



**WELCOME
INFORMATION
PROGRAMME**

**Supporting and Advising
Asylum Seekers:
Development Needs in
the Community and
Voluntary Sector in
Belfast**

October 2025



**Belfast
City Council**



**Migration
Justice
Project**

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About this report and Welcome Information Programme

01

In early 2025, Belfast City Council (BCC) awarded Law Centre NI (LCNI) funding to deliver a 12-month-long capacity building project. The Welcome Information Programme has three key outputs:

1. Identify existing community development needs in Belfast and assess what further support is necessary for organisations to advise and support asylum seekers.
2. Deliver a three-tier training programme alongside the establishment of a Knowledge and Learning Network to enable organisations to be better-equipped to advise and include asylum seekers within their services.
3. Produce a user-friendly online map of services available to asylum seekers and refugees in Belfast.

This report provides an assessment of the community development needs in Belfast (Output 1).

Terminology

Asylum seeker: a person fleeing persecution, war or serious harm who is seeking international protection and is waiting for a decision on their asylum claim.

Refugee: a person who has received a positive decision on their asylum claim. Some people who claim asylum are granted other forms of protection, such as Humanitarian Protection, or other leave to remain.

IAA adviser: a person qualified to provide immigration advice accredited by the Immigration Advice Authority.

Northern Ireland (NI) hosts a small but growing population of asylum seekers, which constitutes 2.39% of the UK total.^[1] As of June 2025, 2,535 people were receiving asylum support in NI,^[2] with 70% (1,841) living in the BCC area.^[3]

While the population of asylum seekers and refugees is relatively small, there has been a significant increase in arrivals within the last 5 years^[4] and so the issues are still relatively new for many organisations. While some asylum seekers and refugees are highly qualified and skilled,^[5] many *can* face complex challenges such as financial hardship and/or destitution,^[6] language barriers,^[7] limited legal support,^[8] limited social support networks^[9] and a higher prevalence of some mental^[10] and physical^[11] health conditions.

[1] In June 2025, there were 106,075 people receiving asylum support in UK of which 2,637 people were living in Northern Ireland, i.e. 2.39%. Home Office, '[Immigration system statistics data tables](#)' [last updated 30 June 2025]. See [Asylum seekers in receipt of support detailed datasets, year ending June 2025](#) Asy_D09

[2] Home Office, '[Immigration system statistics data tables](#)' [last updated 30 June 2025]. See [Asylum seekers in receipt of support detailed datasets, year ending June 2025](#) Asy_D09

[3] Home Office, '[Immigration system statistics data tables](#)' [last updated 30 June 2025]. See [Asylum seekers in receipt of support by local authority detailed datasets, year ending June 2025](#) Asy_D11

[4] In March 2020, there were 923 people receiving asylum support in NI, compared to 2635 in March 2025. This represents an almost 300% increase. Home Office, '[Immigration system statistics data tables](#)' [last updated 30 June 2025]. See [Asylum seekers in receipt of support detailed datasets, year ending June 2025](#) Asy_D09

[5] Lift the Ban, '[Lift the Ban: Why giving people seeking asylum the right to work is common sense](#)' (Refugee Action, 2020); Law Centre NI, '[Healthcare Skills: Asylum Seekers and Refugees](#)' (LCNI, 2023); Lift the Ban, '[Time to Lift the Ban: Why this parliament must lift the ban on work for people seeking asylum](#)' (Refugee Action, 2025)

[6] Red Cross & Refugee Survival Trust, '[How will we survive? Steps to preventing destitution in the asylum system](#)' (Red Cross, 2021); Asylum Matters, '[Surviving in Poverty: a report documenting life on asylum support](#)' (Asylum Matters, 2023); All-Party Parliamentary Group on Migration & All-Party Parliamentary Group on Poverty, '[The Effects of UK Immigration, Asylum and Refugee Policy on Poverty: A Joint Inquiry by the APPG on Migration and the APPG on Poverty](#)' (APPG on Poverty, 2024)

[7] Refugee Action, '[Safe but Alone: The role of English language in allowing refugees to overcome loneliness](#)' (Refugee Action, 2017); Refugee Action, '[Turning Words into Action: Why the government must invest now to let refugees learn](#)' (Refugee Action, 2019)

[8] Refugee Action, '[Tipping the Scales: Access to Justice in the Asylum System](#)' (Refugee Action, 2018); Refugee Action, '[Waiting in the Dark: How the Asylum System Dehumanises, Disempowers and Damages](#)' (Refugee Action, 2020)

[9] Migrants Organise, '[This is how it feels to be lonely: A report on migrant and refugees' experiences with loneliness in London](#)' (Migrants Organise, 2014)

[10] Mental Health Foundation, '[The mental health of asylum seekers and refugees in the UK](#)' (Mental Health Foundation, 2025); Blackmore, R., et al. '[The prevalence of mental illness in refugees and asylum seekers: A systematic review and meta-analysis](#)' (PLOS Medicine, 2020)

[11] British Medical Association, '[Unique health challenges for refugees and asylum seekers](#)' (BMA, 2025)

While The Executive Office (TEO) has duties to promote integration,^[12] the voluntary and community sector (VCS) plays a critical role in providing support across housing, healthcare, social security, education, employment, immigration support, social/inclusion programmes and more.

