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Research directed by Lucy Michael Research with African and Caribbean Support Organisation Northern Ireland (ACSONI) and Polish Language, Culture and Affairs (POLCA)

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We extend our thanks to the many groups and individuals who supported this research in a variety of ways, facilitating introductions, providing information and reports, and updating us on changes during the course of the project. We hope that the report will support the advocacy of those who are working on these important issues day-to-day. The peer research team undertook a significant challenge to recruit participants from the most marginalised groups and to do so in the aftermath of Covid-19 lockdowns, when community groups were not yet meeting, and many social connections had been lost, and individuals isolated. We recognise the significant efforts they made to ensure that those voices were represented in this report.

The report is the start of a journey to recognise the diverse experiences of many groups. We hope that we have done some justice to the wide difference in those experiences, and that this report illuminates the need for ongoing engagement with racialised, minority ethnic and migrant communities in Belfast.

## **Foreword**

*Lord Mayor of Belfast, Councillor Christina Black*

As Lord Mayor, I am proud of our city's growing diversity. I value the many communities from minority ethnic backgrounds who have made Belfast their home amongst us, whether they have arrived here recently, or have been here for decades.

Minority ethnic communities have enriched our city, bringing new talent, new ideas, linguistic and sporting skills, as well as new connections with the world.

Diversity has brought so many benefits to Belfast, and I am proud that the council has adopted City of Sanctuary Status. However, this council recognises that people from minority ethnic backgrounds have faced many challenges, inequalities, and reduced access to opportunities because of their ethnic background and immigration category. These challenges play out in many aspects of our society: in the immigration system, in workplaces, in accommodation, in health, in education and inclusion within the civic and political spheres. This was the backdrop to our commissioning of this important piece of research.

Belfast City Council, with our partners in the Public Health Agency and Belfast Health and Social Care Trust, commissioned this report to understand the lived experience of people from different ethnic backgrounds in our city and to understand how ethnicity can shape everyday experiences here. It was very important for us to hear directly from individuals and in this report, you will find experiences, not from organisations or public institutions, but from individual people with lived experience.

The experiences documented in this report challenges the council and our partners. We see that minority groups are not represented in key institutions, community facilities, semi-state sector bodies and board rooms across the city and as such it is right that we should start by reflecting on ourselves at City Hall. In line with the principles of our Good Relations Strategy we will review the services, *programmes, and interventions we deliver and examine how equally accessible they are to Black, Asian and minority ethnic residents.*

Too often, we often have viewed people from minority ethnic backgrounds through the narrow lens of the 'BME' category, grouping their experiences as if there are no meaningful differences between them. This report illustrates that public and political spheres have much more to do to reflect and represent the growing diversity that now exists here.

As a civic leader and a key employer within Belfast we need to do more to reflect the communities we serve and address underrepresentation within the council workforce. We have commenced work to develop a Race Equality Action Plan, we will review underrepresentation within our workforce, inequalities in service delivery and inclusion in decision making.

Following on from the publication of this report we will share the findings with our community planning partners. We will use our Race Equality Action Plan and the Belfast Agenda to examine what more could and should be done to address ethnic disparities and inequality. We will promote values that celebrate human diversity, that challenge discrimination, racism and prejudice, that involve people in decision making and that begin to remove barriers to participation in civic life.

We will continue to engage with, and celebrate, the diversity of Belfast's communities and work towards developing and delivering more accessible and inclusive services. The ongoing Covid-19 pandemic, cost of living crisis, and financial uncertainty are likely to exacerbate pre-existing inequalities. But if we are able to get a better understanding of the nuances and complexities associated with ethnic inequalities, the better we will become in addressing them.

## Executive Summary

This study examined the inequalities experienced by Black, Asian, minority ethnic and Traveller people residing in Belfast in 2022. It was commissioned by Belfast City Council in partnership with Belfast Health and Social Care Trust and the Public Health Agency Northern Ireland.

