

Written evidence submitted by Participation and the Practice of Rights (MEM0009)

**Participation and the Practice of Rights submission  
to the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee of the UK Parliament  
21 May 2021**

**Call for evidence:  
the experience of minority ethnic and migrant people in Northern Ireland**

*Summary*

*I. Introduction*

*II. Written evidence*

*A. The experiences of minority ethnic and migrant people living in Northern Ireland*

- 1. asylum seekers: enforced destitution, housing conditions, food poverty, children's issues, mental health, work*
- 2. refugees: living conditions, placement of housing*

*B. The challenges that minority ethnic and migrant people face in Northern Ireland*

- 1. Hate crime and response*
- 2. Discrimination in use of police powers*
- 3. exclusion from measures to protect rough sleepers during the pandemic*
- 4. New Plan for Immigration*
- 5. Access to employment*
- 6. Representation*

*C. The steps the UK government can take to help ensure effective racial equality legislation in Northern Ireland*

*D. The health and economic outcomes of minority ethnic and migrant people in Northern Ireland, and the steps the UK government can take to help improve them*

- 1. Scrap the New Plan for Immigration.*
- 2. Lift the Ban and enable asylum seekers to work*
- 3. Stop enforced destitution*
- 4. Enable asylum seekers to access social security benefits*
- 5. Guarantee health and social care assessments for asylum seekers and take findings into account in allocating dispersal accommodation*
- 6. Enforce Decent Homes Standard in accommodation*
- 7. Mears Group, Homecare and others adopt a 'zero tolerance' approach to bullying and intimidation of asylum seekers by staff*
- 8. Mears Group adopt a policy whereby school age children are not relocated away from their place of study*
- 9. NI Executive conduct a review of the issue of race / ethnicity and representation*
- 10. The Department for the Economy conduct an audit of whether it is fully carrying out its section 75 obligations with regard to equality of opportunity to employment on the basis of race and ethnicity.*

*E. Successful initiatives and programmes to encourage cultural exchange and diversity among people in Northern Ireland*

## **I. Introduction**

Participation and the Practice of Rights (PPR) is a small human rights NGO founded in 2006, working to turn international human rights standards into grassroots tools for economic, social and environmental change.

Originally active in Belfast and Dublin, PPR now works with a growing network of communities across Ireland using human rights as tools for change. Each of these campaigns are supported by community and voluntary groups, politicians, activist networks and funders. We collaborate with partners in Scotland, South Africa, USA, England and elsewhere to exchange learning and expertise.

PPR works with communities who have been marginalised by laws, policies, public authorities or private interests. One of the groups we support, Housing4All, was formed in 2016 in order to campaign to ensure that all people seeking asylum are given the opportunity to lead dignified and secure lives. The Lift the Ban group is part of the wider UK initiative for the right to work for everyone, including asylum seekers. Another campaign, Equality Can't Wait / BuildHomesNow!, supports refugees living in private rentals, young people in temporary accommodation and homeless families together to assert their right to adequate housing. All of these groups include people with direct experience of living in Northern Ireland as members of 'minority ethnic or migrant' groups.

## **II. Written evidence**

### **A. The experiences of minority ethnic and migrant people living in Northern Ireland**

#### **1. asylum seekers**

Asylum seekers represent the most disadvantaged sector of people that fall within the category of this call for evidence, as not only have they had to flee their country and leave their lives behind, but also, once in the UK, they are subjected to the UK Home Office's 'hostile environment' policies. Refused asylum seekers are the only category of persons for whom the stated intent of government policy, the 'No Recourse to Public Funds', is to produce destitution. However, it remains a fact that the NI Executive has devolved responsibilities which can both mitigate and address many of the causal policies contributing to the marginalisation of this community. The response to Covid-19 has shown that with political will, devolved powers can be used to expand social and economic rights protections for everyone. The offering of Covid-19 vaccines to 761 asylum seekers in May 2021<sup>1</sup> demonstrated this clearly while the stated policy of housing all rough sleepers regardless of status during the pandemic, even with some notable gaps referenced below, was further evidence of this approach.

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<sup>1</sup> <http://aims.niassembly.gov.uk/questions/search.aspx>, AQW 18465/17-22.

In 2016 -- in the absence of any monitoring by the state as to the numbers of refused asylum seekers in NI with 'No Recourse to Public Funds' -- the Housing4All group designed and carried out a survey amongst 36 asylum seekers in Belfast<sup>2</sup>. Research findings included:

- 63% of respondents had been made homeless more than once since applying for asylum.
- 87% of those surveyed said that being homeless had adversely affected their mental and physical health.

