

Written evidence submitted by YMCA North Down/YMCA Ethnic Minorities Support (MEM0014)

## **Evidence from YMCA North Down/YMCA Ethnic Minorities Support to 'Inquiry: The Experience Of Minority Ethnic and Migrant People in Northern Ireland'**

### **1. YMCA Work with Migrants and Refugees**

YMCA North Down (NDYMCA) is a faith-based, voluntary organisation, which, although based in central Bangor, has served communities across North Down and Ards since 1979. We are proud to be part of the global YMCA family, the world's oldest and largest youth and community charity, which now operates in 120 countries.

Our mission is to support individuals, families and the local community to flourish in mind, body, and spirit. We serve all, regardless of age, gender, sexual orientation, religion, culture or race.

NDYMCA has been working with migrants and refugees for 14 years, with an initial focus on migrant workers living in central Bangor. Over the past seven years NDYMCA has developed its services to migrants and refugees with the employment of Bilingual Advocacy Workers and EUSS Advice and Support Workers. Our Bilingual Advocacy Workers primarily service the Polish and Russian-speaking communities, reflecting the most recent Census, and the Arabic-speaking community in response to the needs of Syrian refugee families under the Vulnerable Persons Relocation Scheme (VPRS).

More recently, our service has expanded its geographic reach to cover the south-eastern region of Northern Ireland, in collaboration with Lisburn YMCA, Co Down Rural Community Network, The Link (in Newtownards) and YMCA Newcastle.

Since April 2013, NDYMCA Ethnic Minorities Support project (EMS) has provided individual support to over 700 individuals from 24 BME backgrounds, including Polish, Romanian, Lithuanian, Russian, Indian, Pakistani, Bangladeshi and Syrian (VPRS refugees). Support has been provided to address a wide range of issues, including access to benefits, homelessness, employability, childcare, health issues, educational support, liaison with Social Services, EU Settlement Scheme, racism and hate crime. These advocacy services for individuals have been complemented by the facilitation of ESOL classes, in-person and online, for adult learners.

NDYMCA EMS has been working in partnership with Polish Association of Co Down (PACD), Russian Speaking Community NI (RSCNI) and Sure Start to promote the integration of migrants and refugees and indigenous communities across the region. NDYMCA EMS has also continued to work with relevant statutory partners, such as NI Housing Executive (NIHE), Jobs & Benefits Offices and PSNI, to support those experiencing poverty, exclusion, homelessness, discrimination and hate crime.

Working with project partners, NDYMCA EMS has co-facilitated cultural events with the Syrian, Polish and Russian-speaking communities, in order to celebrate cultural

diversity and promote inclusion. We have also worked with our partners to highlight racism and hate crime, including the roll out of the 'No Hate Here' campaign. Finally, NDYMCA EMS has supported the weekly delivery of Polish Supplementary School and the establishment of a volunteer-led Arabic Language Club in Bangor.

## **2. Challenges Facing Migrants and Ethnic Minorities in Northern Ireland**

Based on our experience of supporting migrants and people from ethnic minorities, we have learned of many challenges facing ethnic minority communities living in Northern Ireland.

Among these challenges, the most predominant are:

- Inequality and segregation in the employment market
- Access to adequate housing
- Access to health service
- Access to EUSS
- Access to welfare
- Access to education
- Prejudice, discrimination and hate crime

In this report, we will focus particularly on problems with accessing employment, housing, welfare benefits, health care and EUSS as these are the main areas of our expertise.

We strongly feel that both cultural and economic contribution of migrants and people from ethnic minorities has been undervalued, or even ignored in the public discourse. The vast majority of our clients came to Northern Ireland to make a better life for themselves and their children, not to become a burden on the social security system. They work hard to achieve that goal. They usually integrate well, trying to be good neighbours, good citizens and to give back to the hosting community. They bring with them cultural diversity, which perhaps is something traditionally divided between protestant and catholic communities, Northern Ireland could benefit from.

### **2.1. Inequality and Segregation in the Employment Market**

Access to the job market for migrants and people from ethnic minorities in Northern Ireland is severely limited. Migrants and people from ethnic minorities are by default expected to take up low-skilled and low-paid jobs in sectors such as hospitality, production and social care. If they are trying to apply for jobs outside these sectors, they are usually unsuccessful. Our clients tell us that, on many occasions, the employers wouldn't even speak to them and just send them a job application form when they hear their accent.