The research was undertaken by Lucy Michael Research with the African and Caribbean Support Organisation of Northern Ireland (ACSONI) and Polish Language, Culture, And Affairs (POLCA). A team of 11 researchers, including 8 peer researchers, conducted interviews with 131 minority ethnic and migrant residents of Belfast in English and 8 other first languages.

Quality of accommodation and overcrowding are the most significant housing issues facing migrant and minority ethnic residents. Housing discrimination persists and is driving ethnic minorities, particularly refugees, into precarious living situations. Mobility within the city is low due to scarce availability of rental housing and particularly scarce for racialised migrants due to the perceived safety of some areas. Asylum seekers and refugees face the greatest issues with housing, including those in hotels. Refugees report significant impacts of repeated accommodation moves on school, work, and community integration.

Access to health services is particularly difficult for migrants with insufficient English to discuss their health during triage and consultations. Interpreters are not made available at triage stage and, in some practices, at consultations. Barriers to GP access increases long-term health problems and use of A&E for these. Where telephone interpreters are used (increasingly due to Covid-19 restrictions), these are often less satisfactory than in-person interpreting. Wellbeing and everyday health amongst minority ethnic and migrant residents overall is good. The majority have access to outdoor space for exercise and enjoy time outdoors. 74% of participants reported a high rate of optimism about future wellbeing in Belfast. However, access to general and acute mental health services is difficult to secure and families living with trauma and suicidality are deeply affected.

Employment experiences in Belfast vary significantly, due to migrants' varying levels of qualifications and lack of recognition of overseas qualifications by employers. Participants generally have access to employment but poor prospects for progression. A significant number have accepted positions below their qualifications and experience because these are not recognised in Northern Ireland. After direct discrimination, language barriers and awareness of work-related training were the most prominent barriers to employment. Workplace discrimination is commonly experienced by migrants in Belfast, even those resident more than 10 years.

The education system is seen as good quality in general by minority ethnic and migrant parents. However, bullying by students and discrimination by staff remain persistent, particularly against Roma and Irish Travellers. Teachers in several schools with Muslim students are openly Islamophobic. Muslims and people of African descent describe persistent exclusion in the school community by other parents, and resistance by schools to requests for cultural and language-related inclusion in school activities.

Adult education is generally perceived as good quality, but barriers to access prevents those most in need from taking up courses. These barriers include long waiting lists, lack of course options, and language barriers. ESOL courses were singled out for their lack of flexibility, variable quality, and lack of options to learn from native language into English because of fewer native speakers of other languages as teachers, as well as absence of gender-specific courses. Targeted support for adult literacy is not sufficient or visible in communities routinely affected by this.

While most participants report feeling safe living in Belfast, a notable proportion experience hate crime and racial discrimination. Those who reported an incident to PSNI were not inclined to report a future incident despite generally positive views of the initial police response. Poor outcomes from police investigations were common, both in lack of convictions and in further harassment of victims after reporting, and this has left many victims less safe in their own homes.

Two-thirds of participants were satisfied with their awareness of their rights, although there is high reliance on minority ethnic-led or migrant support organisations for information and advice. There are common complaints that advice providers are overstretched, lose valued staff, and are unable to offer advice or services beyond specific funded projects targeting single groups or issues. Mainstream advice organisations are valued for their expertise but cannot offer the depth of understanding in cultural or linguistic terms that can be provided by minority or migrant-led organisations. Strongest outcomes are reported where there is collaboration between migrant support and mainstream organisations. Support needs of migrants can be emotional as well as legal, financial, and practical because of migration-related stresses and precarity in housing and employment.

There is significant interest in community groups which support the use and enjoyment of languages and cultures from other countries. This includes both specific and diverse cultural activities and projects. Neighbourhood community organisations are perceived as openly hostile in some cases and generally uninterested in people of other backgrounds in most. While there are some notable outreach projects, these are seen as the exception rather than the norm. As a result, most participants expressed little interest in joining local community groups unless specifically invited.