One respondent to this research highlighted how VCS fills the gaps:

“Like many others, we are doing the work of government but unacknowledged and unresourced. In our case, this is the integration of newcomers with the indigenous population - a pressure issue given current tensions at the time of writing”

The value of work carried out by the VCS cannot be understated. However, the increased number of people seeking sanctuary adds additional strain to an *already* stretched sector that faces high workloads, staffing shortages, burnout and low pay.^[13] It is crucial that staff and volunteers are properly equipped to support asylum seekers and refugees effectively.



[12] The Executive Office, [‘Refugee Integration Strategy’](#) (TEO, 2025)

[13] Northern Ireland Council for Voluntary Action, [‘Making a difference: Reflections from the challenges facing the Voluntary and Community Sector workforce’](#) (NICVA, 2025)

Methodology

03

An online survey of organisations providing support and advice in the Belfast area was launched at BCC's Belfast Migrant Forum on 9 June 2025 and ran for six weeks. Organisations were asked to comment on matters including:

- existing service provision with regards refugees and asylum seekers
- challenges to providing an effective service
- whether they would like to avail of specialised training

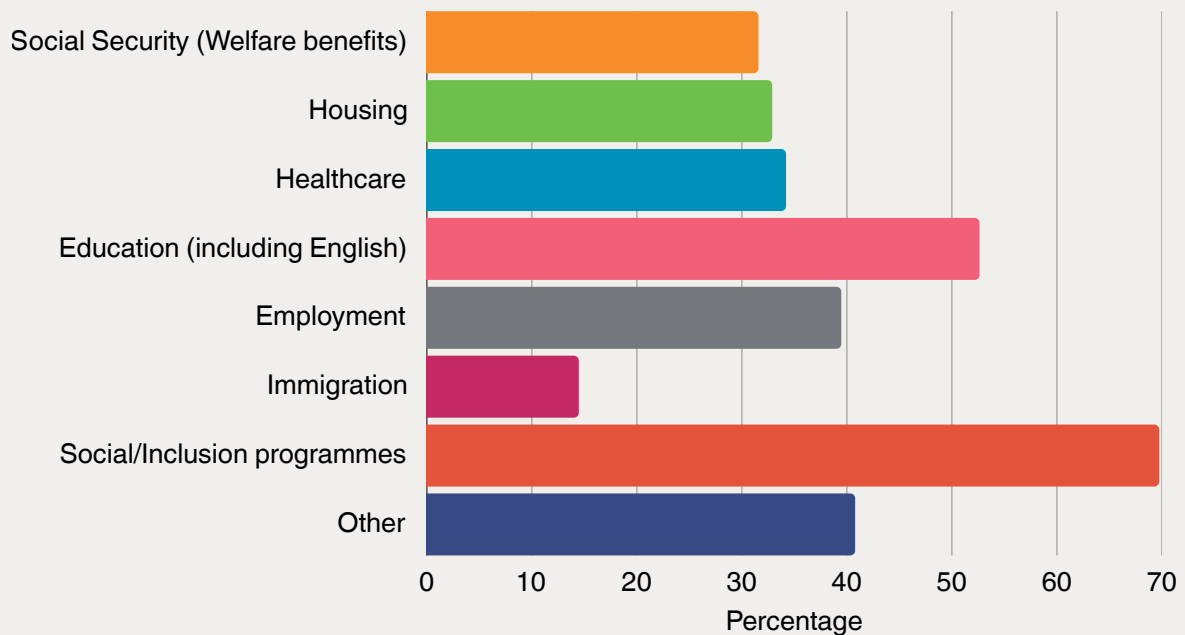
A total of 85 responses were received from a range of organisations e.g. advice agencies, migrant support organisations, housing associations, family support services, and others.

In addition, the Law Centre's Community Development Officer conducted 19 engagement interviews to capture more in-depth qualitative insights and explore the direct experiences of staff and volunteers.



Respondent Composition

Survey respondents reflect a diverse service landscape, bringing a wide range of skills and experience, providing support or advice on:



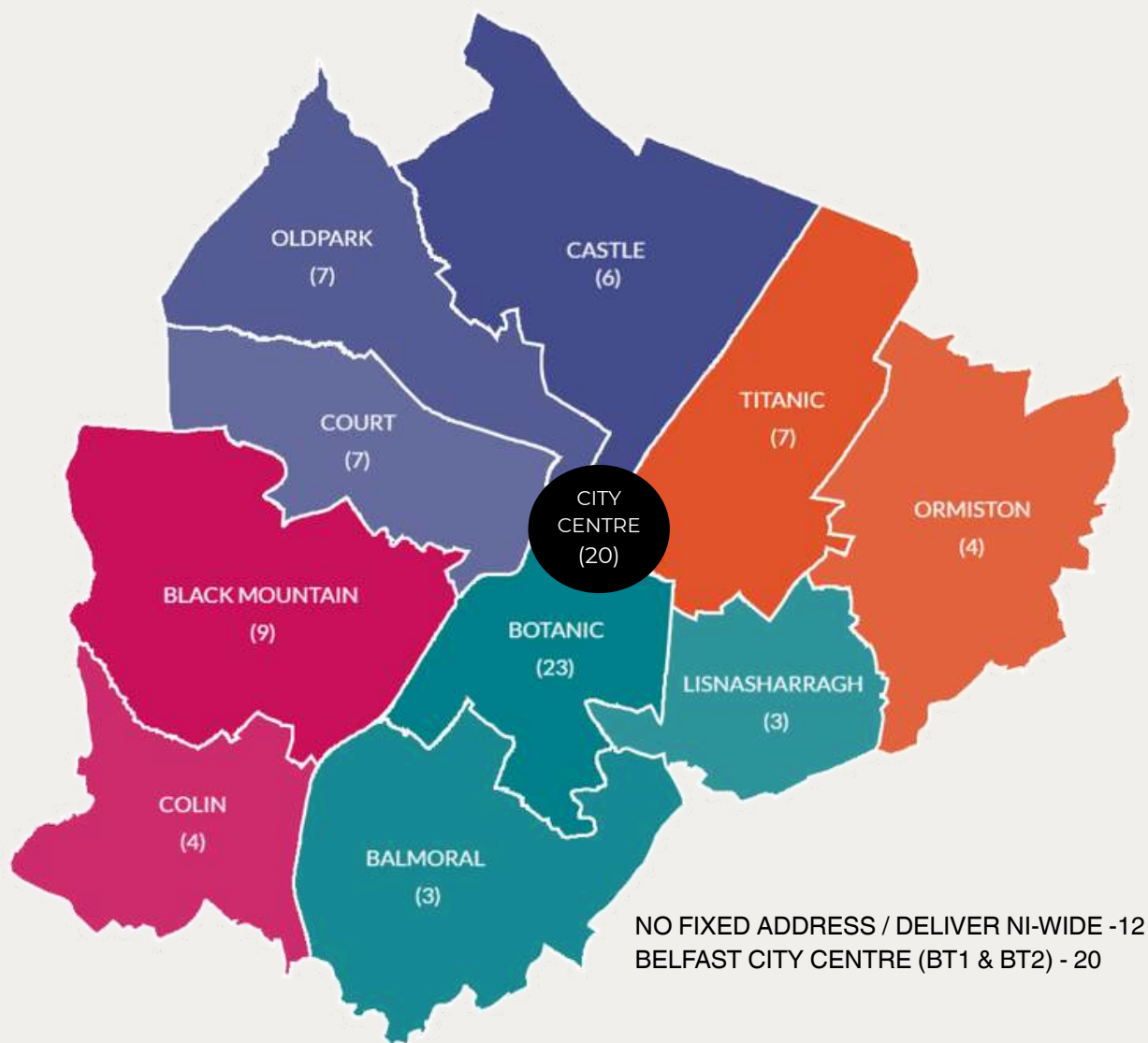
The following map shows the service delivery locations of respondent organisations in each District Electoral Area (DEA).^[14] Note that some organisations did not provide postcodes as they either deliver services NI-wide or have no fixed address for their service delivery.

There is a clear concentration of services in the Botanic DEA, which aligns with its high levels of international migration.^[15] In contrast, DEAs such as Lisnasharragh, Balmoral, Colin, Ormiston and Castle appear to be less well-resourced.

[14] Organisations delivering services in BT1 or BT2 were considered as delivering the city centre, despite technically being within the boundaries of Botanic, Castle or Old Park DEAs. Some organisations provided services in multiple DEAs, therefore there are more entries on the map than survey respondents.

[15] "While 6.3 per cent of the Northern Ireland population were born outside the UK and Ireland, this figure rises to almost a quarter (23.4%) in Botanic DEA." Northern Ireland Assembly, Research and Information Service (2025) [International Migration in Northern Ireland: an Update](#).

Map of service delivery locations of respondent organisations in each District Electoral Area (DEA)



