Office would not be off-putting to people or to the sector.

Q164 **Chair:** We know that there appears to be an increase in hate crime, racially aggravated assault, verbal or actual, on the streets, people having their homes disrupted and vandalised, and the like. How regularly do you receive reports from the PSNI on both the geography and the quantum? How do you, in the Executive Office, respond to that?

Gareth Johnston: There are reports that come from the PSNI, which I believe are updated every month. I have the latest in front of me. As you say, if we look over the last year, racist incidents have gone up from 878 to 1,231, and racist crimes from 588 to 864. It is important to set that in the longer-term context. If we look back to 2004, we see that the levels were a little lower, but not hugely, than now. We then had a drop around 2011 and quite a spike in 2013, and then the trend has been downwards but, worryingly, over the last year, it seems to have increased again.

The important message is that there is no acceptable level of racial hate crime and incidents. Colleagues in the Department of Justice have had a considerable focus on this of late after Judge Marrinan's work and his report on hate crime, and have acknowledged that some of the mechanisms that we have had, particularly around sentencing, really have not been fit for purpose. In July, the Department of Justice published a comprehensive response to that report, indicating how its 34 recommendations would be taken forward by the Department. It is one of the areas that the subgroup have highlighted as key for it, on which we are going to be facilitating discussions with the Department of Justice.

I agree that the figures are concerning. We certainly get them very regularly from the PSNI and we are working with DoJ colleagues, who are



looking at a whole range of ways in which we can tackle hate crime, not just among communities of different races, but homophobic, sectarian, disability, faith and transphobic crime as well.

Q165 **Claire Hanna:** Thank you to the witnesses. Two things that have come up throughout the inquiry from different groups and individuals we have met, both of which you have touched on briefly, are the issues around the limitations of monitoring and the absence of hate crime legislation. What is the plan here to get both of these fairly urgent things in place?

Gareth Johnston: Orla, would you like to say something more about the way forward on monitoring?

Orla McStravick: On ethnic equality monitoring, we now have the report from the independent research that was carried forward in terms of how we might take that forward, and some of the recommendations coming out of that. Equally, working with our statistician colleagues, we have developed draft guidance on ethnic equality monitoring, which is now being circulated to colleagues across Departments. We have set up a cross-departmental group, which was the first recommendation coming out of the research that was done around the feasibility of introducing that here.

We have, in parallel, been doing a lot of engagement around what happens elsewhere with some of our key sector organisations and the likes of the Equality Commission. We have now agreed, coming out of the stocktake report, that this will be one of our primary priorities to move forward, and we are now engaging the subgroup to sit in with the departmental racial equality champions and that wider working group in order to tie down what we can do. It is likely that we will be taking a phased approach to this to try to move things forward, perhaps looking at workforce monitoring in the first instance, and possibly starting with the NICS as a "lead by example" in that respect and, as a second stage, drawing from that how we might go further into services monitoring and into the private sector beyond the public sector.

I cannot give a definitive timeframe at this stage, because the key lever for this will be the final guidance on the ethnic equality monitoring, which is being finalised at the minute.

Claire Hanna: Sorry, what will be? I just did not catch what you said.

Orla McStravick: The draft guidance that we have developed around ethnic equality monitoring will be used by that group for how we take that into practice and make that a reality on the ground, and what we need to do. That group is due to meet in January with members of the racial equality subgroup to start to tie down an implementation plan for this.

Q166 **Claire Hanna:** What are we talking about? Will guidance be in place and activated in 2022?



Orla McStravick: The guidance is in draft form at the minute, but I would expect—and Gareth, you can come in on this—that we will finalise that guidance over the next month or two. Once we have that guidance finalised, the work will be ongoing through the cross-departmental group to look at, as a priority, how we put this into practice and what that will mean. We are engaging our statistician colleagues in that as well. That is our work plan and a key priority of our work plan over the next year to take that forward. I cannot give you a definitive timeframe for the outcome of that, because it will depend on the implementation plan for the work group that arises from the meeting over the next couple of weeks and months.