Most participants have the right to vote, being British or EU citizens, but less than half of those eligible used their vote. Trust in the political system is low across all groups. Sectarianism in political parties, anti-migrant statements, perceived disinterest in minority ethnic and migrant constituents and lack of confidence in local representatives affected trust levels.

The findings of this report highlight the need for strategic interventions in all the major areas of public services; a shared approach by public institutions to acknowledging inequalities highlighted here; and identifying, collecting, and using disaggregated demographic data to sustain an informed strategy.

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## Introduction

This report explores the lived experiences of Black, Asian, minority ethnic and Traveller people residing in Belfast in 2022. It has been commissioned by Belfast City Council, the Belfast Health and Social Care Trust and the Public Health Agency of Northern Ireland to understand inequalities experienced by these groups and how these might be addressed.

Across Northern Ireland there has been an insufficient understanding of the experiences of minority ethnic and migrant populations of community participation, social exclusion, economic opportunity, discrimination, and disadvantage. Often these populations are side-lined in policymaking due to a focus on the comparative experiences of white British and Irish populations or considered only in respect of specific policy areas.

This report is undertaken to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the range of experiences of minority ethnic and migrant populations in Belfast to inform policy making and service provision in the city. It does not cover populations living outside Belfast, who commute into the city for work, leisure, or other reasons, although it is anticipated that the wider population of city users may benefit from any positive changes produced from this research.

We acknowledge that this report only provides a small sample of Belfast's minority ethnic and migrant population and therefore does not represent the experiences of all, nor do we claim that our observations encapsulate all the issues being experienced. We have recruited a range of participants to highlight key shared problems across diverse groups.

Over the past 20 years, Belfast has experienced an increase in the Black, Asian and minority ethnic communities making the city their home. New communities and their descendants have made significant and lasting contributions to Belfast. However, they continue to face a range of challenges including hostility, resentment, and discrimination, which have impacted on how they participate in political, social, and economic life.<sup>1</sup> There are further challenges identified for both minority ethnic and migrant individuals in employment, accessing suitable housing, healthcare, education, leisure, political participation, access to justice/safety, economic inclusion, language, and cultural integration.<sup>2</sup>

### Diversity in Belfast

Northern Ireland has historically been one of the least ethnically diverse regions of the United Kingdom (UK). However, the expansion of the EU in May 2004, among other factors, prompted a notable increase of immigration.<sup>3</sup> This rise in inwards migration mostly reflected arrivals from the EU8 countries, especially Poland. Most migrants initially secured employment in the agricultural, food processing, hospitality, and construction sectors. Following the 2008 recession the level of immigration to Northern Ireland from the EU declined. Likewise, in 2010 following the implementation of restrictions on non-EEA workers and students in 2010, migration from India,

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<sup>1</sup> McKee, R (2015), Love thy neighbour? Exploring prejudice against ethnic minority groups in a divided society: the case for Northern Ireland, *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 42:5, 777-796.; Wallace, A., McAreavey, R. and Atkin, K. (2013) *Poverty and Ethnicity in Northern Ireland: An Evidence Review*, York, Joseph Rowntree Foundation. ; Doebler, S; McAreavey, R; Shortall, S (2017), Is racism the new sectarianism? Negativity towards immigrants and ethnic minorities in Northern Ireland from 2004 to 2015 , *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 41:14, 2426-2444.

<sup>2</sup> Belluigi, D. Z. Et al. (2020). *Ethnic Disparities and Inequality In The UK: A Consultation Response From The RPA Consortium* . The Migrant and Minority Council of Northern Ireland; Lubit, A; Belluigi, D. (2021) *Collation and Mapping of Research related to Migrant and Minority Ethnic Matters in Northern Ireland produced within Northern Ireland's Universities*. MME Council and QUB: Belfast.