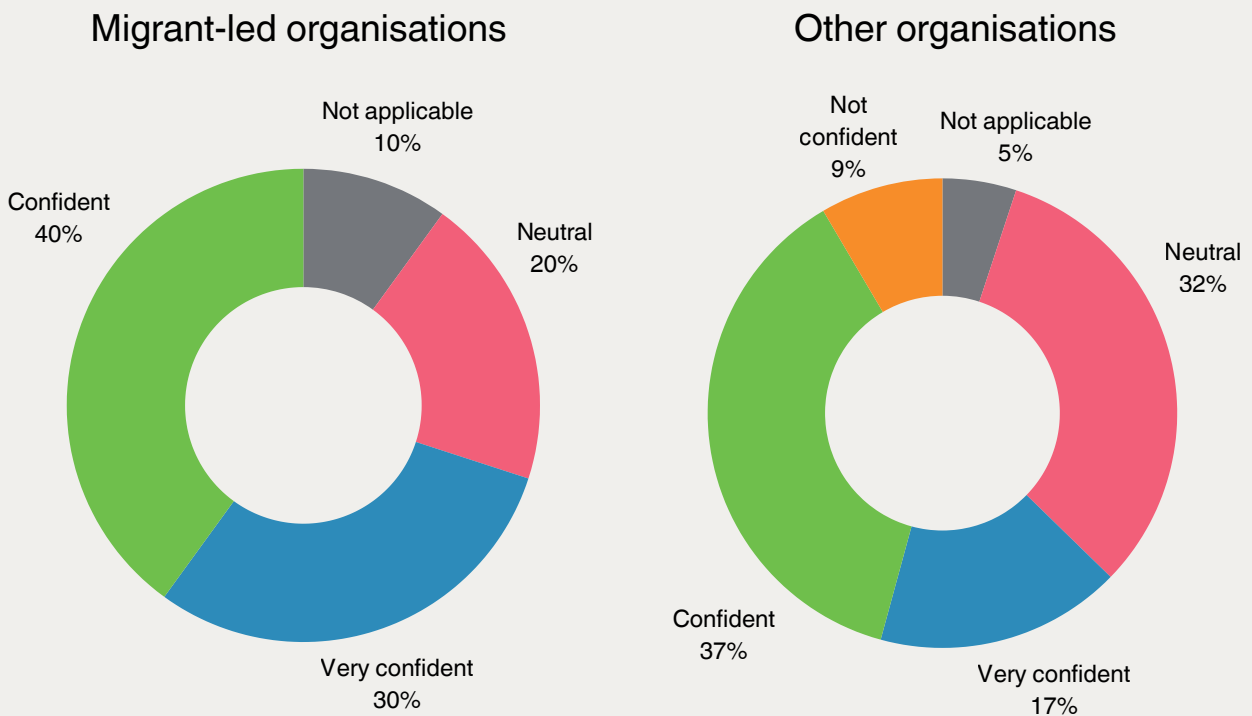
Fourteen migrant-led organisations responded to the survey. Our findings suggest that the experiences and needs of migrant-led organisations at times differ from non-migrant-led organisations, which in this report we describe as ‘other’ organisations. Note that whereas migrant-led organisations primarily tend to serve migrant communities, the ‘other’ organisations tend to serve local and migrant communities and often provide a wider range of services. The distinctions between migrant-led and other organisations are highlighted throughout this report where relevant.

Whilst 82% of respondents currently provide services to *refugees*, this drops to 76% for those providing services to *asylum seekers*. In contrast, 91% of migrant-led organisations currently deliver services to *both* asylum seekers and refugees.

Theme 1 - Confidence in ability to provide effective services

Several organisations are experienced at working with a specific cohort of forced migrants ^[16] - such as refugees who arrived through the Syrian Vulnerable Persons Resettlement Scheme (SVPR), but have limited experience with others.

Confidence working with asylum seekers

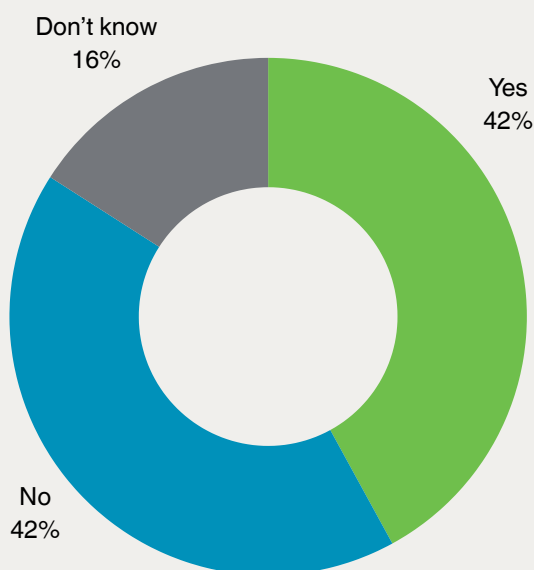


[16] Forced migrants are people who are displaced due to factors beyond their control, such as conflict, famine, persecution or environmental disasters. Also included are migrants who have experienced modern slavery/human trafficking.

Indeed, one of the key complexities for advisers is the significant variation in rights, entitlements, restrictions and legal processes across the following groups:

- Asylum seekers
- Refugees
- Resettled refugees e.g. Syrian VPR, Afghan
- Nationality-specific groups e.g. Ukraine Scheme, BN(O) visa-holders
- Refused or destitute asylum seekers
- Survivors of modern slavery/human trafficking
- Irregular migrants

Do staff/volunteers have a good understanding of available support services for asylum seekers and refugees?