Q167 **Claire Hanna:** That one does not need any legislation, so it is not really dependent on the Assembly and any potential gaps after the election. That one is in hand, but moving quite slowly. What about the hate crime legislation?

Orla McStravick: Just on ethnic equality monitoring, you could make the legislation at a later date, and there are conflicting views around what that might mean and whether that would be through the Race Relations (Northern Ireland) Order. We are giving consideration to that as part of our review of the Race Relations (Northern Ireland) Order and our proposals around the consultation, to leave the option that we can enact secondary legislation as part of that, if we needed to, to cover the ethnic monitoring. Not all of it would require legislation, and there is a lot that we can do without that, but it does leave the door open for us if we needed to enact legislation. We can do that at a later date, so it is just to clarify that point.

On hate crime, that is being led by DoJ, which, only last week, briefed the racial equality subgroup on its hate crime proposals and what it was intending to do. They intend to introduce the hate crime Bill by autumn 2023, with the final stage of the Bill completed in spring 2024. They are planning a first phase of the public consultation for the end of January 2022 and a second consultation for later in the year, which will cover policies that require further consideration. They are doing a two-stage consultation, with a plan to take the Bill forward in 2023 and conclude in 2024.

Q168 **Stephen Farry:** Good afternoon to Gareth and Orla. I just want to ask about a very discrete issue and then move on to a few more general issues. I appreciate that this is probably more a Department of Finance issue, but I do not want to give you too much of an excuse not to answer it, Gareth. I am very conscious of how reflective the Northern Ireland Civil Service is of diversity in our society. From my own experience, albeit from a few years ago, I certainly was not aware of a lot of ethnic diversity in particular in the Civil Service. Has that improved? If it has not, how well can the Civil Service respond to these issues if it is not seen to be as reflective of society as it should be?



Gareth Johnston: I sit on the diversity champions group for the Northern Ireland Civil Service. I am champion for LGBT, so I have had some insight into how thinking on this is developing. Dr Farry is correct that, if you look at the numbers of minority ethnic people who we have recorded as civil servants here as against the wider participation, we have a bit of distance to go.

The work on that has been very much helped by the appointment of my colleague Alfie Wong as the diversity champion for race for the Civil Service, and I was delighted to see Alfie being awarded the MBE last year for the work that he has spearheaded.

We have been in a situation in the Civil Service where the level of recruitment has been limited in recent years, and that has impacted on how much we have been able to do. Alfie has been focusing very much on getting at some of the underlying reasons why people from minority ethnic backgrounds might not be applying to the Civil Service. For example, for the Chinese community, one of the reasons is that sometimes the Civil Service is not seen as a professional career opportunity to aspire to.

Part of what has been happening there has been about explaining to members of the community and families how, within the Civil Service, we have doctors, architects, vets and engineers—a whole host of professionals—and also how the work that we do, day in, day out, in working with Ministers, in developing policies and in managing services is very much a professional occupation.

Colleagues in Northern Ireland Civil Service HR have also been developing their marketing strategy for recruitment, with the expectation that recruitment is ramping up again. How we reflect our commitment to diversity and the experience of members of staff from different backgrounds is very much part of the thinking on that campaign.

I would agree that you need to start at home and, as Orla has said, some of the first work that we do on ethnic equality monitoring will be within the Civil Service, but we are seeing this being taken seriously at a very senior level and we will see further developments in the coming year.

Orla McStravick: I have worked very closely with Alfie and NICS HR, so we have organised quite a number of outreach sessions specifically for minority ethnic communities. Where there is a recruitment coming up, we will do a dedicated session with minority ethnic communities to inform them about it and explain it to them; to try to identify any barriers to their application or what they might need to know; and to try to help support and encourage applications at all levels across the NICS. We will also circulate the external competitions or recruitment exercises through our extensive contact list for minority ethnic groups, just as an additional means of trying to encourage applications in the first instance.