<sup>3</sup> O'Sullivan, T., Young, G., Gibb, K., Reilly, P. (2014) *Migrant Workers and the Housing Market*. Report to the Northern Ireland Housing Executive. <https://www.nihe.gov.uk/getmedia/47957b8e-cd67-4332-a243-991c7d9dbacc/Final-Migrant-Workers-Report-Jan-2015.pdf>

China and the Philippines also fell. There was then another increase of migration into Northern Ireland following 2014.<sup>4</sup> By 2019 the total population of Northern Ireland who were not either British or Irish citizens was estimated to be around 112,000.<sup>5</sup>

According to the 2021 Census, the largest ethnic group in Belfast included people who identified as White (92.95%) followed by Chinese (1.37%), Indian (1.26%), people of mixed ethnicity (1.2%), and Black African (1.19%). People of Polish nationality are counted within the White ethnic group (1.29%).<sup>6</sup> Other minority identities represent below 1% of Belfast, including other European and Asian nationalities, Filipinos, and Arabs. In Northern Ireland as a whole, minority ethnic people comprised 6.53% (124,283) of the total population. People born in other EU countries comprised 3.54% (67,451) and non-EU countries 2.99% (56,832).

Northern Ireland also has a small population of asylum seekers and refugees from various ethnic groups and nationalities. According to Home Office immigration statistics, in June 2022, 2,493 individuals were receiving asylum support in Northern Ireland.<sup>7</sup> This figure only includes those who are receiving asylum support, and not all applicants and refugees, and therefore likely underrepresents the true population. The top 5 nationalities in receipt of asylum support in 2022 are from Eritrea, Syria, Somalia, Iraq, and Sudan.

Births to mothers born outside the UK and Ireland now account for over 10% of all births in Northern Ireland annually<sup>8</sup>, The School Census figures also show growth of the resident minority ethnic population, growing from 1,366 minority ethnic and migrant pupils in 2002, to 17,400 in 2020.<sup>9</sup>

Chinese and Indian communities have been established in Northern Ireland for decades, and now represent the largest second and third generation migrant populations.<sup>10</sup> People of African descent have also been present in Ireland for decades but in smaller numbers. These populations are still growing from continued immigration. Despite having established minority ethnic communities, there are no distinct areas of residential concentration by ethnic group in Belfast.

Northern Ireland is also home to an indigenous minority ethnic population, the Irish Travellers. This group makes up less than 1% of the population of Northern Ireland, and in contrast to other minority ethnic groups in Northern Ireland, its population is decreasing. The Traveller community

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<sup>4</sup> Russell, R. (2016) International Migration in Northern Ireland: An Update. Belfast: Northern Ireland Assembly.

<sup>5</sup> Northern Ireland Research and Statistics Agency (NISRA) (2020) Long-term international migration 2019 – admin data relating to the international population in Northern Ireland. Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency, 27 August 2020.

<sup>6</sup> Northern Ireland Research and Statistics Agency (NISRA) (2022) Census 2021: Main Statistics.

<sup>7</sup> Newell, B. (2022) Immigration Statistics Year Ending June 2022: Asylum and Resettlement - Asylum seekers in receipt of support. Home Office: London.

<sup>8</sup> Russell, R. (2016) International Migration in Northern Ireland: An Update. Belfast: Northern Ireland Assembly. Available at: <http://www.niassembly.gov.uk/globalassets/documents/raise/publications/2016-2021/2016/general/3916.pdf>

<sup>9</sup> Department of Education (2021) Number of Newcomer Pupils at schools in Northern Ireland. Department of Education for Northern Ireland, 21 March 2021. Available at: [https://www.educationni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/education/Newcomer\\_pupils\\_2001-2002\\_to\\_2020-21.xlsx](https://www.educationni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/education/Newcomer_pupils_2001-2002_to_2020-21.xlsx)