It was clear from these early findings that the Home Office's enforced destitution policies were having a devastating impact on people seeking asylum.

In November 2018, the Housing4All group carried out a wider survey, encompassing 70 asylum seekers in Belfast. The findings, published in June 2019<sup>3</sup>, highlighted key areas.

**a) Enforced destitution: 7% of people stated they were not in receipt of any Home Office support at the time of the survey<sup>4</sup>**

Given that the Home Office does not keep statistics on the number of asylum seekers who are destitute, it is impossible to know how many are affected. People who have been destitute for several years may fall away from established networks of support and go 'underground', where they are at serious risk of exploitation and abuse.

**b) Housing conditions: 31% of survey respondents said their home was not safe, liveable or secure, their privacy was not protected, or they didn't have access to essential services and facilities including energy and heating<sup>5</sup>**

The main reasons people gave for this included unresolved maintenance issues (26.7%), privacy not respected (16.7%), dampness (10%), location not close to services (3.3%) and other (43.3%). Comments given in response to 'other' included "sometimes heat not working, sometimes no gas or electricity" and "sometimes very cold and smelling". 91% of people surveyed by Housing4All said they were living in accommodation provided by the Home Office through the National Asylum Support Service (NASS). (The current provider, from 2019 to 2029, is Mears Group PLC under the £50m AASC contract.)

The ill effects of poor housing conditions on both physical and mental health are well documented, for instance with regard to respiratory illnesses (particularly amongst children and the elderly). Poor conditions exacerbated by insecurity of tenure have been found to contribute to mental ill health symptoms such as stress, anxiety, panic attacks and depression.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> [A Place of Refuge? Report calls for action from Executive to end homelessness and destitution | Participation and the Practice of Rights \(pprproject.org\)](#)

<sup>3</sup> PPR, a Prison without Walls at [https://issuu.com/ppr-org/docs/h4all\\_report\\_june\\_2019\\_final\\_17.06](https://issuu.com/ppr-org/docs/h4all_report_june_2019_final_17.06).

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., A Prison without Walls, p. 11.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., A Prison without Walls, pp. 15-16.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., A Prison without Walls, p. 16.

With the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic, PPR's ongoing work in the area of housing rights had to move online. Since January 2021 PPR have carried out regular online housing rights clinics, and is collating information and helping people submit complaints to Mears Group plc about the conditions and treatment they experience. In April some of these asylum seekers took part in an online meeting with the relevant Mears Group staff to discuss the outstanding issues with both conditions and Mears' response. Some of these families also shared their stories in a meeting with a concerned Member of NI's Legislative Assembly on the Committee for Communities, who subsequently submitted Parliamentary questions to the Minister for Communities on their behalf<sup>7</sup>. Work with these and other families continues.

**c) Food poverty: 79% of people stated they could not afford food for themselves or their family. 57% were currently attending a food bank - of these, 70% attended at least once a month and almost 20% on a weekly basis<sup>8</sup>**

In contrast, at the time of these survey results, it was reported that 7% of the wider population of the UK had used a food bank -- demonstrating the relative severity of the food insecurity faced by asylum seekers.

Moreover, as comments from survey respondents demonstrated, food is an important part of identity and culture and helps families seeking asylum remain attached to the place they are from. One group member said,

*if you force people not to eat food according to their culture, you are pushing their kids to forget their own culture which is not right. They need to be supported to keep their culture and share it with their children and their children's children. You push me to eat this, they will never know our food. It's finished. Gone. They will know nothing about our culture.*

Comments to the survey indicated that the combination of food insecurity and loss of culture worsens the trauma of displacement, in that constant reliance on charities inevitably has an impact on people's dignity and wellbeing. People who participated in our research explained how they were often turned away from receiving food parcels as they had already received their quota and some people with children even reported to us that they were told by staff if they came to collect another food parcel they would be reported to social services. Food banks also struggle to provide food that meets the health or cultural needs of individuals.

**d) Children's issues: Families make up 38% of the asylum-seeking population surveyed. Of these, 88% of people with children stated they could not afford the basics and other child related costs, while 71% stated the school uniform grant is not adequate<sup>9</sup>.**

The parents surveyed greatly struggled to afford the costs associated with raising a family.

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<sup>7</sup> See inter alia <http://aims.niassembly.gov.uk/questions/search.aspx>, AQW 18850/17-22 and AQW 18851/17-22.

