

Written evidence submitted by the North West Migrants Forum (MEM0028) concerning 'The experience of minority ethnic and migrant people in Northern Ireland' inquiry.

In partnership with Belfast Islamic Centre, Belfast Multi-Cultural Association, Black and Minority Ethnic Women's Network, Horn of Africa People's Aid Northern Ireland, Multi-Ethnic Sports & Cultures NI.

"Our Experience – Our voices"

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Introduction

The North West Migrants Forum (NWMF) welcomes this opportunity to submit written evidence to the Inquiry by the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee concerning “the experience of minority ethnic and migrant people in Northern Ireland.”

1. Established in 2012, and based in Derry/Londonderry, the NWMF was founded with the fundamental goal of supporting, advising and caring for members of black and minority ethnic (BME) communities living mainly, but not exclusively, in the north-west region of Northern Ireland.
2. The submission which follows is based on evidence collected from four focus groups and 10 one-to-one interviews conducted with minority ethnic individuals over two days (29 April and 1 May 2021). The individuals come from Algeria, Hungary, Spain, Somalia, Syria, Iraq, Iran, Kuwait, South Africa, Kenya, Eritrea, Nigeria, Pakistan, Palestine, Ghana, Latvia, Russia, Mauritius, Jordan, Zimbabwe, and British Guyana. But first, some background.

Background

3. Prior to the Millennium, Northern Ireland was the least ethnically diverse region of the United Kingdom (UK), with an overwhelmingly white population. However, the expansion of the EU in 2004, among other factors, led to a surge in international migration. Overall, the total Non-UK/Republic of Ireland population in 2019 was estimated to be around 112,000, 45,000 of whom have settled in Northern Ireland since the Millennium (NISRA, 2020c). The scale of inward migration can be seen in the School Census figures. In 2002, there were 1,366 ‘newcomer’ BAME pupils; by 2020, this figure had risen to 17,400 (Department of Education, 2021). The School Census for 2019 also lists over 65 languages spoken by primary school pupils as their first language here (NISRA, 2020c), another indication of the growth in diversity across Northern Ireland.

THE SUBMISSION

4. While there are a large range of issues affecting Black, Asian and minority ethnic (BAME) communities in Northern Ireland, this submission will focus on four of them, namely: hate crime; asylum seekers and refugees; the Northern Ireland Racial Equality Strategy; and ethnic monitoring.