<sup>10</sup> O'Sullivan, T., Young, G., Gibb, K., Reilly, P. (2014) Migrant Workers & the Housing Market. Report to the Northern Ireland Housing Executive. Available at: <https://www.nihe.gov.uk/getmedia/47957b8e-cd67-4332-a243-991c7d9dbacc/Final-Migrant-Workers-Report-Jan-2015.pdf.aspx?ext=.pdf>



population in Northern Ireland fell from 1,700 in 2001 to 1,300 by 2011.<sup>11</sup> Recent census data suggests there are 299 Irish Travellers in Belfast. Although Irish Traveller and Roma groups are often considered together in policy terms, associated by nomadic traditions, there are distinct differences between them. It is estimated that a small population of Roma, around 1,000 members mostly from Romania, live in Northern Ireland.<sup>12</sup> The Roma population in Belfast is recorded at 314 in the 2021 Census. This includes Roma people from Bulgaria, Hungary, Slovakia and Romania.<sup>13</sup>

## Literature Review

In this section, we review the existing literature on inequalities affecting ethnic minorities and migrants in Northern Ireland and, where available, Belfast.

Inequality and segregation in the employment market are key obstacles to moving out of poverty for minority ethnic groups in Northern Ireland.<sup>14</sup> Migrant workers, particularly Eastern Europeans, are over-represented in low-paid, low-status jobs. Irish Travellers are less likely to be in employment than all other ethnic groups.<sup>15</sup>

Health challenges include differences with health systems in migrants' home countries, perceived discrimination by frontline staff, lack of recourse to public funds and awareness of services, and problems communicating their needs, as well as cultural sensitivity needs particularly in respect of ageing<sup>16</sup>. Other problems include certain health problems prevalent among minority groups, such as hypertension, diabetes, lower life expectancy<sup>17</sup> and mental health<sup>18</sup>.

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<sup>11</sup> O'Sullivan, T., Young, G., Gibb, K., Reilly, P. (2014) Migrant Workers & the Housing Market. Report to the Northern Ireland Housing Executive. Available at: <https://www.nihe.gov.uk/getmedia/47957b8e-cd67-4332-a243-991c7d9dbacc/Final-Migrant-Workers-Report-Jan-2015.pdf.aspx?ext=.pdf>

<sup>12</sup> Russell, R. (2016) International Migration in Northern Ireland: An Update. Belfast: Northern Ireland Assembly. Available at: <http://www.niassembly.gov.uk/globalassets/documents/raise/publications/2016-2021/2016/general/3916.pdf>; Education Support for Northern Ireland (2014) Roma – Information for Schools. Available at: <http://www.education-support.org.uk/teachers/ids/roma/>

<sup>13</sup> Northern Ireland Research and Statistics Agency (NISRA) (2022) Census 2021: Main Statistics. Available at: <https://www.nisra.gov.uk/statistics/2021-census/results/main-statistics>

<sup>14</sup> Lucas, O., Jarman, N. (2016) Poverty and Ethnicity: Key Messages for NI . Available online: [https://www.housingnet.co.uk/pdf/JRF-Poverty\\_and\\_Ethnicity-Key\\_messages\\_for\\_Northern\\_Ireland.pdf](https://www.housingnet.co.uk/pdf/JRF-Poverty_and_Ethnicity-Key_messages_for_Northern_Ireland.pdf)

<sup>15</sup> Equality Commission (2018) Key inequalities in unemployment . Available online: <https://www.equalityni.org/ECNI/media/ECNI/Publications/Delivering%20Equality/Employment-KeyInequalities-SummaryStatement.pdf>

<sup>16</sup> Wallace, A. (2015) Housing and Communities' Inequalities in Northern Ireland , Available online: <https://www.equalityni.org/ECNI/media/ECNI/Publications/Delivering%20Equality/HousingInequalities-FullReport.pdf>