<sup>8</sup> Op. cit., A Prison without Walls, pp. 19-20.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., A Prison without Walls, pp. 23-24.

Over one third of parents said they had been forced to change their child's school due to relocation by the Home Office. The school uniform grant is only available once a year and so families who are relocated during the school year must pay for the new uniform out of their weekly allowance. 88% of parents stated they could not afford basic items such as food and clothing along with other child related costs, specifically transport, recreational activities, and school trips.

**In all 21% of survey respondents said they had had a child since becoming an asylum seeker and 92% of them struggled to afford the cost of this.**

The Home Office provides a one-off maternity payment of £300 for children born to asylum seekers.

**75% of parents reported they experienced anxiety, isolation, and depression or felt they could not cope with daily activities.**

Housing4All research found that parents struggled with being unable to afford things like extracurricular activities, sports and learning musical instruments, and this had a negative impact on the mental health of parents. Parents felt that their children did not respect them as they were unable to afford things like school uniforms or bus fare. Parents felt that being able to participate equally in school and out of school activities was vital to their child's education, development, and integration into their new community.

Additional sources reveal particular problems faced by older children and youths -- for instance in accessing funding for the higher education places they have won, due to their status as asylum seekers<sup>10</sup>.

**e) Mental health: 79% of people stated they experienced anxiety, depression, or isolation or felt they could not cope with daily activities<sup>11</sup>.**

Comparably, pre-pandemic an estimated 20% of the overall population in the North of Ireland suffered with mental ill-health.

**A staggering 77% of people surveyed by Housing4All said their health had gotten worse since claiming asylum in the UK.**

There are generally three stages of a displaced person's journey where they may experience trauma causing mental ill-health: pre-displacement, during their flight, and post-displacement. Post-displacement stressors -- the ones people are undergoing in Northern Ireland -- can be caused by factors relating to the displacement itself, like family separation, social isolation, racism and discrimination, as well as loss of social identity tied with former community and cultural groups.

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<sup>10</sup> See for instance <https://www.belfastlive.co.uk/news/belfast-news/mystery-businessman-offers-fund-asylum-18958230?fbclid=IwAR2s2T5j6MSXK4jovfz-YKRwnenT0DWB4nQN7j4kzKgw64wIxEjw0OOC950>

<sup>11</sup> Op. cit., A Prison without Walls, pp. 27-9

Post-displacement stressors can also be caused by poverty, poor quality housing and barriers to employment and education, and exposure to complex and unfair legal systems -- all consequences of deliberate Home Office policy, resulting in additional trauma for asylum seekers under the UK's 'hostile environment'. Asylum seekers involved in this research frequently reported to Housing4All that they felt medical professionals or other staff lacked understanding about their culture which prevented them from receiving adequate services.

**f) work: 100% of asylum seekers are excluded from accessing employment<sup>12</sup>.**

People who were surveyed by Housing4All included bankers, doctors, mechanics, chefs, pharmacists, teachers, accountants, retail workers, lawyers, fishermen, electricians, computer engineers and farmers in their home countries -- a vast set of skills unused. Among other impacts, some survey respondents explained how the denial of the right to work reduced them to an unfamiliar and unwelcome state of dependency:

*Imagine someone who has been working for a long time in his own country providing for himself. Then he comes here and gets £35 per week and he knows if he is working he could give that £35 to 10 people.*

In January and February 2021, people in the Lift the Ban group carried out a survey about people's work experience, skills and education amongst 125 of their peers amongst the immigrant community in Belfast. The findings, which have yet to be released publicly, included the following:

- **Prior to being forced to leave their country, 98 people -- over 4 out of 5 respondents - said they had been working.** Of the fifth who hadn't been working many were under 18 when they left and had been in full time education.
- **The most common sector that people had been working in before coming to NI was healthcare, including doctors, nurses and care workers.** This was followed closely by IT, Education, Construction and Agriculture. The range of professions reported was very wide -- from pre-school teachers to graphic designers, actresses to farmers and civil engineers to bus drivers.
- **Over 4 out of 5 people held academic qualifications and nearly 1/3 have a university degree or higher.**

The survey asked about people's experience and skills. It also asked what being able to work would mean for the respondent. This is just one of the answers:

*Being able to work would bring a lot of changes to the asylum seeker like me. Firstly, it will [allow] me to secure my needs and not rely on the support I get from the government, I'll be able to contribute such as paying taxes. It will be good for my mental health. Because when I'm working, it will facilitate my integration with the local people. Being able to work will help me to feel more confident and less stressed as [otherwise I] will be only waiting for my acceptance such as my status.*

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid., A Prison without Walls, pp. 32-3.

