

NI Assembly motion: Opposition to Racism

Law Centre NI Briefing August 2024

At a glance

This briefing paper is to inform the Assembly debate in support of the motion addressing the recent unrest.

For people who have sought sanctuary and a place of safety with the opportunity to rebuild their lives here, Northern Ireland has always offered a [welcoming, compassionate place to call home](#). Equally, this is so for everyone living and working in Northern Ireland, whatever their background, and who contribute so much to our economy and our public services through vital work in many of our essential services. Their presence enriches our communities.

At Law Centre NI, we believe we are a society grounded in a shared belief in the dignity of everyone. We have seen this in the widespread acts of solidarity and support for those who have been affected. We stand in solidarity with all those who have been targeted in these attacks and who are now fearful and scared to leave their homes.

The Law Centre urges MLAs to support the motion. In this short briefing paper, we highlight some key recommendations relating to refugee integration.

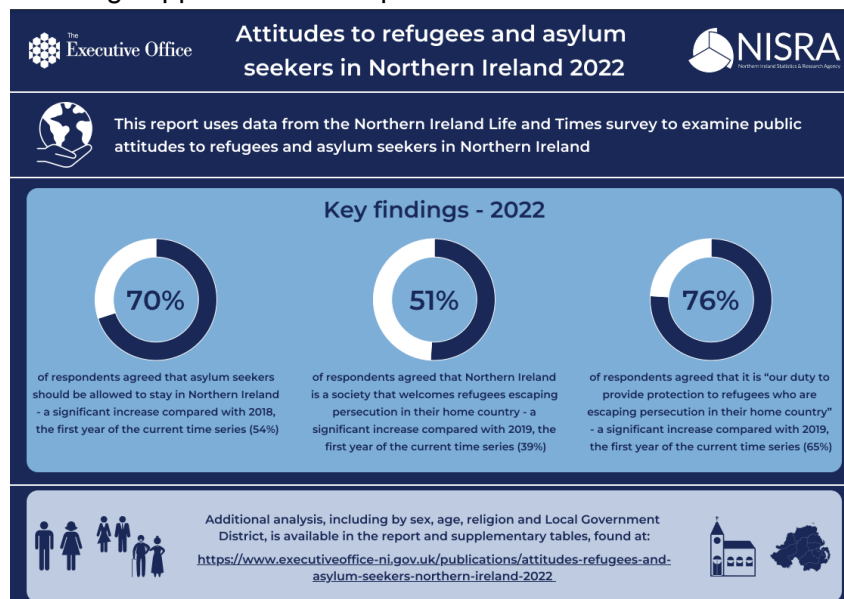
Assembly motion: Opposition to Racism

On 8 August 2024, the Assembly will debate the following motion:

“That this Assembly condemns the criminal damage and targeting of businesses in recent days; rejects all forms of Islamophobia, xenophobia and racism; endorses the work of voluntary sector organisations combatting racism and supporting those impacted by it; recognises the work of the Police Service of Northern Ireland and other public sector bodies protecting our communities during the recent unrest; calls on the First Minister and deputy First Minister to finalise the draft Refugee Integration Strategy and associated Thematic Delivery Plan and present it to the Executive; and further calls on the First Minister and deputy First Minister to bring forward the renewed Race Relations Order, and set-out the process of replacing the Racial Equality Strategy 2015-2025 by the end of 2024.”

What is the Northern Ireland context?

1. The Law Centre regularly updates a briefing containing up-to-date statistics about people seeking sanctuary in Northern Ireland <https://www.lawcentreni.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/08/LCNI-briefing-refugee-statistics-August-2024.pdf> . While the number of people seeking sanctuary in Northern Ireland has increased, this should be understood in the wider global context. The majority of the world’s refugees are in neighbouring countries (the Global South). Within Europe, the UK ranks 19th in terms of asylum applications per capita. **Northern Ireland hosts 2.6% of all the people in the UK who are seeking sanctuary.**
2. There is strong support for NI as a place of welcome¹:



¹ <https://www.executiveoffice-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/execoffice/attitudes-to-refugees-and-asylum-seekers-ni-2022-infographic.pdf>

3. It the almost 20 years since the then OFMDFM committed to develop a Refugee Integration Strategy, the landscape has changed considerably. Over 5,000 individuals have now been welcomed to Northern Ireland through official UK Government Resettlement Schemes e.g. Ukraine, Syrian and Afghan Schemes. Others have been granted refugee status through the asylum process.