<sup>17</sup> Health and Social Care Northern Ireland (HSCNI) (n.d.) Promoting health and wellbeing in black and minority ethnic (BME) groups, including Travellers and migrant workers Available online: [https://www.publichealth.hscni.net/sites/default/files/Guide%204%20BME%20Groups\\_0.pdf](https://www.publichealth.hscni.net/sites/default/files/Guide%204%20BME%20Groups_0.pdf)

<sup>18</sup> Murphy F, Vieten UM (2020) Asylum seekers and refugees in Northern Ireland: the impact of post-migration stressors on mental health. In J Psychol Med 20:1-10; Radford et al (2015). 'Walking this thin line' Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) Experiences of Mental Health & Wellbeing in N. Ireland . Waking-this-Thin-Line-Report-BME-Experiences-of-Mental-Health-Wellbeing-in-N.Ireland.pdf

(strongertogetherni.org); Equality Commission (2007) Inequalities in Health and Social Care . Available online:

[https://www.equalityni.org/ECNI/media/ECNI/Publications/Delivering%20Equality/KI2007\\_Health.pdf](https://www.equalityni.org/ECNI/media/ECNI/Publications/Delivering%20Equality/KI2007_Health.pdf);

Equality Commission (2016) Programme for Government and Budget Recommendations . Available online: <https://www.equalityni.org/ECNI/media/ECNI/Publications/Delivering%20Equality/PfG->

In housing, minority ethnic groups and migrants are particularly affected by insecurity of tenure, overcrowding, and poor housing conditions.<sup>19</sup> Refugee complaints in respect to housing are met with poor responses by service providers and sometimes met with hostile reactions.<sup>20</sup> Housing rights are difficult for migrants to exercise in the private rental market because of their relatively weaker position as renters.<sup>21</sup>

Minority ethnic and newcomer children have been more likely to attend non-grammar secondary schools and represent a greater share of children within the integrated education sector.<sup>22</sup> Irish Travellers are absent from school 6 to 7 times more than the general population.<sup>23</sup> In higher education, minority ethnic students are slightly underrepresented in undergraduate enrolments, and the educational qualifications of people coming from EU countries are often not recognised.<sup>24</sup>

Very little is formally documented on inequalities in leisure for migrant communities in Northern Ireland beyond a need for culturally sensitive leisure facilities, such as female-only swimming.<sup>25</sup>

Migrants find themselves within highly segregated urban spaces in Belfast and the sectarian context affects to a large extent minority ethnic groups' experiences of life in Northern Ireland.<sup>26</sup> Migrants that have moved into Belfast have found themselves identifying along neighbourhood sectarian lines, impacting their perception of other areas of Belfast and confidence moving through those areas. Experiences of racial and ethnic prejudice are still common in Northern Ireland.<sup>27</sup> Four-fifths (80%) of Belfast-born teenagers from minority ethnic backgrounds who took

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Recommendations/PfG-Recommendations-Summary.pdf; Patel, K., Kouvonen, A., Bosqui, T., Vannanen, A. and O'Reilly, D. (2018) The Mental Health of Migrants in Northern Ireland, *International Journal of Population Data Science*, 3(2).

<sup>19</sup> Equality Commission (2017). Key inequalities in housing and communities in Northern Ireland. Available at:

<https://www.equalityni.org/ecni/media/ecni/publications/delivering%20equality/housingcommunities-summaryreport.pdf>; Murphy F, Vieten UM (2020) Asylum seekers and refugees in Northern Ireland: the impact of post-migration stressors on mental health. *J Psychol Med* 20:1-10

<sup>20</sup> Murphy F, Vieten UM (2020) Asylum seekers and refugees in Northern Ireland: the impact of post-migration stressors on mental health, *J Psychol Med* 20:1-10.