Q169 **Chair:** That is good to hear. Can I just check on timings? We have heard



from one community. From memory, the PSNI was advertising for posts in a drive for diversity, in a community that probably had not really thought about joining the PSNI before. They began their recruitment drive two days before the closing date for applications. You cannot turn a stubborn dial in two days. Do you give plenty of time? Do you factor that in? I am loth to use the term "positive discrimination", but is there an active agenda to try to diversify the base?

Orla McStravick: Certainly in the work that we do, in terms of the outreach. We have been engaged with NICS HR and with Alfie as our race and ethnicity champion in advance of any recruitment competitions even being finalised and agreed, and then we would offer that outreach session at the very start, so that there is plenty of time for somebody to come back with queries or put in an application. It certainly would not be something that we would do at the end of it.

Q170 **Chair:** Does that take place outside of as well as within Belfast, or is it a very Belfast-centric piece?

Orla McStravick: They have been happening over the past two years, and so, unfortunately, they have all been virtual up to this point in time. They have not been physical meetings but virtual ones. We circulate them around all of our contact lists, which are geographically right across the board.

Stephen Farry: Another aspect to flag up in this regard is how long it will take for diversity to work its way through the system in terms of promotions. Particularly when people are coming in, what grade they come on in may impact on that as well. It is not just a case of the middle junior ranks but the senior official level. We have seen some very dramatic changes in terms of gender diversity at the top compared to five or six years ago, when it was almost entirely male in some respects, so that is an indication of what can be achieved, as well as the time lags in the system.

Chair, could I maybe do a slight handbrake turn?

Chair: Please, as long as you do it safely, you can do whatever you like.

Q171 **Stephen Farry:** I will just turn to the issue of refugee resettlement and ask a number of questions in that regard. First of all, to give a reflection on where things stand in discussions between the Executive Office and the Home Office around the Afghan resettlement process, as far as I am aware, to date none of the Operation Pitting Afghans has been resettled in Northern Ireland. They are in hotels in Great Britain, pending moving to Northern Ireland—almost a phase 2 situation.

What sort of lessons could be learned from the Syrian resettlement scheme, which, on the whole, has been successful in Northern Ireland? I will give credit where it is due in that regard, but there is always room for improvement, of course.

Reflecting on the development of the refugee strategy, we are very



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struck that Northern Ireland is the only region of the UK that, hitherto, has not had a refugee strategy. While you have pointed to recent work in that regard, is there a danger that it is going to be too elongated, in that we will receive the bulk of the Afghan refugees in the coming weeks and there may well be people resettled from Hong Kong, which I know Ian will come to in a moment, but we do not quite have the policies in place quickly enough in that regard? I am conscious, for example, that you are contracting out some of the work as opposed to doing it in-house. Will that exercise some delay rather than fast-tracking it? I appreciate that there is a lot there.

Gareth Johnston: Maybe I could say something about Afghan refugees and the lessons that have been learned from Syrians. Orla, who has been spearheading the work on the refugee integration strategy, might say something about it.

In terms of the Afghan refugees, Ministers have engaged with the Prime Minister and wrote to him in September, setting out the Executive's commitment to support the humanitarian crisis by welcoming vulnerable Afghan citizens here, and agreeing to resettle 3%, which is the population share under both of the Afghan schemes. That would equate to some 840 vulnerable Afghan citizens in total—240 in the first year and then 120 per year under the ACRS.

In terms of when exactly that will start, there has been work going on at pace over the last eight weeks with the Home Office to develop a full understanding of the needs and the shapes of the families who are currently in bridging accommodation in Great Britain, and to address the issues about data, health information and so on that need to be fed in here. On this side of the water, work has been ongoing on securing suitable housing and health support to meet the needs of those families. There are a few stages to this. The general commitment was given, but then you need to look very much at the individual requirements, the family sizes, the support and health needs, and so on, so that people can be linked in to the right support.

We are now at the very final stage of that, and we hope to be able to welcome the first cohort of Afghan families before the end of the calendar year. That is dependent on the Home Office, but we are trying to get everything lined up locally, so that that would be possible.