## 2. Refugees

Shortly before the Covid-19 pandemic began, local press reported that Northern Ireland had resettled 1637 Syrian refugees under the Vulnerable Persons Resettlement scheme, or roughly 9% of the UK total; this meant that NI had proportionately more Syrian refugees than any other part of the UK, though they still made up a tiny percentage -- 0.08% -- of the overall population<sup>13</sup>.

With regard to the housing element of the scheme, the Department for Communities' most recent briefing document on the VPRS scheme says

the Department and the Housing Executive analyses the possible settlement locations in Northern Ireland. All areas are considered. The analysis looks at factors which relate to the homes themselves and the communities they are located in.<sup>14</sup>

It explains,

the private rented sector will provide the temporary housing solution for when the refugees arrive in Northern Ireland. The NIHE will assist the refugees to identify appropriate permanent housing solutions as they would for any other homeless household.<sup>15</sup>

PPR began working with people from this group in 2018, leading to the publication that July of detailed information gathered from six families<sup>16</sup>. Work with Syrian and other refugee families continues. Most of the families report that the private tenancy they were placed into by the Housing Executive upon arrival is managed by the private company Homecare. In 2018 PPR asked the Housing Executive via Freedom of Information request about this: the Housing Executive replied,

Homecare is a private limited company and is one of a number of private persons who are willing to make available private sector accommodation to which the Housing Executive may refer persons requiring temporary accommodation ... there is no contract between the Housing Executive and Homecare or any of the private providers of accommodation.<sup>17</sup>

### a) Living conditions

Under the VPRS scheme these families were selected for resettlement in part on the basis of identified vulnerabilities. After exhaustive vetting by United Nations and UK authorities, they were placed in the responsibility of local authorities in Belfast. A close look at their situation raised serious concerns<sup>18</sup>:

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<sup>13</sup> [Syrian refugees: Highest proportion resettled in Northern Ireland - BBC News](#)

<sup>14</sup> <https://www.communities-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/communities/dfc-svprs-briefing-feb20.pdf> p. 13.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 13.

<sup>16</sup> ["We came here for sanctuary" Syrian refugee families" by Participation and the Practice of Rights \(PPR\) - issuu](#)

<sup>17</sup> NIHE FOI response to PPR of 15 May 2018.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, We came here, pp. 6-7.

- under the VPRS families were meant to be in temporary accommodation for a limited time -- maximum of one year -- before being moved to permanent homes. **All of the families interviewed were still in temporary private rental accommodation, despite four of them having arrived two years before or more.**
- All six families have **documented photographic evidence of appalling living conditions** failing to meet the NI Department for Communities Decent Homes Standard.
- All recounted **repeated and unsuccessful attempts to get problems with their homes rectified** in the face of inaction, apparent lack of concern and at times disrespectful treatment on the part of the staff and authorities involved. A mother recounted,
 

*everything is in very bad condition. I reported that the glass shower door is unsafe and housing did nothing. Then it broke when my daughter was taking a shower. They have still not fixed the shower door.*<sup>19</sup>
- All spoke of the **impact of the substandard conditions and accompanying lack of care on their physical and mental health and on that of their children.** For example, one parent said
 

*From the day I arrived I noticed rising dampness in all of the rooms in the house. My daughter was born prematurely at seven months and has serious ongoing health issues – especially with her breathing and chest. When my daughter was born she had a haemorrhage in the lungs. She takes an inhaler daily. The doctor has stated that she cannot continue to live in these conditions... I have reported the problems to Homecare many times and they are aware that the situation is making my daughter sick.*<sup>20</sup>

Another said,

*my wife is being treated for depression because of the stress the house is causing my family. My oldest daughter's health is getting worse, and she is crying day and night asking why we brought her here. The mental health of everyone in my family is suffering. Nobody is listening to us.*<sup>21</sup>

- The most vulnerable amongst them, women living alone with children, spoke in particular of their families' **exposure to racist abuse and attack in and around their homes.** In one example, a mother reported that
 

*my family suffer from frequent racist attacks in the area. Every time we leave the house everyone stares at us – some people in the neighbourhood insult and beat my children and shout racist remarks about them. They are too scared to leave the house. One of the neighbours spat in my face. Sometimes at 2am or 3am people bang on my door and shout. People from the neighbourhood throw things at my house. This information has been told to the housing [authorities] many times. In five months nothing has been done to help any of these issues.*<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid., We Came Here, p. 10.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., We Came Here, p. 9.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., We Came Here, p. 12.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., We Came Here, pp. 13, 17.