<sup>21</sup> Wallace, A. (2015) Housing and Communities' Inequalities in Northern Ireland, Centre for Housing Policy, University of York and Equality Commission NI. Available online:

<https://www.equalityni.org/ECNI/media/ECNI/Publications/Delivering%20Equality/HousingInequalities-FullReport.pdf>

<sup>22</sup> Equality Commission (2015) Education Inequalities in NI, Summary Report. Available online:

<https://www.equalityni.org/ECNI/media/ECNI/Publications/Delivering%20Equality/EducationInequality-SummaryReport.pdf>

<sup>23</sup> Belfast Health and Social Care Trust (BHSC) (Sept 2021) Written evidence submitted by Traveller Intervention Belfast Health and Social Care Trust (MEM0029)

<sup>24</sup> Embrace NI (2022) Lack of Recognition of Qualifications. Available at:

<https://www.embraceni.org/migration/lack-of-recognition-of-qualifications>

<sup>25</sup> Murphy, F., & Vieten, U. M. (2017). Asylum seekers' and refugee's experiences of Life in Northern Ireland: Report of the first study on the situation of asylum seekers and refugees in NI - 2016. Queen's University Belfast. Available online: <https://www.qub.ac.uk/home/media/Media,784971,en.pdf>

<sup>26</sup> Kempny, M. (2013) 'Tales from the borderlands: Northern Irish conflict in the representations of Poles'. *Space and Culture* 16 (4): 435-446; Kempny, M. (2019) 'Polish spaces in a divided city', in B. Fanning and L. Michael, eds. 'Immigrants as Outsiders in the Two Irelands', Manchester University Press; Knox, C. (2011). Tackling Racism in Northern Ireland: 'The Race Hate Capital of Europe'. *Journal of Social Policy* 40(2):387-412; Vieten, U., & Murphy, F. (2019). The Imagination of the Other in a (Post-)Sectarian Society: Asylum Seekers and Refugees in the Divided City of Belfast. *Social Inclusion* 7(2): 176-186.

<sup>27</sup> Michael, L., Devine, P. (2018) A welcoming Northern Ireland? Understanding sentiment towards asylum seekers and refugees, ARK Research Update 124, available at: <https://www.ark.ac.uk/ARK/sites/default/files/2018-11/update124.pdf>

part in a Belfast Youth Forum survey said that they want to leave Belfast due to racist attitudes, including discrimination in securing employment and work<sup>28</sup>.

Gaps in statutory service provision experienced by minority ethnic and migrant communities in Northern Ireland are frequently filled by NGOs. This can include advice on accessing services, support with applications and documents, or support with language provision. These organisations serve as ‘shock absorbers’ to structural causes of inequalities.<sup>29</sup> Even with support from state and local funding, such organisations often can guarantee only short-term interventions due to the short-term nature of funding. Their structural precarity impacts on their service users.

Little is known about the civic and political engagement of migrant groups in Northern Ireland, as the focus on the conflict between the two ‘dominant’ groups has tended to overshadow migrants’ needs and concerns.<sup>30</sup> There is a need to focus on questions relating opportunity to migration, politics, and place, as well as citizenship and belonging from Government down to grassroots-level community organisations.

## Methodology

This research project involved an interactive collaborative effort of participant-led discussions with minority ethnic and migrant communities, including Irish Travellers, Roma, and asylum seekers of various nationalities, aiming to gather information on personal experiences of inequalities experienced in city life.

The Indicators of Integration Framework (2019) was utilised to provide an outline for investigating inequalities in each of the domains and supporting the development of the research tools.<sup>31</sup>

Eight peer researchers from Black, Asian, minority ethnic and Traveller communities were recruited and provided with training in research design, data collection, ethics, and data management. They recruited and interviewed participants, as well as translating and transcribing interviews where necessary. The research team further identified community group representatives and organisations that could encourage and support individuals to participate in confidence. All participants have been anonymised.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 131 participants from Black, Asian, minority ethnic and Traveller Communities, recruited through a snowball sampling approach. All of these were in-person interviews, with the exception of 10 which were conducted online for reasons related to Covid-19. Focus groups were conducted with an additional 33 participants, including refugees and asylum seekers, Chinese, South Asian and Polish groups. Focus groups were invited from a wider range of groups, but many community organisations were not yet meeting in person after Covid-19 and chose not to participate in online focus groups. All of the interview participants and focus group participants in this study are of minority ethnic background or migrated to Belfast