2. What leadership is needed?

1. The NI Executive's leadership is essential to counter narratives that underpin the 'hostile environment' policies of the previous Westminster Government. The NI Executive's leadership is essential to set out a clear commitment to welcome and inclusion.
2. In tangible terms, this means the adoption and implementation of the long-overdue **Refugee Integration Strategy**. A total of **fifty-one** members of the *Refugee & Asylum Forum* have written to the First Minister and Deputy First Minister to urge for the **urgent adoption of the Refugee Integration Strategy**.
3. Other devolved regions have demonstrated their commitment to being countries of welcome:
 - a. Wales: in 2019, Wales declared its intention to become a Nation of Sanctuary²
 - b. Scotland: the *second* New Scots Refugee Integration Strategy was published by the Scottish Government in 2024.³
4. Last summer, the Refugee & Asylum Forum warned that failure to adopt a policy of welcome could have repercussions for community cohesion in Northern Ireland. The example given at that time was of 'contingency accommodation':

*"An example of where [a clear narrative of welcome and inclusion is necessary] is necessary is the use of contingency hotels for asylum accommodation in Northern Ireland. The residents are essentially segregated from local communities which makes integration virtually impossible. **This de facto segregation can easily lead to suspicion and hostility, which can be manipulated by those with anti-immigration agendas.***

We ask the Executive / TEO to show leadership and to take a stance against the use of all forms of segregated asylum accommodation. The Northern Ireland Executive should use its powers to introduce legislative reforms that

² Welsh Government, 'Nation of Sanctuary – Refugee & Asylum Seekers Plan' (2019) available [here](#).

³ Scottish Government, 'New Scots Refugee Integration Strategy: Delivery Plan 2024-26' (2024) available [here](#).

would shield asylum seekers from some of the UK's hostile environment policies.⁴ [our emphasis added]

5. The implementation of the *Refugee Integration Strategy* is essential to enable refugee integration in Northern Ireland and to support the sector's trust in policymakers.

What is the current policy landscape?

6. The **TEO Refugee Asylum Support Integration Division (RASID)** was established in October 2022. Law Centre welcomes this. Whilst RASID has assumed many of the functions of the now defunct NI Strategic Migration Partnership (NISMP), it remains the case that NI is the only region in the UK that does not have a Strategic Migration Partnership (SMP). SMPs are Local Government-led partnerships funded by, but independent of, the Home Office whose role is to coordinate and support delivery of programmes in asylum and refugee schemes as well as agreed regional and devolved migration priorities.
7. RASID has now set up a number of engagement structures including the **RASID Voluntary & Community Forum**, of which the Law Centre is a member. We understand that RASID is currently exploring establishing a **forum comprising of refugee leaders**. This is a welcome, if belated, development as it will realise the right of effective participation whereby persons with lived experience of forced migration are directly involved in the process of policy making.
8. Having been in operation for more than 18 months, we recommend RASID commits to eliminating racial inequalities and promoting opportunities for refugees of *all* nationalities.⁵ The following examples illustrate what can be built on.
9. The **Ukraine response in NI** supporting people fleeing the war in Ukraine is a good example of partnership work between the government and the voluntary and community sector to provide an urgent response. Ukraine Assistance Centres (UAC) were set up to provide immediate services to Ukrainian nationals. Law Centre provided immigration law advice; more than 1,000 Ukrainians and their family members availed of our service at the centres. The value of the UAC model was that newly arrived Ukrainians could quickly link in with relevant support service and that vulnerabilities - especially in relation to exploitative sponsorship arrangements and/or working practices – could be quickly identified and acted upon. **We recommend that RASID builds on the learning from the UAC model to benefit all newly arrived people in NI seeking international protection.**

⁴ Law Centre NI, 'Refugee & Asylum [Priorities for Action](#)' (2023), p7. We referenced the [CAJ publication](#), 'Can Stormont Rollback the Home Office 'Hostile Environment' (2022).