Multiple organisations highlighted the challenge of service users being ‘dispersed’ to other areas of Belfast and beyond to other parts of NI. Asylum seekers can be moved without notice by Mears.^[17] Once granted refugee status, the limited availability of accommodation in Belfast may result in several moves within Northern Ireland Housing Executive (NIHE) Temporary Accommodation. This can disrupt service provision and creates difficulties for both the organisations and the individuals. Service users having to travel long distances (often on foot) to maintain access to

services remains a common occurrence. Staying up to date with the availability of services in different areas to make referrals also creates a challenge for some organisations, especially beyond their own subject and/or geographical area.

“It is challenging to know how to signpost people for support”

[17] Asylum accommodation is offered on a no choice basis. Asylum seekers will not be accommodated in a specific location unless they are considered to have an exceptional need. Home Office, [‘Information booklet about your asylum application’](#) [last updated 2 June 2025]. See [Section 3: Asylum support](#)

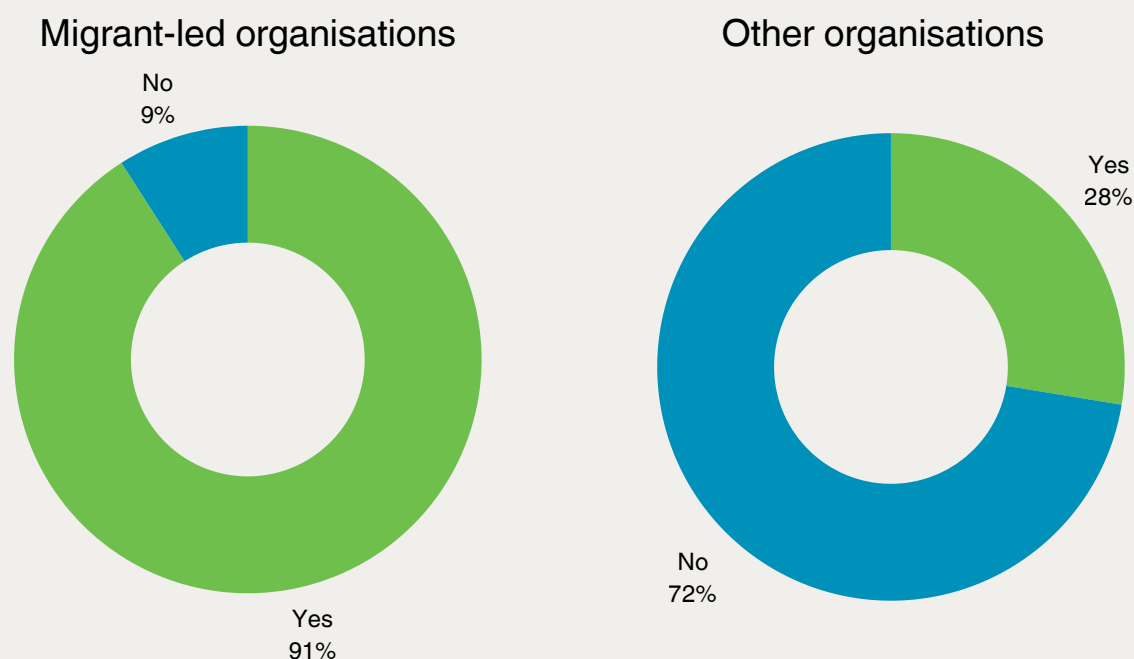
Only 39% of respondents are confident working with irregular/undocumented migrants who are particularly vulnerable to destitution. This figure is concerning given the complexities associated with migrant destitution.^[18]

Theme 2 - Challenges to effective service provision

a) Language

Language was identified by organisations as being one of the biggest barriers to working effectively with asylum seekers and refugees.

Does your organisation provide services in another language?



Whilst organisations acknowledge the importance of quality interpretation and translation services, limited funding for professional services is a major barrier and a source of frustration.

“We have no budget for this but we would love to provide a more inclusive service”

[18] Broadhead, J. & Leon, L., [‘Understanding Migrant Destitution in the UK: Research Findings’](#) (COMPAS, 2024)

In the absence of funding for professional services, organisations are sometimes compelled to find workarounds. For example, some organisations explained that they try to share interpreters with other services. However, this can be demanding for an interpreter, who might be expected to prepare for a session by researching specific vocabulary.^[19] Additionally, sharing an interpreter in this way can limit engagement with the service user and put pressure on staff to deliver services or support in shortened appointment times.

Many ‘other’ organisations (68%) rely on digital devices and translation apps to deliver their services. While more affordable, this reliance carries risks.

CASE STUDY: A family experienced a miscommunication using Google Translate. The caseworker initially thought the family was calling her *shameful*, but in fact, they were expressing their own shame about needing her help. This misunderstanding caused further distress, as the family did not want to appear ungrateful for the caseworker’s support.

Migrant-led organisations are particularly likely to rely on multi-lingual staff/volunteers as well as on volunteer interpreters. This can be *ad hoc* and dependent on the language and dialect needed.

“We have no budget and we are formed and ran by volunteers so we have limited time and finance for interpreting”

Organisations highlighted difficulties sourcing interpreters, especially for minority languages, and raised concerns about the quality of services. Client confidentiality is also an issue, with some interpreters reportedly sharing sensitive information within their communities.