Recognising qualifications by employers is another issue. Many of our clients came to Northern Ireland with formal qualifications and experience. Unfortunately, quite often these qualifications are not recognised in Northern Ireland and the route to get their qualifications recognised is often complicated and expensive.

*“I was working as a teacher back in my country but when I came here my qualifications weren’t recognised. I applied for a classroom assistant position but I was told my qualifications were insufficient. I urgently needed a job so I started working as a care assistant in a care home.” - Eastern European client.*

Northern Ireland has recently become home to nearly 2000 Syrian refugees resettled here under VPRS. NDYMCA Ethnic Minorities Support is supporting Syrian refugees resettled in the South Eastern Trust area. Our work with refugees includes employability support. We teach our clients basic job seeking skills and help them with contacting employers and filling job applications. Our clients are craftsmen, builders, farmers with many years of experience, shopkeepers, bakers and they show us impressive photos depicting their work back in Syria. Despite being skilled, they cannot find jobs in their area of work. When we speak to employers, they are telling us that our clients’ English is not good enough to perform these jobs. However, the insufficient level of English doesn’t seem to be a problem when clients apply for cleaners, production operative or care assistants positions instead.

In fact, the majority of our clients are employed in the production, healthcare and hospitality sector. They perform low-skilled and low-paid jobs and the opportunities for progression are close to none. Our clients report to us their employers fail to treat them equally on various levels. Migrants and people from ethnic minorities may be given tasks nobody else wants to do, e.g cleaning an industrial cooker in a restaurant, picking up clothes from the floor in a store, working in very cold conditions in a meat factory, and heavy lifting. Hospitality industry workers often complain that the rest of the staff doesn’t share tips with them. One notably persistent pattern can be seen in rotas. Our clients say they are always the ones working unsocial shifts and not allowed to take time off during weekends and holidays.

*“I was told by my manager I have to work on Christmas Eve. I’ve explained it is an important celebration for Polish people but he didn’t care.” - Eastern European client working for a cleaning company.*

Some employers also abuse the fact that English is not the first language for some of their employees and assume they don’t know their rights and even if they do - won’t be able to speak for themselves. Unlawful deduction from wages and unpaid holiday leave are the most common employment issues reported to us by our clients.

One case we dealt with a few years back involved an elderly, vulnerable client from Eastern Europe employed in a hospitality sector. For five years their employer was ignoring their requests for annual leave (requests were made verbally through another staff member so no written evidence available) and never compensated them for unused leave. When approached by one of our case workers, the employer stated that the client had never asked for leave and it wasn’t the company’s job to remind them that they were entitled to paid leave. Unfortunately, due to the client’s vulnerability, their case with the Equality Commission hasn’t progressed. In the end, the client left the company without being paid for all these years of unused leave.

*“I just wanted out. I was so disappointed with my employer I just didn’t want to see them anymore.”*

The unhealthy discriminatory culture of the workplace is one of the main reasons migrants and people from ethnic minorities resign from their jobs. Being ridiculed by their colleagues, experiencing verbal or, in some cases, physical violence from co-workers or managers, sexual harassment, abusing employment rights are among the issues reported to us by our clients. Although bigger companies have policies and procedures in place allowing victims of discrimination to fight for their rights, there appear to be very few remedies available for people working in the smaller businesses.

**What needs to be done:**

- Stronger enforcement of employment discrimination legislation
- More effort to utilise migrants and refugees existing skills
- Make recognition of qualifications easily accessible

**2.2. Access to Adequate Housing**

Access to adequate housing is one of the main issues experienced by migrants and people from ethnic minorities in Northern Ireland.

There are numerous barriers to accessing social housing. Quite often migrants don’t know their rights and they are not aware that they can apply for social housing. Information in languages not easily accessible. In addition to that, some housing officers are more helpful than others. From our experience of working closely with NIHE for a number of years we have found that some housing officers lack awareness of migrant’s rights.

*“I was told my terminally ill mother in-law cannot be included in my application for social housing. It turned out to be untrue. ” - Eastern European client.*

Furthermore, clients are afraid of being housed in segregated housing estates as they consider them to be unsafe. Whilst the majority of our clients don’t experience any hate crime incidents in these estates, they are definitely not a risk-free environment. Most hate crime incidents reported to us happen in social housing estates.