Another mother said,

*we are suffering from frequent racist attacks. Every time my nine-year old son leaves the house people beat him or insult him and say provoking things to humiliate him and make him cry. Peoples throw eggs and rubbish at the windows and doors. Every time I put recycling bins out people empty them at my door. People throw glass bottles through my skylight – my sofa is under the skylight and I am worried that if my children are sitting on it they will be killed by one of these glass bottles...I have been to the police and complained but nothing happened. I have informed housing many times about what has been happening... I have reported everything to housing and the police. Nothing has been done. I have asked to be moved and nothing has happened.*<sup>23</sup>

After the 2018 report, over time it was confirmed that five of the six of the families were moved from the homes where they had been living to other accommodation. Unfortunately, amongst refugee families there have been reports of new families moved quickly into properties that other families have been relocated from due to poor conditions, with no indication that full remedial works have been carried out beforehand to make them entirely compliant with Decent Homes Standard

Since January 2021 PPR have carried out numerous online housing clinics, and to date have gathered evidence from twelve Syrian VPRS families -- two in Belfast and ten in Derry -- reporting similar situations and issues to those described above. 10 of the 12 have submitted written housing complaints to the NI Housing Executive, and monitoring continues.

## **b) Placement of VPRS housing**

In April 2021 PPR submitted input to the Special Rapporteur on the Right to Adequate Housing to inform his upcoming reports on discrimination, segregation and the right to adequate housing. As expressed in that submission, PPR is concerned at the practice of placing vulnerable Syrian refugee families in areas of high housing need. In Belfast, FOI requests have revealed that the NIHE has chosen to place a large percentage of Syrian families in areas of high demand and clear shortage of social housing -- including, mainly, predominately Catholic areas. In 2019, over 100 households were concentrated in seven of Belfast's 20 Housing Needs Assessment areas -- including the 5 with the largest residual need (shortfall) of social homes.

The deliberate placing of vulnerable refugee families in private rental accommodation in deprived areas with high housing demand -- in which deprivation also manifests in severe housing shortage, housing stress and homelessness -- places additional stress on them and potentially impedes their integration.

New figures from end March 2021 have just been received and are being reviewed; initial analysis revealed that the situation has not greatly changed.

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid., We Came Here, pp. 13, 17.

## B. The challenges that minority ethnic and migrant people face in Northern Ireland

The Special Rapporteur on the Right to Adequate Housing specifically requested information on "migrants, foreigners, refugees, internally displaced persons" and housing: in addition to the issues addressed above, we highlighted additional issues.

### 1. Hate crime and response

PPR have received numerous accounts from different group members and others of experiences similar to those recounted in the quotes above. On paper hate crime in NI is determined by the victim's perception<sup>24</sup>, yet in some cases there is evidence that even repeat incidents are treated more as anti-social behaviour. Following a number of cases in which people have been intimidated from taking up offers of social housing, or have been intimidated out of social homes in which they were living, PPR have followed up on the issue through Freedom of Information requests<sup>25</sup> with both the Police Service of Northern Ireland and the Northern Ireland Housing Executive.

In one well-publicised recent event, January 2021 saw a devastating fire at the Belfast Multicultural Association in Donegall Pass in Belfast, which had been used for a food bank, a clothes bank and other activities. Police investigated it as a hate crime; the First and deputy First Minister called the attack 'despicable' and said they were doing everything possible to eradicate racism and hate crime. In a positive sign of community support, within days nearly £60k had been raised to help the organisation rebuild.<sup>26</sup>

#### Prevalence of hate crime

A recent report from an independent review into hate crime legislation here, published by the NI Department of Justice, found that hate crime and discrimination against minorities has been "a persistent and recurrent problem across Northern Ireland for the past two decades", and said that since 2016, racist hate motivated incidents are more prevalent each year than sectarian motivated incidents, meaning "in practical terms, there is approximately a one in 31 chance of being the victim of a reported racial hate incident compared to an approximately one in 1777 chance of being a victim of a reported sectarian hate incident"<sup>27</sup>.