Organisations worry that this causes service users to withhold information, echoing findings from a report by Law Centre NI and Rainbow Refugees NI.^[20]

[19] See ‘1. Pre-Session’. Sussex Interpreting Services, [‘Guidelines for Service Providers working with Sussex Interpreting Services and SIS Freelance Interpreters’](#) (SIS, 2025)

[20] 78% of LGBTQIA+ refugees and asylum seekers were concerned that interpreters would report details of their sexuality to their community. 58% withheld information from service providers because of the interpreter. Law Centre NI & Rainbow Refugees NI, [“We are getting hurt”: Safe accommodation for LGBTQIA+ people seeking sanctuary in Northern Ireland.](#) (LCNI, 2024)

Organisations also raised concerns about statutory agencies' reluctance at times to provide adequate interpreting. This issue was recently addressed in a Department of Health report.^[21] This increases workloads for VCS organisations, which spend extra time advocating for necessary services.^[22]

b) Availability of qualified advisers

The availability of qualified generalist and immigration advisers within the asylum support sector is also a pressing concern.

i) Qualified Generalist Welfare Advisers

Only 20% of respondent organisations have a qualified Generalist Welfare Adviser within their team. Generalist Advisers require a Level 4 Certificate and Extended Certificate, or an OCN Level 3 Certificate.^[23] Only one migrant-led organisation has a Generalist Welfare Adviser within its team.

ii) Qualified immigration advisers

Respondents are acutely aware of the importance of understanding immigration status.

“Immigration status is the key to unlocking rights and entitlements”

However, the provision of immigration advice is regulated and can only be provided by solicitors or persons accredited by the Immigration Advice Authority (IAA). Only five organisations (7%) have an IAA Adviser, with just one being migrant-led.

The lack of qualified immigration advisers across the UK is widely documented.^[24]

[21] See p. 25 'GP Services'. Department of Health, [‘Make My Voice Heard: Experiences of Women Accessing Health and Social Care in Northern Ireland.’](#) (DoH, 2025)

[22] Section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act (1998) places a statutory duty on designated public authorities to have due regard for the need to promote equality of opportunity. This includes providing interpreters where needed.

[23] Level 4 Certificate and Extended Certificate in Providing Social Security Advice, or an OCN Level 3 Certificate in Generalist Advice.

[24] Wilding, J. [‘No Access to Justice: How Legal Advice Deserts Fail Refugee, Migrant and Our Communities.’](#) (Refugee Action, 2022); Wilding, J. [‘No Access to Justice 2: Mapping the UK’s Continuing Immigration and Asylum Legal Advice Crisis.’](#) (Justice Together, 2025)

Several organisations discussed their apprehension around immigration law. They are patently aware that immigration advice is highly regulated and that immigration law can change rapidly. Some organisations reported signposting service users away rather than risk providing incorrect support. However, some avoid signposting due to long waiting times for free community immigration advice.

“There is significant demand for qualified community legal immigration advice in Northern Ireland and the demand is more than we can satisfy”

c) Organisational capacity

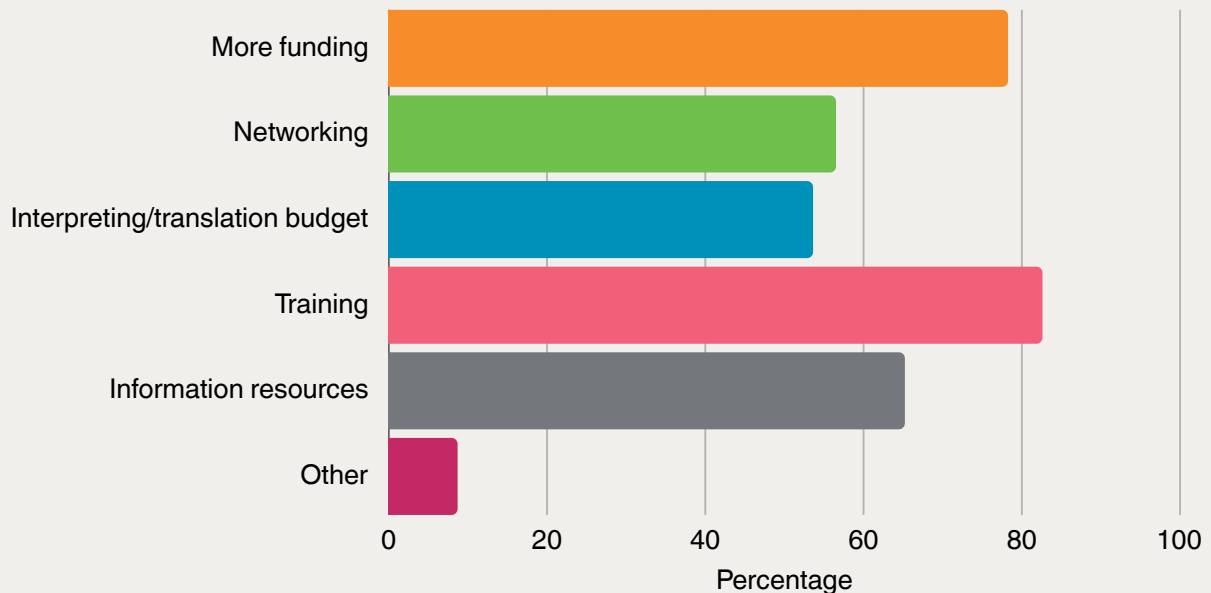
Organisational capacity is another challenge identified by survey respondents. Organisations reported that where staff/volunteers are funded to deliver on specific pieces of work, such as language classes, they often end up supporting with essential needs like GP registration or understanding Home Office documentation.