Another prominent issue is lack of larger houses to accommodate for multi-generational families of refugees from the Middle-East. In some cases we see refugee families of 7 to 8 people living in a three bedroom house because NIHE only has a limited number of large houses.

*“When we came to Northern Ireland 4 years ago, we only had 3 children. My mother in-law is living with us so there were 6 of us living in a 3 bedroom house. Today we have 2 more children so there are 8 of us living in the same house.” - a client from the Middle-East.*

Private rental accommodation seems to be a more accessible option for economic migrants. However, it is usually more expensive and less secure. Saying that, migrants and people from ethnic minorities are still facing various barriers to accessing private rental accommodation. Firstly, it is difficult, or in some cases impossible, to find a guarantor without having a family in Northern Ireland. Secondly, landlords may be reluctant to rent their properties to people from abroad as they are afraid that the Home Office may perform some checks and impose penalties if their tenants are in the country illegally. Lastly, people on benefits are disadvantaged in the competitive housing market, which particularly affects the most vulnerable clients.

Housing conditions seem, on average, to be better in the social housing sector, and disrepair is usually dealt with quickly and efficiently. On the other hand, private rental accommodation often presents many problems, such as dampness, rats, disrepair and lack of amenities. Many landlords take advantage of the language barrier and lack of awareness of their rights in their tenants.

Over the years we have worked with innumerable clients who were living in appalling conditions and their landlords completely ignored their responsibilities. One memorable example involves Eastern European family with young children living in a rat infested property in Belfast. Due to the language barrier they were unable to speak to the landlord themselves about the issue. When contacted by one of our case workers, the landlord said it wasn't his problem and the tenants need to resolve it themselves. He also accused tenants of littering and attracting the rats by leaving food out. In reality, there were several holes in the walls which the rats entered through. Even when threatened with Environmental Health involvement, the landlord still refused to resolve the issue. In the end, the landlord intimidated the tenants into not working with Environmental Health and with us.

*“Our landlord is very cross with us because we complained to you about our housing situation. He'll kick us out if you contact him again on our behalf. We don't want to lose this accommodation. Without a guarantor and without money for a double deposit, we'll not be able to find anywhere else to live.”*

**What needs be done:**

- Crack down on private landlords exploiting vulnerable tenants
- Improve access to adequate and affordable accommodation
- Provide training to NIHE housing officers on migrant's rights

**2.3. Access to Health Services**

Migrants and people from ethnic minorities in Northern Ireland can rely on the NHS interpreting service to access the NHS. In recent years the trend to reduce the spending on interpreting services means that the patient can book interpreters for the hospital visits only. GP appointments are supported by the 'BIG Word' telephone interpreting service. Both of the services are readily accessible in the Belfast area. It is much more difficult to book interpreters or phone interpreters outside the city. We hear from many ethnic minority patients that their surgeries simply refuse to provide even cost effective phone interpreting.

*“My GP practice says they don’t provide interpreters. Every time I need to make a telephone appointment with my doctor, I have to ask a friend to speak on behalf of me.” - Eastern European client.*

Recently there has been a reduction in the number of mental health appointments for the ethnic minority patients. They can not access psychological therapies when interpreting is required. This means that those patients do not have equal access to NHS services due to language barriers and lack of understanding of the NHS system. Face to face interpreters can also act as ‘cultural’ interpreters. They educate BAME patients on the services available to them, signpost or refer to relevant support agencies such as Social Services, Women's Aid and Community Mental Health teams.

For some patients it means they have confidence to access the services they would not consider in their country of origin. Limiting access to interpreters means making access to those services much more difficult.

**What needs to be done:**

- Educate health care providers outside Belfast on their duty to provide interpreting service to ethnic minorities patients
- Provide translations of NHS resources, e.g leaflets, information for patients re. treatments and procedures
- Enhance financial support for NHS interpreting services as well as community and voluntary agencies working with ethnic minorities

**2.4. Access to welfare benefits**

Access to welfare benefits is one of the main issues migrants and people from ethnic minorities need help with.