On the learning points from the Syrian refugees, as Dr Farry says, by and large it has been recognised that the work there was good and successful, but there are absolutely points to be learned. Orla has referred to an innovation lab that was held specifically around these learning points. Some of those are about legal support for asylum claims. Some are about housing, as we have heard; supporting people who need to make complaints; mental and physical health; employment support, where there are a range of projects going on; English language support; and, very importantly, data, which I know has been a consistent theme within our discussion. We are very much feeding those issues from the



experience that we have had with Syrian families into the experience that we will have with the Afghans. That is all very relevant, Orla, to the refugee integration strategy.

Orla McStravick: Yes, and that is now out to consultation as a draft strategy, and we will take whatever comes out of the consultation to revise and inform the final strategy, which will be agreed by the Executive. It has been developed and, while we do not have a final strategy in place, it does not mean that we have not been working around the principles of the strategy. For example, one of the key things that came out of the innovation lab was around the structures here. We had very good structures in place to support the VPRS, and we had an oversight body through our strategic planning group that had all the relevant Departments and the Home Office around the table.

Even though it would be a recommendation for a refugee integration strategy, we went ahead and expanded the remit of that strategic planning group to cover all asylum seekers and refugees, which is now the basis on which our refugee integration strategy would be based. We now have a structure in place and a mechanism for looking into issues that are facing asylum seekers and refugees, and trying to seek a collective response across Government and with the Home Office in terms of addressing some of those issues, particularly asylum issues and those around accommodation, and some things that we need Home Office engagement on because they are not entirely within the gift of the Executive.

We would plan to bring our final refugee integration strategy to Ministers and the Executive as early as possible after the consultation, and then work to implementation plans and the monitoring, oversight and delivery of those, but we are still going ahead and doing a lot of the things that we would expect to see coming out of the final refugee integration strategy, despite not having one finally published at this point in time.

Q172 **Ian Paisley:** I appreciate your answers to date. This is a slight diversion but still on the same theme. As you know, the last census shows that one of the strongest demographics from our local communities is the Chinese and Asian community. They have a propensity to settle really well in Northern Ireland, because of the history of that. I am just wondering if any work has been done with the Hong Kong community, and if BNO status has been looked at to see whether there is any interest in BNO if they come to Northern Ireland from Hong Kong. Is there any assessment being made of the housing capability for Northern Ireland, or the educational opportunities, availability and spaces, and the employment opportunities that may be available? Could you maybe update us on any of the work that the working group is doing on that?

Orla McStravick: On BNO, we work closely with the NI Strategic Migration Partnership on that. When the BNO route was opened, the migration partnership brought in an additional co-ordinator to look at that, who we worked very closely with. We have done a bit of work with



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the team at NI Direct to do some signposting and information for those who might arrive here, and we work closely with our organisations on the ground. Wah Hep and the Chinese Welfare Association are both represented on our racial equality subgroup. I am aware of no issues that have arisen specifically around those who arrived here, and certainly no housing issues.

It is an immigration route, so they are not technically refugees. They are arriving under an immigration route rather than a resettlement scheme. Although, in practice, it looks generally like the same thing, they are classed slightly differently. That said, we are working very closely with the NISMP to see if there are any issues that arise and if there is anything that we need to do to support them. At this point in time, I have not been made aware of anything specifically on that. If there is anything, we are very happy to hear about it and work with the NISMP on how we might seek to address it.

Q173 Ian Paisley: I understand that, to date, it has been a very small number that you could probably count on one hand, but the applications for BNO are through the roof. I think there are 65,000 or 70,000 applications. Just knowing how quickly the circumstances in mainland China could change, there might then be an influx of BNO-status people into the UK, and Northern Ireland, given its history, will more than likely form a logical place for many Hong Kongers to consider settling. That would then have a knock-on effect on refugees who will be coming in, in terms of the work being done to make sure that we have capacity for refugees. Is there a grand plan being mapped out for capacity, if there is a rush of BNOs coming to Northern Ireland?