Additionally, several organisations highlighted the need for more campaigning and policy work, but feel they are already at capacity addressing the immediate needs of their service users.



Theme 3 - Development needs

“Our sector is in urgent need of better coordination and enhanced capacity to provide equitable services for those seeking our support”



a) Training

Survey respondents were asked what their organisation needs to provide effective services to refugees and asylum seekers.

84% of organisations report the need for staff training. This figure rises to 100% for migrant-led organisations.

Training needs vary depending on the existing experience of the organisation. Types of training required range from legal information and rights and entitlements, anti-racism and cultural awareness to myth-busting. Ultimately, organisations were unequivocal about wanting:

“a better understanding of migrant issues”

Interestingly, some respondents suggested that more training for public sector staff working directly with asylum seekers and refugees could ease pressure on the VCS.

Organisations reported their limited capacity to attend training as being a barrier. To mitigate this, it is important that training is free or cost-effective and not centralised to Belfast City Centre.

“Fully funded training on asylum seeker support or immigration”

“Rolling training programme with legislative updates available to orgs providing support to migrant communities”

It is clear that more training on how to support and advise asylum seekers and refugees is essential to build the confidence of all organisations engaging with this cohort.

b) Funding

The second largest need relates to funding, which was highlighted by 78% of organisations as a problem. Constant financial uncertainty and the associated risk of closure is a concern for many organisations. Organisations were unequivocal about the importance of strategic, long-term investment to support effective planning.

Flexibility in funding was highlighted as another concern: restrictive funding is a major limitation and can prevent organisations from being inclusive in their approach. For example, one organisation explained that their funding only permits them to support persons affected by the NI conflict. This has the effect of excluding asylum seekers and refugees from their services.

c) Information resources

66% of organisations cite information resources as necessary to engage effectively with asylum seekers and refugees.

Information resources need to be translated/translatable into key languages and regularly updated. Law Centre NI’s information resources were cited as an example of best practice e.g. the ‘New Refugee Move-on Guide’.^[25]

“Up-to-date information resources in multiple languages would empower both our staff and service users”

[25] Law Centre NI, [‘New Refugee “Move-on” Guide’](#), produced with the support of Belfast City Council.

“Shared practice and accurate information on immigration law changes”

d) Networking opportunities

Over half of survey respondents (57%) highlight the need for networking opportunities. However, similarly to training, limited organisational capacity can affect attendance at networking and forum meetings. It seems that there is some awareness of both the Refugee and Asylum Forum which is NI-wide as well as the Belfast Migrant Forum. There are also area-specific forums in the four corners of Belfast ^[27] where addressing issues around asylum seekers and refugees is within their remit - some are more established than others. Overall, there is a clear need for better promotion and increased awareness of these networking opportunities.

“Networking opportunities with other organisations working with migrants would help us share best practices and collaborate more strategically”

e) Sources of support

As outlined above, lack of awareness of available services is an issue for nearly two thirds (60%) of responding organisations.

A centralised map of services available to asylum seekers and refugees as a means to improve signposting and referrals attracted almost unanimous support with 99% of organisations expressing interest in this idea.

“One place to find signposting information”

“Awareness sessions on services that could be helpful to people so we can signpost clients to them”

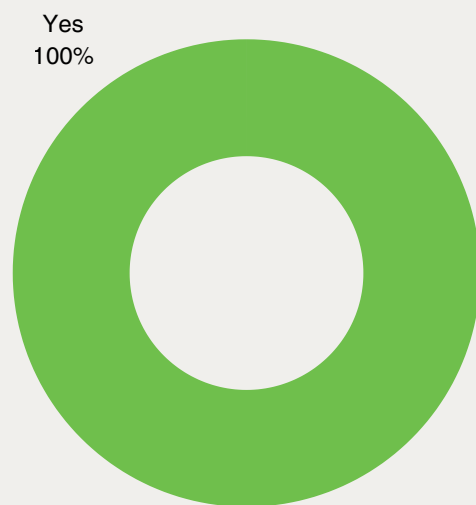
[26] These are the North Belfast Migrant Forum; East Belfast Race Relations Network; West Belfast Roundtable; and South Belfast Strategic Networking Forum.