Among many barriers to accessing welfare by migrants and people from ethnic minorities, insecure immigration status and no recourse to public funds (NRPF) are the most difficult to deal with, even for experienced advisers. To receive support in relation to their immigration status, clients with NRPF have to be referred to an immigration adviser. Unfortunately, Northern Ireland lacks affordable and accessible immigration assistance. The existing services are already stretched and struggling with processing new referrals in a timely manner. NRPF is a main reason behind poverty, homelessness and destitution among migrants and people from ethnic minorities.

As the EUSS registration deadline is approaching fast, for many EEA nationals living in Northern Ireland there is a substantial risk of losing their entitlement to social security benefits after 30th of June 2021 if they are unable to get their pre-settled or settled status by then.

*“Together with my 6 year old daughter I joined my EEA family a few months ago. Because of Covid I wasn’t able to find work. I was told I cannot claim benefits. We are living off food banks.” - Eastern European client.*

Language barrier is a huge obstacle to applying for social security benefits. It is easier for migrants and people from ethnic minorities to apply for disability benefits, such as PIP than for Universal Credit (UC). When they call PIP, they can ask for an interpreter over the phone. They can also use the multi-lingual Make The Call service. Unfortunately, these services are not available when applying for UC.

In addition to that, UC interviews are currently conducted over the phone. If a work coach is not being asked to call with an interpreter, they wouldn't arrange this service themselves.

*“I didn't take a call from Universal Credit as I was afraid I wouldn't be able to understand them. As a result my claim has been closed. ” - Eastern European client.*

Applying for UC and managing UC claims is especially difficult for the most vulnerable clients. They may not have access to technology or even if they do, they lack basic computer skills. Being illiterate even in their own language is also one of the common obstacles in accessing online UC claims.

**What needs to be done:**

- End No Recourse to Public Funds
- Make UC claim process more accessible - language support available
- Enhance financial support for bilingual advocacy services

## **2.5 Applying to EU Settlement Scheme**

Although the vast majority of EU citizens were successful in applying to the EU Settlement Scheme (EUSS), the most vulnerable groups found the process quite intimidating.

The application via a smartphone app proved to be difficult to use for the older generation or people with limited knowledge of English. Many of our clients were also simply too anxious to apply themselves in case they made a mistake, given the implications such errors could have on their immigration status.

In Northern Ireland there was a limited government campaign regarding the EUSS, which may explain why many local employers choose not to engage with EUSS support agencies. It also meant there was limited awareness among the ethnic minorities on what EUSS is.

Furthermore, the EUSS promotional campaign, which was only conducted in English, did not reach people who don't speak the English language. We noticed a reluctance to apply for EUSS among some of the clients who feared that the application could be a way of scrutinizing their legal status in the U.K.

Regardless of the reassuring Home Office statistics on the success rate of all applications, many of the EU citizens with criminal records chose not to apply. Some of those clients also do not have a valid I.D. making their status in the U.K. even more complex and them more vulnerable to destitution.

We found that some communities were much harder to reach due to cultural and language barriers, such as Roma communities, farm workers and homeless EU citizens. Many homeless EU citizens suffer from mental health issues and substance abuse, and only some have an allocated social worker.

Many applications, started over a year ago, haven't been completed due to lockdown, lack of required evidence or because the Home Office couldn't process them due to pending police investigations. Some of the applications are automatically deleted when the required paperwork is not delivered within the time scale, which means that many of the homeless EU people will have to apply again.

Because of the difficulty contacting those clients and Home Office correspondence getting lost to the clients who do not use email it is harder for us to track the progress of their applications.

With less than 30 days left until the application deadline, it is very likely that most of those vulnerable EU citizens will miss the deadline. Clients who applied to EUSS and are still awaiting the decision can protect their legal status by presenting a certificate of application. Again that can prove difficult for the people who do not access their emails regularly or lack language and digital skills.

Post application issues:

There has been a rise in the number of clients asking us to help with proving their status to the employers or for the benefits purpose. It's a regular practice now that EU residents are being asked to prove their status even though we have not reached the deadline of the applications yet. Even though it's a straightforward process it relies on access to the internet/smartphone. People with limited English and no digital skills rely on us to do it for them.

What needs to be done:

- Communicate EUSS deadline to all employers and other stakeholders
- Roll out urgent multilingual campaign
- Consider concessions for most vulnerable EU clients, i.e. limited extension of the deadline.
- Issue paper copies that can be used as proof of clients immigration status.
- Provide EUSS support by multilingual EUSS advocacy workers

*June 2021*