⁵ OFMDFM, 'Racial Equality Strategy 2014 – 2025' available [here](#). See Shared Aim 1 at paragraph 6.5.

10. In July 2023, the Executive Office launched an online **skills and employability survey for Ukrainian refugees** to assess their skills, qualification and experience to help inform practical solutions to support Ukrainians move into employment.
11. While members of the Refugee & Asylum Forum welcomed the initiative to support refugee employability, we asked that the survey should be extended to *all* refugees, so as to ensure equal access to tailored employment and learning opportunities. TEO confirmed that a similar survey would be developed for the wider refugee population and **we recommend that this is now extended to all refugees at pace** as employment is a key driver of refugee integration and brings a range of recognised benefits.⁶ Securing employment improves well-being and mental health, reduces poverty and dependency, supports skills retention, brings valuable skills to the local economy, helps address critical skills shortages in the Northern Ireland labour market and increases contact with the ‘host’ community thus strengthening community cohesion. Clearly *these benefits are particularly desirable in the current context of unrest*.
12. The **refugee support sector** remains under-resourced. Voluntary and community sector organisations play a vital role in supporting all newcomers to NI. This includes access to quality, authoritative information about refugee, asylum and immigration matters. *This is an imperative at a time when fear mongering and misinformation is rife*. Access to reliable information would benefit asylum seekers and refugees, support organisations and the wider public alike. NI Direct has recently begun to build webpages and information relevant to asylum seekers and refugees. While welcome, it remains the case that the majority of information on NI Direct is targeted specifically at Ukrainians. **We recommend that NI Direct resources and signposting is urgently extended to include all refugees**. Not least, this would convey an important message of inclusion.
13. The voluntary and community sector has long plugged the gap with regards information resources. An example of this is the *Refugee Transition Guide* produced by Law Centre NI with funding from the Belfast City Council.
14. The main source of TEO funding for refugee support comes from the **Minority Ethnic Development Fund (MEDF)**. Whilst the number of people requiring support has increased quite significantly, this has largely not been matched with increased funding. The community and voluntary and legal sector is stretched to breaking point; more resources are necessary.
15. **We recommend that the MEDF is sufficiently resourced, accessible for refugee community groups and that it promotes effective partnership working**. More specifically, we argue that funding for refugee support initiatives is ringfenced. MEDF

⁶ Employment is one of the 5 domains within the [Home Office Indicators of Integration framework 2019](https://publishing.service.gov.uk) (publishing.service.gov.uk)

is focussed on addressing racism and celebrating racial diversity and yet some of the ongoing refugee support work – including supporting destitute asylum seekers – does not readily fall within the MEDF funding priorities.

Recommendations

16. We ask MLAs to speak in favour of the motion and to request that:

- a. The *Refugee Integration Strategy* is finalised and published without further delay;
- b. The establishment of a *Refugee Leaders Forum* within RASID is prioritised;
- c. The learning working practices of the Ukraine Assistance Centre are harnessed and that the model is built on and expanded to benefit all asylum seekers and refugees;
- d. The skills employability survey is likewise expanded to include all refugees and that employability programmes are developed for all;
- e. NI Direct information is expanded to include all refugees;
- f. The MEDF is reviewed to ensure it is sufficiently resourced and accessible and that funding for refugee support is ringfenced.

About Law Centre NI

Law Centre NI transforms lives through law. We have worked in immigration law since 1988. The Law Centre's **Migration Justice Project** provides specialist legal services to people as well as support to organisations across Northern Ireland on asylum and refugee law as well as people affected by trafficking and unaccompanied asylum-seeking children. In 2022 - 23, we provided almost 7,000 pieces of advice and worked on hundreds of immigration cases. Our service is regional: 70% of our work was outside of Belfast.

The Law Centre convenes Northern Ireland's Refugee and Asylum Forum, a network of more than 60 organisations that provide support services to asylum seekers and refugees in Northern Ireland.

The Executive Office contributes to the Law Centre's legal services through support for an immigration advice service to asylum seekers and refugees in Northern Ireland.

More information

For further information about this briefing please contact:

☎ 028 9024 4401

✉ migrationjustice@lawcentreni.org