Theme 4 - Other issues

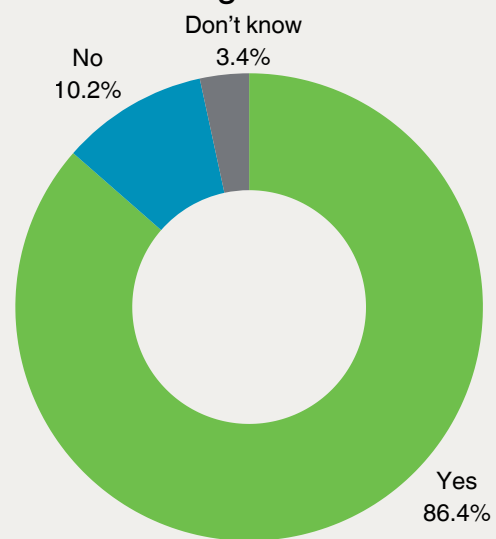
Several other issues were raised throughout this research, including the lack of childcare provision, transport costs and digital exclusion.^[27] Most striking was concern around increasing anti-migrant rhetoric.

Are you concerned about anti-migrant rhetoric in your area of Belfast?

Migrant-led organisations



Other organisations



Some organisations reported a sharp drop in service engagement as a result of anti-migrant rhetoric - particularly following the riots in August 2024, and more recently those in Ballymena and other towns in Summer 2025.

Organisations described investing staff time and resources to ensure that service users felt safe and confident in accessing their services. It was felt that this extra effort has placed further pressure on services with already limited capacity.

“We have already seen an increase in race-related hate incidents or hate crimes for refugees and asylum seekers. The service users are incredibly vulnerable and struggle to access our services confidently due to past experiences of discrimination or oppression or violence”

[27] Refugee and Asylum Forum, [‘Priorities for Action’](#). (LCNI, 2023)

“It impacts the people we support. It causes fear and people at times have stopped coming to our services because of it. It means we have additional work to do in reassuring and supporting and showing care”

Some organisations, which have faced criticism for their work in providing services to people seeking sanctuary, report reluctance in advertising their services.

“Our organisation has been targeted during race-related riots, forcing the closure of classes and raising deep concerns for the safety and well-being of our service users”

“We no longer advertise who we are on our office windows”

Organisations also explain that sometimes they have to address misinformation or xenophobic sentiment expressed by other service users or by people in the wider community. Organisations do not feel equipped to do this citing a lack of knowledge around ‘the facts’ and how to sensitively navigate conversations around migration. Many organisations expressed an interest in training focused on ‘myth busting’.

“Very occasional inappropriate behaviour within groups. The perception of ‘others’ being given priority in regards to housing...the need to build practice and training into our work to manage the impact of this rhetoric and how our staff can address it”

“Our migrant service users also feedback the misinformation they hear about migrants-refugees - they often believe the misinformation and have a tremendous sense of guilt and discomfort at the thought of being unwelcome or a burden”

Conclusion

06

This research highlights key challenges facing the VCS in Belfast in supporting asylum seekers and refugees. A major issue is the lack of language support, with many organisations relying on translation apps due to limited funding for professional interpreters, affecting trust and service quality.

There is also a shortage of qualified generalist and immigration advisers, leaving overstretched services to absorb referrals. Short-term, restrictive funding adds further strain, with many organisations delivering beyond their funded roles.

Limited legal knowledge and poor awareness of local services point to the need for targeted training and better information sharing. Rising anti-migrant rhetoric adds to the pressure, impacting both service users and staff.

Despite these many challenges the research findings are a testament to the skill, expertise and commitment across this vibrant sector. The findings also demonstrate that, despite facing additional barriers, migrant-led organisations bring particular benefits in terms of language skills, cultural insight, and community trust.



Recommendations

07

Drawing on WIP's work and the Migration Justice Project's community engagement, we offer the following interim recommendations for Belfast City Council's consideration:

1. Continuation of a programme of tailored support which provides elements of training and capacity building for organisations in Belfast that are relatively new to supporting and advising asylum seekers.
2. Continuation of a knowledge and learning network for organisations supporting and advising asylum seekers and refugees.
3. Increased provision of free training across Belfast, to be available to community organisations and statutory agencies on topics including cultural competences, myth-busting, immigration legal processes and advice restrictions.
4. Ensure migrant-led organisations are included within any capacity building initiatives.
5. Commission more translatable information resources - especially on rights, entitlements, restrictions.
6. Commission further research on the impact of anti-migrant rhetoric and hate crime on the provision of support for asylum seekers and refugees.
7. Promote and encourage the connectivity and information exchange between Belfast's existing Migrant Forums.
8. Purchase translation devices for organisations that are struggling to provide services in additional languages.
9. Include funding for interpreters in all community advice tenders.

More detailed recommendations will follow as this project develops.


Law Centre NI look forward to discussing this report and emphasises the need for capacity building within the VCS to ensure that the rights of asylum seekers and refugees are fully realised.

This will support the process of integration, which ultimately benefits wider society.

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Belfast
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