Orla McStravick: We did a bit of work with Departments at the very start, when the BNO route was announced, to look at any capacity issues. The difficulty, as you touched on there, is the data. When somebody applies for the BNO immigration route, they can optionally put where they might like to settle, but there is no determination. We do not know how many might arrive here, but there was some scenario planning. The other thing, which I touched on before, is that the route is slightly different, with slightly different rules around what they have to do. Essentially, the Home Office is working on the basis that most will be able to support themselves when they are here. That said, there is a risk that that might not be the case and, when they get here, they may be able to support themselves only for a short period of time.

We did some initial work but, without the numbers and the quantum, it is quite difficult to understand if there are any issues arising, which is why the NISMP brought in the additional co-ordinator to work with any groups that arrive and then liaise with us appropriately. We continue to raise that, for example, through the SPG, where we are looking at refugees and asylum seekers. If there is likely to be any impact in terms of that work, we will bring that by way of update. Our NISMP rep is involved in



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those SPG meetings as well and provides a regular update, so there are those linkages with it.

Q174 **Ian Paisley:** Is that co-ordinator exclusive to BNO?

Orla McStravick: Yes. My understanding is that that is a BNO co-ordinator post within the strategic migration partnership.

Q175 **Chair:** I have a few questions. Could you say a few words in relation to the Traveller and Roma community? They see themselves as being seen as a nuisance to be brushed under the carpet—"If we ignore them, they will ignore us".

Gareth Johnston: In the last week, we had the first meeting of a new strategic planning group on Travellers and Roma, which Ministers attended. That is really to give a forum where the issues for Travellers that cannot be resolved at a working level can be escalated, and where we can work with senior representatives between Departments to address them. Last week's meeting was one of a number of opportunities to hear some of what those immediate concerns are, particularly around education, health and levels of hate crimes and incidents. The architecture is now in place, which mirrors the architecture that we have for refugees and asylum seekers. I hope that the Traveller community will take some confidence from that that their needs really are being given attention within Government and are being addressed.

Orla McStravick: In addition to the strategic planning group that Gareth touched on, in line with one of our commitments in the racial equality strategy we also set up the thematic group on Travellers, which is at a local level, with a range of stakeholders involved. We are not part of it, so it is run independently. That group has been meeting for a number of months now. They have put out an expression of interest and have got a really good response from Travellers engaging with that group and beginning to have a voice that can feed up into the strategic planning group.

They also want to do some research to help set the baseline around the needs and issues affecting the Traveller community. Within TEO, we are supporting that and we are working with the chair to develop the spec that will go out to procure somebody to do that research for us. As Gareth touched on, at the first meeting of the strategic planning group the chair presented an update of the issues. I have spoken to him since that and already that has been followed up with the relevant Departments to set up additional, separate meetings to start looking at some of those priority issues that were brought up from the Travellers thematic group. That piece of work is definitely increasing in momentum as we move forward.

Q176 **Chair:** I have two further questions. You have mentioned the number of Syrian refugees who came to Northern Ireland. I think it is fair to say that, from what we have heard, their experience has been mixed. That



might be the best way to describe it. You are now preparing, as the rest of the UK is, for the arrival of very vulnerable people from Afghanistan, who will, by definition, apart from any other issues, be sceptical about officialdom, the state and all the rest of it. Are you going back to those who came from Syria to ask, "What went right? What went wrong? What could have been done better?" Is the best source of organic learning not to go back to that client group to find out directly from their experience and then shape things for those from Afghanistan?

Gareth Johnston: Orla, do you want to say something about the engagement that we have had?

Orla McStravick: Two independent reviews have been done of the VPRS. We also know a number of stakeholders who work with quite a number of those groups on the ground. The delivery partners who were involved in the VPRS are those who will be involved in the Afghan work, and they have very much taken on board the learning and experience of the Syrian refugees to feed into the work on the Afghan resettlement.

Chair: That is helpful. Thank you for that. It is important not to throw the baby out with the bathwater, as it were. This is my final question and I think it is going to be the final question from the Committee. We are politicians and you are officials. We love working groups and strategies. We adore strategic planning.

Ian Paisley: Speak for yourself.