The Equality Commission NI's 'key inequalities' research includes tracking of NI crime statistics regarding the number of 'criminal damage to a dwelling crimes' that had a racist motivation<sup>28</sup>. Around the same time as the above DOJ report was issued, press reports showed that the PSNI were investigating a hate incident in which racist and sectarian graffiti was painted on walls in North Belfast to deter potential residents from moving there<sup>29</sup>. Over the past three years PPR have logged numerous similar reports of perceived 'foreigners'

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<sup>24</sup> Public Prosecution Service for Northern Ireland, Hate Crime Policy at <https://www.ppsni.gov.uk/SiteDocuments/PPSNI%20HATE.pdf>, paras. 2.1.1 - 2.1.3.

<sup>25</sup> <https://www.nlb.ie/investigations/FOI/2020-12-hate-crime-against-migrants-how-the-police-service-of-northern-ireland-should-investigate-hate-crime-incident>

<sup>26</sup> [https://www.nlb.ie/investigations/policy-watch/01-2021-free\\_school\\_meal\\_provision\\_in\\_ni\\_and\\_in\\_england\\_nis\\_dfc\\_food\\_programme\\_response\\_to\\_belfast\\_hate\\_crime\\_psn\\_begging\\_arrests](https://www.nlb.ie/investigations/policy-watch/01-2021-free_school_meal_provision_in_ni_and_in_england_nis_dfc_food_programme_response_to_belfast_hate_crime_psn_begging_arrests)

<sup>27</sup> [hate-crime-review.pdf \(justice-ni.gov.uk\)](https://www.justice-ni.gov.uk/hate-crime-review.pdf)

<sup>28</sup> [ECNI - Housing & Communities: Research - Equality Commission NI \(equalityni.org\)](https://www.equalityni.org/ECNI-Housing-Communities-Research)

<sup>29</sup> [Police investigating hate incident after graffiti painted outside Belfast home ahead of viewings - BelfastTelegraph.co.uk](https://www.belfasttelegraph.co.uk/news/northern-ireland/police-investigating-hate-incident-after-graffiti-painted-outside-belfast-home-ahead-of-viewings-1.4711111)

being intimidated out of their homes, indicating that discrimination against this group impacts their access to their right to adequate housing.

### **Hate crime legislation**

The Department of Justice published the report of an independent review into hate crime legislation here at end 2020<sup>30</sup>. It found that hate crime and discrimination against minorities has been "a persistent and recurrent problem across Northern Ireland for the past two decades". Since 2016, racist hate motivated incidents are more prevalent each year than sectarian motivated incidents, meaning "in practical terms, there is approximately a one in 31 chance of being the victim of a reported racial hate incident compared to an approximately one in 1777 chance of being a victim of a reported sectarian hate incident". Meanwhile the PSNI investigated a hate incident in which racist and sectarian graffiti was painted on walls in North Belfast to deter potential residents from moving there<sup>31</sup>.

Justice Minister Naomi Long, addressing fellow MLAs at Stormont, said in May that work on a stand-alone hate crime bill to be presented next term is underway, along with non-legislative measures around providing a sustainable hate crime advocacy service and creating a victims of crime commissioner<sup>32</sup>.

## **2. Discrimination in use of police powers**

In April NI's Chief Constable addressed the Northern Ireland Policing Board on the PSNI's issuing of Covid-19 fines and use of 'stop and search', found to have been disproportionately directed at people from ethnic minority backgrounds. According to PSNI figures Travellers were the group most disproportionately affected, and people of black, Asian and minority ethnic (BAME) backgrounds made up 4.1% of the total 2020 stops in 2020 despite only making up around 1.8% of the population. Some Policing Board members voiced concern; its Performance Committee continues to monitor the issue<sup>33</sup>.

In November 2020 a report by the NI Policing Board was highly critical of the PSNI's actions against Black Lives Matter protestors earlier in the year. It said these "sent the wrong message to protesters and damaged the reputation of the PSNI and the confidence of some members of the public".<sup>34</sup> In January 2021 BLM protestors sued to recover fines charged plus damages after the police ombudsman found the PSNI had handled the protest in a discriminatory manner. The PSNI chief constable apologised for the service's handling of the demonstrations in Belfast and Derry, but the fines and cautions against protestors reportedly remained in force.<sup>35</sup>

## **3. Exclusion from measures to protect rough sleepers during the pandemic**

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<sup>30</sup> [https://www.nlb.ie/investigations/policy-watch/12-2020-social\\_housing\\_shortage\\_rough\\_sleeping\\_housing\\_and\\_hate\\_crime\\_in\\_ni\\_uk\\_refugee\\_resettlement\\_scheme](https://www.nlb.ie/investigations/policy-watch/12-2020-social_housing_shortage_rough_sleeping_housing_and_hate_crime_in_ni_uk_refugee_resettlement_scheme)