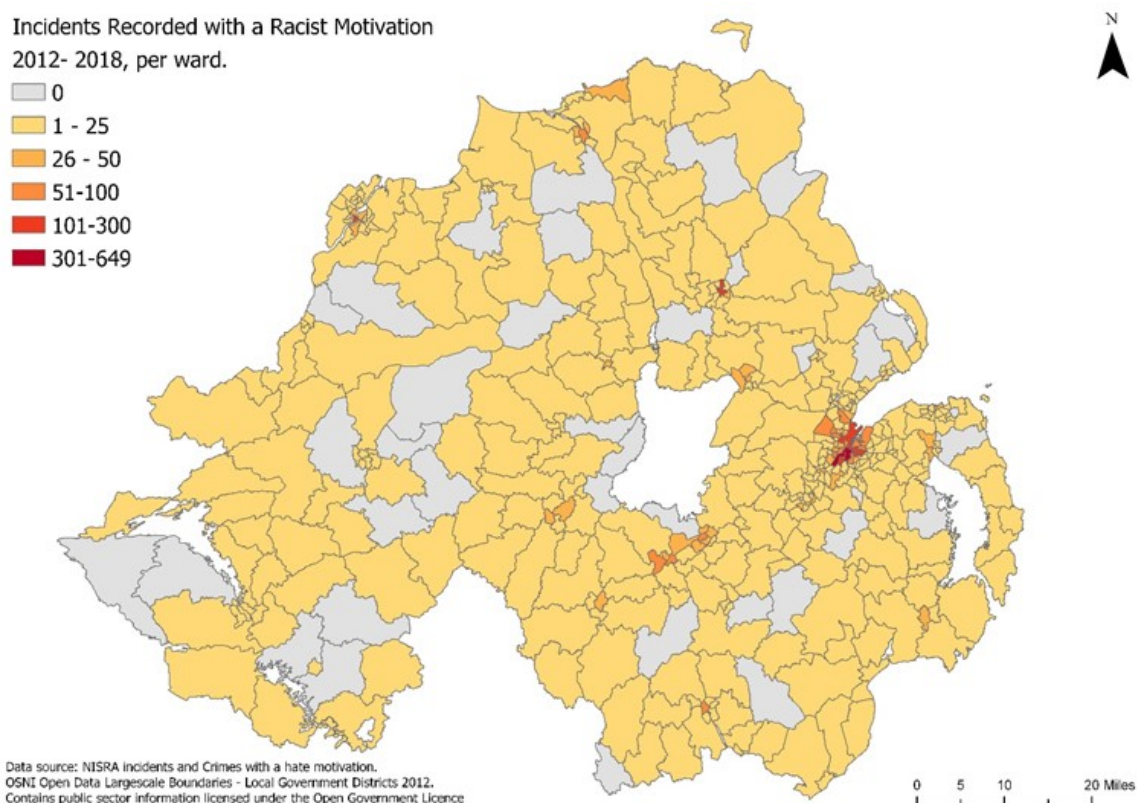
Hate Crime

5. On 2nd June 2021, ten asylum seekers living in a house in South Belfast, were viciously attacked by a hooded and masked gang. The asylum seekers, many of whom were already traumatised by their experiences in Iraq and Syria, were corralled into a single room, then interrogated and insulted, before being beaten with a range of implements including a fire extinguisher. Two of the victims suffered broken arms while others received severe head and facial injuries. As they were leaving, the gang (one of whom was armed) proceeded to smash all the downstairs windows in the house. Police have declared this incident to be a racially-motivated hate crime.
6. A particularly chilling aspect of this whole incident, was not the violence and beatings directed against this vulnerable community, but the lack of media interest. Remarkably, the attack went unreported on local TV and radio, with only one newspaper picking up the story (Belfast Live, 2021). Perhaps hate crimes in South Belfast have become so prevalent that they are no longer considered newsworthy.
7. If the aim of the perpetrators was to spread terror, they were very successful. Many asylum seekers and refugees live in South Belfast, and the effect on them was immediate. As word of the attack spread, a wave of fear swept through the community, and some are already considering moving to other parts of the UK. This was not an isolated incident: six months earlier, and just a few hundred metres away, the Belfast Multi-cultural Centre (BMCC) was destroyed in an arson attack. The blaze was the culmination of 18 months of harassment, during which a number of cars belonging to staff and volunteers were damaged (BBC, 2021). One focus group participant who was a volunteer in the Centre takes up the story:

“During the pandemic last year we were very active in the food bank attached to the BMCC; really going out of our way to feed and help the needy. Unfortunately, some members of the local community didn’t like what we were doing. Didn’t like our volunteers, who came dressed in their cultural (Islamic) clothing. That led to cars being attacked, leading on to graffiti daubed on the main door. The intimidation continued for months, and ultimately led to the virtual destruction of the Centre by fire in January 2021.”

8. The PSNI began recording hate-motivated incidents and crimes in 2004. Traditionally, Northern Ireland has been perceived as a society dominated by sectarianism, but In 2016/17 the number of racist incidents exceeded the number of sectarian incidents for the first time, and this has remained the case ever since (PSNI, 2021).

Map 1: Racist Incidents, Geographical Distribution, 2012 – 2018



9. In 2020/21, for example, **993 racist incidents** were recorded by the police, compared with **934 sectarian incidents**. Map 1 (above) shows just how widespread these incidents are across Northern Ireland, with very few electoral wards incident-free (shown in grey).

Table 1: Likelihood of experiencing racist –v- sectarian incident, 2020/21

Type of Incident	No. of Incidents	Affected Population	Rate per 100,000	Likelihood
Racist	993	112,000	887	17
Sectarian	934	1,848,700	51	1

Source: PSNI (2021) and NISRA (2020a)

10. Hate crime is a regular feature of life amongst the BAME communities, with many incidents going unreported. Indeed, given the relatively small size of the BAME population, statistics show that **the likelihood of a minority individual experiencing a racist incident in Northern Ireland is at least 17 times higher than the likelihood of a member of the majority (Protestant/Catholic community) experiencing a sectarian incident** (Table 1).
11. The issue of hate crime, and the failure of the PSNI to effectively deal with it, dominated proceedings in the focus groups and interviews. In addition to overt violence, many spoke of their experiences of **racial macroaggressions** – so-called ‘low level racism’, or “subtle insults” (verbal, non-verbal, and/or visual) directed towards minority individuals – including one interviewee, a 30-year-old Lisburn woman from a PUL background who converted to Islam:

“I grew up here as a white person who didn't wear a hijab, and about 16 years ago I started wearing it. It was like I became a different person: suddenly, anyone could ask you where you're from, or where's your family from. And even if you have a broad local accent, they don't see that – they just see the scarf. So, I have been told to go home; I've been told to speak English. When out with my kids, I've been insulted and called racist names, because there's just that assumption that you're foreign. So it's been a really weird

experience, and has opened my eyes to what minority ethnic people go through here on a daily basis."