Q177 **Chair:** We find discussion forums the most fascinating thing since Dickens picked up his pen. We all have shelves full of strategies. I know that I used to, when I was a district and county councillor. Then you go, "What has flowed from them? What was delivered from them?" We had a very good strategy and then had to start reviewing it again, so we did not implement any of it. There seems to be a lot of good stuff going, and we are all heartened by the fact that you have not ducked the issue, which is, in many respects, through no fault of yours, that Northern Ireland is very much behind the curve on a lot of these issues. Can you just assure us that it is not all strategies, focus groups, working groups and the like, and that it is about getting your hands dirty, getting down on the ground and delivering?

Gareth Johnston: It is sometimes said that, in this part of the world, we used to launch ships and now we launch strategies. That is not a feeling that I want people to have. Orla will be smiling, because she will be sick of me going on about this in our senior management team meetings. I have no attraction to strategies that have 40, 50 or 60 actions that were all the things that you were doing anyway, and you just re-present and report on them every three months. That is really why we did the mid-term stocktake. It was to ask, "What is the small number of things on which we need to make real progress and to make a real difference on the ground?"



The training and development, the legislation and the ethnic equality monitoring were three particular issues that came out of that, and we are doing real stuff on those that will make a difference. We are talking with the sector, working out how we can deliver effective and impactful training and development to officials, and then rolling that out more widely. It is not the kind of thing that takes you through reams of legislation, important as that might be to acknowledge, but the kind of training and development that makes you realise what the lived experience is of people from a variety of ethnic backgrounds here, how we can improve that, what they need and how we deliver that.

The emphasis is absolutely on action, and I would like to think that, over the next few months, we will see a few ships as well as a few strategies.

Chair: That would be good.

Orla McStravick: I think you planted that question, Gareth.

Q178 **Chair:** Having said that was the final question, this is my final supplementary, I suppose. Taking the point that the community pool in which you are fishing, as it were, is, by definition, smaller, and that the experience of politicians and other stakeholders in Northern Ireland is very different from that, for example, on the mainland, do you have seconded to you or access to, via the NIO, the Home Office, the Local Government Association or others, people from England, Wales and Scotland who are well versed in these sorts of issues and very experienced, with a long tradition in very racially mixed areas of the country? Do they ever get seconded over to you? How do you pick their brains, get best practice or learn from their trials and errors, or are you swimming alone?

Orla McStravick: We do not have anybody seconded in, but we are very mindful of the expertise elsewhere, so we would engage with other jurisdictions and those who are involved in other jurisdictions in some of these policy areas, around what they do, how they do it and some of the issues. Equally, we recognise in our racial equality strategy that, a lot of the time, our minority ethnic communities know more than we do. That was why the racial equality subgroup was set up as a key delivery structure of our strategy, so that we can have those informed voices informing Government on a regular basis across a broad range of work on racial equality.

Q179 **Chair:** Has secondment ever been given thought and ruled out, or has it never been discussed?

Gareth Johnston: Maybe the idea that England is always good at things—

Q180 **Chair:** I may represent an English constituency but I am a Welshman, so you would never find me saying that. What I am saying is that there is a raft of at-scale experience in delivering sensitive policy initiatives et cetera. Rather than trying to reinvent the wheel from a Northern Irish



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perspective, while there will always be a unique slant to that, surely to goodness there must be some merit in formal secondment, some sort of information share or some sort of group that you can bounce ideas off, pick brains and find out the pitfalls.

Gareth Johnston: Of course, the south of Ireland has had experience in all of this as well. I will repeat what I said at a meeting last week: I am open to light from any quarter on this. Anywhere we can get useful experience and guidance, we will certainly look to get it. I am conscious that key among those quarters is our own stakeholders and those with lived experience here in Northern Ireland, but if there is other expertise we can draw in—in fact, it is a conversation I have been having just in the last few weeks about how we continue to get appropriate expertise into Orla’s division—we are open to it.

Chair: That is an encouraging space to bring this session to an end. Can I thank you both, as I know you were under time pressures with earlier meetings, for your patience when we had Divisions here? Thank you for your attendance and for your contribution, taking our questions and answering them so comprehensively. The Committee is very grateful to both of you and wish you well.