<sup>31</sup> <https://www.belfasttelegraph.co.uk/news/northern-ireland/police-investigating-hate-incident-after-graffiti-painted-outside-belfast-home-ahead-of-viewings-39767072.html>

<sup>32</sup> <https://www.theyworkforyou.com/ni/?id=2021-04-27.4.63&s=refugees#g4.65>

<sup>33</sup> [https://www.nlb.ie/investigations/policy-watch/04-2021-income\\_inequality\\_and\\_covid-19\\_infection\\_rates\\_structural\\_racism\\_in\\_the\\_uk\\_inequality\\_and\\_discrimination\\_in\\_northern\\_ireland](https://www.nlb.ie/investigations/policy-watch/04-2021-income_inequality_and_covid-19_infection_rates_structural_racism_in_the_uk_inequality_and_discrimination_in_northern_ireland)

<sup>34</sup> [https://www.nlb.ie/investigations/policy-watch/11-2020-black\\_lives\\_matter\\_and\\_the\\_psn\\_i\\_food\\_insecurity\\_and\\_the\\_young](https://www.nlb.ie/investigations/policy-watch/11-2020-black_lives_matter_and_the_psn_i_food_insecurity_and_the_young)

<sup>35</sup> [https://www.nlb.ie/investigations/policy-watch/01-2021-covid\\_deepening\\_inequalities\\_children\\_and\\_deprivation\\_black\\_lives\\_matter](https://www.nlb.ie/investigations/policy-watch/01-2021-covid_deepening_inequalities_children_and_deprivation_black_lives_matter)

In terms of the Covid-19 pandemic, local press highlighted cases of migrants excluded from the Northern Ireland Housing Executive's implementation of the 'Everyone In' policy to house all rough sleepers during the pandemic in the interest of public safety, meant to be accessible to all regardless of nationality or immigration status<sup>36</sup>.

#### 4. New Plan for Immigration

PPR joined eighteen other NI organisations to endorse the Refugee & Asylum Forum's response to the Home Office consultation on the 'New Plan for Immigration'<sup>37</sup>.

International legal protections for people seeking asylum are in no way conditional on their using a "safe and legal" route. The 'New Plan' is predicated on a two-tier system that has no basis in law and is absolutely divorced from the reality faced by people facing persecution. It explicitly denies vulnerable people their right to seek international protection and claims that this is in the interest of "fairness".

The proposed "refined approach" to resettlement schemes risks denying people access to the right to international protection, a clear dereliction of the UK's duties as a signatory of the 1951 Convention. Moreover, the stated intention of cherry-picking people considered as having potential to "achieve better integration outcomes in the UK" would undermine the Home Office's equality duties and would inevitably lay the groundwork for charges of institutional bias, including institutional racism.

Conflating vulnerable people entering the UK unlawfully in order to seek international protection with criminal "people smugglers" is a betrayal of this country's proud history of sheltering refugees. The Home Office is using an "overhaul [of] the UK's decades old domestic asylum framework" as a smokescreen to deny protection to genuinely vulnerable people.

The explicit aim of "rapid removal" -- especially given the deliberate breaches of international law and standards proposed by the Home Office -- raises immediate concerns about potential denial of due process and risk of de facto refoulement. The same is true of the prospect of assessing asylum claims offshore. More fundamentally, these proposals are an assault on this country's historic claim to be a beacon of respect for due process and the rule of law.

For people denied refugee status but unable to be sent elsewhere, the proposed "new temporary protection status with less generous entitlements" than those currently offered to asylum seekers is, frankly, hard to envision. The current system was already highly punitive by design, as evidenced above.

With regard to "plans to expand the Government's asylum estate", the housing of asylum seekers in disused military barracks in England that were declared unfit for use by the responsible authorities -- in continued defiance of a growing array of civil, judicial, health and legislative authorities -- is already a spectacle damaging to the dignity and repute of the

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<sup>36</sup> [Homeless migrants missing out despite 'Everyone In' pandemic policy - Investigations & Analysis - Northern Ireland from The Detail](#)

<sup>37</sup> <https://lawcentreni.s3.amazonaws.com/RAF-New-Plan-for-Immigration-Analysis-of-Impact-2.pdf>

Home Office everywhere. To widen the use of reception centres for asylum centres, at a time when the Republic of Ireland just over the border has decided to close theirs as not fit for purpose, is unjustifiable. It is also politically ill-judged, given that the UK will in many cases be relying on EU third countries to accept asylum seekers deemed 'inadmissible' here.