What the Government can do

12. Northern Ireland is the only part of the UK which does not have specific hate crime legislation. However, an **Independent Review of Hate Crime Legislation** (Department for Justice ,2020) recently concluded with 34 recommendations for change. It urged the adoption of an "aggravated offence model", whereby a hate crime aggravation could potentially be added to **any** offence.

13. **It is important that the Government ensures the implementation of the Independent Review in full. With personal safety such an important issue for BAME communities here, It is grossly unfair that these communities have less protection under the law in Northern Ireland than in any other part of the UK.**

14. Sufficient resources should be provided to the Police Service of Northern Ireland (PSNI) to enable them to fulfil their duty and **properly protect the Black, Asian and minority ethnic communities in Northern Ireland against racial violence and harassment.** Unless our new citizens and residents feel safe, they will never be able to fulfil their potential.

Asylum Seekers

15. Recent years have seen a significant increase in the number of desperate people seeking sanctuary in Northern Ireland. War and conflict in countries such as Syria, Somalia, Eritrea, Sudan, Congo, Iran, Iraq, and Afghanistan have fuelled this increase. The precise number of asylum seekers and refugees currently living in Northern Ireland is not known, mainly because, while the Home Office collects national data, they do not release statistics for Northern Ireland (Law Centre NI, 2015). However, **the true figure is believe to be in the thousands**, with over 1,800 Syrian refugees alone (Barnardo's Northern Ireland, 2020).

16. As part of the evidence-gathering process for this submission, a focus group and set of one-on-one interviews were held with asylum seekers from Algeria, Syria, Somalia, Eritrea, Nigeria and Sudan. Five key issues emerged from these engagements, namely: **(i) denial of the right to work; (ii) inadequate benefit payments; (ii) long delays in processing asylum applications; (iv) mental health concerns; and (v) the Home Secretary's 'New Plan' for Immigration.**

17. **Denial of the right to work** is built into the very fabric of Immigration Rules, with the policy intention to discourage 'economic migrants' from entering the UK (Home Office, 2021). However, as the focus group revealed, desperate people are not dissuaded from fleeing terror by administrative rules. Instead, our asylum seekers spoke of the poverty and sense of shame at being unable to work, often for years.

"I'm still an Asylum Seeker after five years, and I live in Belfast. Our problems are more than just getting the right papers. We need permission to work and support ourselves. I haven't worked since I came here; it feels like five years of being in lockdown. We just want to work like normal people. I know of around 20 asylum seekers of my age that can't go to work, and it's a stressful and hard life."

18. Asylum seekers are given a **cash allowance of £39.63 per week** for each person in the household. According to the Government, "This will help you pay for things you need like food, clothing and toiletries." (Gov.UK, 2021). A payment of this size, however, bears no relation to the actual cost of living in 2021, and anyone forced to exist on this meagre amount is likely to be destitute.

19. While many asylum seekers are forced to use food banks, most participants felt a sense of embarrassment or shame at having to seek free food, and preferred to work, if they would only be allowed to do so. A former asylum-seeker from Zimbabwe explained:

"I must say, when I was seeking asylum, the food bank was helpful, but I hated going there because I felt it took away my dignity. I didn't like taking those plastic bags from the food bank, as I used to think people were looking at me every time. And sometimes they'd give

you things you don't want, and things that you don't eat, and you just have to say, thank you. I hated it! "

20. **Mental health** concerns are a significant problem among asylum seekers, and this was reflected in some of the comments made by the focus group participants. The increased vulnerability to mental health problems that refugees and asylum seekers face is linked to **pre-migration** experiences (such as PTSD and war trauma) and **post-migration** conditions, including separation from family, prolonged asylum procedures, poverty, and poor housing (Mental Health Foundation, 2017).
21. Studies have shown that asylum seekers and refugees are more likely to experience poor mental health than the local population, including higher rates of depression, PTSD and other anxiety disorders. For example, they are **five times more likely** to have mental health needs than the general population ¹, and more than 61% will experience serious mental distress (Medical Health Foundation, 2017).
22. The Home Secretary's '**New Plan**' for Immigration (24 March 2021) came in for particular criticism, both during the interviews and the focus groups. The Plan will establish a two-tier asylum system, with someone's means of arrival in the UK determining how they will be treated.
23. In essence, the 'New Plan', will criminalise people who attempt to reach the UK irregularly. But some participants in the focus group made the point that people fleeing terror or persecution often have to **travel without permission**, as there is no visa to enable them to do so legally.
24. The government is proposing to use **destitution** as a weapon to encourage people to leave once their claim has been refused, as they will no longer be eligible for any

¹ The ever-present fear of being returned to the country where they were persecuted can trigger extreme distress in asylum seekers, with tragic consequences. A torture survivor in England recently committed suicide because he believed, when contacted by the Home Office, that he was going to be removed from the country. It turned out, the man was due to be informed that his asylum claim had been successful. But it was too late, the fear of return to persecution had been too much to bear. Last year (2020), 29 asylum seekers died in Home Office custody (see Freedom from Torture, 2021).

financial support. All who attended the focus groups and interviews were uniformly opposed to the New Plan. Their views were succinctly summarised by the charity *Freedom from Torture*, who wrote:

“Refused asylum seekers living on £5 a day already live far beyond the poverty line and have no right to work. Stripping people of that minimal financial support and pushing them into destitution and street homelessness will have seriously damaging effects on the safety, stability and physical and mental health of this already extremely vulnerable population.” (Freedom from Torture, 2021).

What the Government can do

25. In relation to asylum seekers, the Government should consider doing the following:

- Grant asylum seekers **the right to work** while their claim is being considered.
- Increase the cash allowance of £39.63 per week to the **same level as Universal Credit**.
- The Home Office should set a **target of six months to complete their investigations into individual claims for asylum**.
- Asylum seekers are the most vulnerable of all our new residents, and invariably arrive in Northern Ireland from areas of high conflict. Many have either witnessed or experienced extreme violence (including torture) and may have undiagnosed PTSD or other forms of mental illness. Mental health services, such as trauma counselling and holistic therapies, should be made available to this group as a routine option. Further, given the high number of asylum seekers in the Province, **consideration should be given to setting up a properly-funded and equipped Trauma Centre to cater for their specialist needs in Northern Ireland**².

² There are numerous examples of this type of initiative in other jurisdictions, including the Trauma Centre for Survivors of Violence and Torture (South Africa) and the Freedom from Torture Centre (London).

- The Home Secretary's '**New Plan**' for Immigration should be abandoned, as it will seriously damage the reputation of the United Kingdom.

Northern Ireland Race Equality Strategy, 2015 – 2025

26. The Executive Office (TEO, 2015) in Northern Ireland has published two Racial Equality Strategies, in 2005 and 2015 respectively. Both Strategies have broadly the same aims, namely:
- to tackle racial inequalities;
 - to eradicate racism and hate crime; and
 - along with *Together: Building a United Community*, to promote good race relations and social cohesion.
27. These aims – and the measures proposed – remain relevant today, not least because **so little has been accomplished towards achieving them**. The first Strategy was enthusiastically received by people from minority ethnic backgrounds. There was broad agreement that the measures proposed – including legislation, ethnic monitoring and training – were what was needed. The second Strategy contained many of the same measures (because they had not yet been implemented).
28. The Northern Ireland Assembly, in a debate on 14 September 2020, noted the continuing relevance of the second Strategy (2015 – 2025), but some Members who spoke expressed regret about how long implementation was taking. One example cited was **ethnic monitoring; first recommended in the 2005 Strategy but still outstanding sixteen years later**.

Ethnic Monitoring

29. As noted above, ethnic monitoring has been part of the Northern Ireland Racial Equality Strategy since 2005, but sixteen years later it has still to be implemented. **Northern Ireland remains the only part of the UK which does not monitor race and**

ethnicity. This makes it impossible to quantify any racial disparities which may exist in various walks of life.