There is no indication of need for a new regime of "scientific age assessment methods". The extensive proposals put forward in this area, and the punitive ethos which permeates the New Plan, do give rise however to real concerns that such procedures would aggravate the harm already suffered by vulnerable people in need of international protection.

The 'fast track', 'one-stop' proposals for streamlining the asylum application system would give rise to serious breaches of due process and effective remedy. The same is true for new proposed measures for enforcing removals.

The Home Office proposal to involve local authorities, partners and stakeholders in implementing immigration law, including removing people's support, fails to account for devolution of powers. For the Home Office to involve itself in the working of the devolved administration would be an encroachment on NI authority.

## **5. Access to employment**

Asylum seekers interviewed for Housing4All's 'Prison Without Walls' report raised a number of concerns in relation to accessing employment. For example, many minority ethnic workers -- even those with full status and permission to work -- are employed on zero hours contracts. In this regard, the Equality Commission NI identified "the segregation of minority ethnic workers in low pay, low skill jobs" as an issue of concern in its May 2016 submission to the UN Committee on the Elimination of all Forms of Racial Discrimination<sup>38</sup> regarding a 'list of themes' to address when considering the UK's state party report. Group members' experiences indicate this is still a real issue.

## **6. Representation**

Another issue raised by group members was the lack of political representation of people from minority ethnic groups in NI, alongside their lack of representation in strategic and power positions. Again, this appears to be a longstanding issue: the Equality Commission NI identified "the lack of involvement in local government, specifically, of minority ethnic women" as an issue in the report to CERD mentioned above<sup>39</sup>.

## **C. The steps the UK government can take to help ensure effective racial equality legislation in Northern Ireland**

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<sup>38</sup>[https://www.equalityni.org/ECNI/media/ECNI/Publications/Delivering%20Equality/CERDSubmission\\_ListofThemes\\_270516.pdf](https://www.equalityni.org/ECNI/media/ECNI/Publications/Delivering%20Equality/CERDSubmission_ListofThemes_270516.pdf), para. 4.26

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., para. 4.16

Follow up with the Northern Ireland Executive, which has come under repeated criticism for failing to progress its Racial Equality Strategy<sup>40</sup>.

#### **D. The health and economic outcomes of minority ethnic and migrant people in Northern Ireland, and the steps the UK government can take to help improve them**

The 'hostile environment' strategy contradicts NI authorities' equality obligations under section 75 of the 1998 NI Act, as does discrimination against refugees and others from minority ethnic groups. All authorities, from departments through to local councils and other official bodies, must take steps to guarantee equality on the basis of race in the exercise of all their functions.

1. Scrap the New Plan for Immigration.
2. Lift the Ban on asylum seekers' work
3. Stop enforced destitution
4. Increase financial support to asylum seekers in line with social security benefits
5. Guarantee health and social care assessments for asylum seekers and take findings into account in allocating dispersal accommodation
6. Enforce Decent Homes Standard in accommodation for asylum seekers and refugees
7. Mears Group, Homecare and others should adopt a 'zero tolerance' approach to bullying and intimidation of asylum seekers by staff
8. Mears Group adopt a policy whereby school age children are not relocated away from their place of study
9. The NI Executive should conduct a review of the issue of race / ethnicity and representation in Northern Ireland, with a view to addressing the issues raised by the NI Equality Commission and others.
10. The Department for the Economy should conduct an audit of existing data and programming to establish whether it is fully carrying out its section 75 obligations with regard to equality of opportunity to employment on the basis of race and ethnicity.

#### **E. Successful initiatives and programmes to encourage cultural exchange and diversity among people in Northern Ireland**

The evidence included above underlines that people's marginalisation is not rooted in a lack of 'cultural exchange and diversity'. It is instead a direct result of deliberate Home Office policies. Scrapping the 'hostile environment' and implementing the other recommendations above are essential; other programmes or initiatives could build from there.

#### **F. People's experiences of applying for the EU settlement scheme.**

n/a

*May 2021*

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<sup>40</sup> [https://www.nlb.ie/investigations/policy-watch/04-2021-income\\_inequality\\_and\\_covid-19\\_infection\\_rates\\_structural\\_racism\\_in\\_the\\_uk\\_inequality\\_and\\_discrimination\\_in\\_northern\\_ireland](https://www.nlb.ie/investigations/policy-watch/04-2021-income_inequality_and_covid-19_infection_rates_structural_racism_in_the_uk_inequality_and_discrimination_in_northern_ireland)