30. Monitoring is the fundamental building block of equality: without explicit statistical evidence to bring to bear on allegations of unfair treatment, or inequalities in employment, health, education, and the criminal justice system, such issues will continue to be either hidden or ignored. A proper system of ethnic monitoring will allow public authorities to highlight possible inequalities, investigate their underlying causes, and develop plans to remove any unfairness or disadvantage³.
31. The Cabinet Office *Race Disparity Unit*, and the Scottish Government's *Evidence Finder* website, produce large amounts of monitoring data disaggregated by race, enabling comparisons across ethnic groups in all areas of life and economic spheres. There is nothing remotely comparable to these two facilities in Northern Ireland.

What the Government can do

- The Government must **bring Northern Ireland into line with the rest of the UK, by ensuring that ethnic monitoring is finally introduced**, more than a decade after the Equality Act 2010 (which still does not apply here!).
- The Race Equality Unit of TEO, is seriously under-resourced in terms of staff and funding, and **requires a major increase in numbers if government is serious about tackling the myriad issues facing BAME communities in Northern Ireland.**

Other Issues of Concern to Migrant Communities

Education, Employment and Housing

32. The focus group sessions relating to employment, education, and housing yielded a number of issues of concern, including (i) non-recognition of educational qualifications

³ A recent report commissioned by The Executive Office (TEO) in Northern Ireland recommended the introduction of mandatory ethnic monitoring, along the lines of GB, by 2024. The report is currently being considered by TEO.

obtained in other jurisdictions; (ii) racial bullying in schools and an absence of proper policies to tackle this issue; (iii) inadequate training of teachers on matters relating to race in Northern Ireland; (iv) a lack of BAME teachers – an overwhelmingly white workforce; and (v) uniform and dress codes which are culturally insensitive.

33. Overall, when asked how the **employment** situation could be improved, there was a general acceptance that things were unlikely to change substantially until there were more people ‘who looked like me’ in positions of authority.
34. In terms of **housing**, a number of focus group participants spoke about the difficulty of obtaining a tenancy in the private rental sector, even when the BAME applicant was in full employment. Discrimination in housing can often be covert, and hard to prove.
35. In relation to **health**, no conclusions can be drawn concerning outcomes for BAME communities, for the simple reason that the absence of monitoring means there is no reliable statistical evidence to rely upon.

Inclusion and Belonging

36. Across all focus groups the lack of **inclusion and belonging** emerged as an important aspect of ethnic minority experience, with the absence of political participation and representation being a major concern. It was suggested that ethnic and religious minorities are unable to exercise their political and civil rights due to the binary nature of the two dominant communities in Northern Ireland politics – *“They only talk about issues that affect the two tribes here, and we do not fit into the narrative of the two tribes.”*, remarked one participant.
37. **Northern Ireland remains the only part of the UK without a single BAME political representative, either at local, Assembly or Parliamentary levels.** This contrasts markedly with the situation in the Scottish Parliament, where there are currently six MSPs from a BAME background (May 2021). It was also felt by some participants that Northern Ireland political parties shy away from engaging with minority ethnic people

because, “ ... they believe they will lose support from their core supporters if they were to demonstrate their support and solidarity with ethnic minority people.”

38. A number of participants also raised the issue of the **Common Travel Area (CTA)**. It is not generally understood, except by Immigration specialists, that Non-CTA nationals born outside the EU and living in Northern Ireland, do not have freedom of movement across the border between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland. In effect, this means that most non-EU nationals living in Northern Ireland, or the Republic, must apply for a visa before crossing the border. This issue creates many problems for the BAME population here.

Conclusion

39. This submission to the Committee is based on over 14 hours of taped transcripts extracted from four focus groups and ten interviews conducted on 29 April and 1 May 2021. The engagement sessions with asylum seekers, migrant workers, and longer-established BAME residents, covered a wide range of topics. These included hate crime, asylum seekers, sectarianism, education, the Racial Equality Strategy, monitoring, and barriers to freedom of movement for non-CTA residents in Northern Ireland. The submission itself was drawn from a much larger paper which can be accessed [here](#).
40. While there are numerous issues affecting the Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic communities in Northern Ireland, the issue of personal safety is especially troubling. Again and again, this topic was raised by focus group participants. The recent, brutal attack on ten asylum seekers in South Belfast by an armed gang (highlighted in this presentation) was particularly disturbing, and it is only a question of time before someone is killed. The PSNI and the justice system **MUST** act decisively against racially-motivated crime in Northern Ireland, or they will lose the trust of BAME communities here. This would be a tragic outcome, as there are many positive aspects of life in Northern Ireland, and minority communities would love to play their part, if only they were left in peace to do so.

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June 2021