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<sup>28</sup> Belfast Youth Forum (2021) Minor Choices, Major Voices research project. Available at: <https://yoursay.belfastcity.gov.uk/young-people-racism-diversity>

<sup>29</sup> McAreavey, R (2017) *New Immigration Destinations: Migrating to Rural and Peripheral Areas*. Routledge: New York

<sup>30</sup> McCurry, J. (2018) *Migration, belonging and the ‘place-based contract’: The civic and political participation of Polish migrants in Northern Ireland from a transnational perspective*. Queen’s Mary University of London Theses.

<sup>31</sup> Ndofor-Tah, C., Strang, A., Phillimore, J., Morrice, L., Michael, L., Wood, P., & Simmons, J. (2019). *Indicators of Integration framework 2019*. London, Home Office. [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/805870/home-office-indicators-of-integration-framework-2019-horr109.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/805870/home-office-indicators-of-integration-framework-2019-horr109.pdf)

from outside the UK. The fieldwork for this project was conducted in the context of reopening of city facilities and services after Covid-19 closures. Health and safety considerations applied both to the research team and participants.

The sample did not include users of city services, commuters and other regular visitors who live outside the precise city boundary. These include daily commuters for work and education, relatives and friends of city residents, consumers of goods and services, people using health services, users of public spaces and facilities, and participants in cultural activities. This restriction on the sample skews against, for example, people of African-Caribbean background, who tend to live outside the city boundaries but work in the city.

The peer research team actively engaged in outreach to their communities and posters advertised our project in 9 languages (Arabic, Cantonese, Mandarin, Romanian, etc) placed at key organisations and migrant businesses, as well as online advertising through Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram. There was also recruitment through the membership of the Belfast City Council Migrant Forum.

Covid-19 affected some disinclination to participate, but also consultation fatigue in the city, where there were at least 4 academic research projects ongoing at the same time drawing on the same communities. Time is a precious commodity for migrants who are often working heavy jobs and long hours, with no intergenerational childcare for many. We are grateful to all those who gave their time so generously for this project. We recommend that all future research includes compensation directly to participants for their time and costs incurred. Participants were not compensated financially for their participation in this research.

The peer research team were also actively involved in the analysis of interview and focus group data and collectively workshopped the key themes and early recommendations, providing valuable insights from the research. Recommendations were further developed in consultation with the Steering Group.

This report provides an illustrative overview of the issues facing a wide range of racialised, ethnic minority and migrant groups resident in the city. The sample size of each group is small and cannot cover the many diverse experiences of all people within any group. The desire of the commissioning agencies to get a broad overview of experiences in Belfast necessarily means groups of many different ethnic backgrounds, differently racialised groups and groups with different immigration statuses have been brought together in this illustrative report. We recommend consultation with the represented organisations of any particular group when a strategy or intervention targeting or including that group is planned. A fuller set of demographic information for participants is provided in Appendix 1.

Ninety-eight participants were from non-white racialised ethnic groups. There were seven Irish Traveller participants. Thirty-two participants are from 'White other' groups, including migrants from Eastern Europe. More than half (79) do not identify with any religion. Thirty-seven are from a range of Christian denominations, and eleven are Muslim. The largest age groups were in their 30s (44) and 40s (35), followed by those in the 18-30 cohort (32), in their 50s (19) and 60s+(7). Half of the participants (65) have children under 18 years old. Fifty-six participants identified themselves as having a high level of proficiency in everyday English, 42 as intermediate level and 32 as basic level.

Forty-six participants said they live in south Belfast, 35 in east Belfast, 26 in north Belfast, 16 in west Belfast, and 1 in the city centre. Fifteen participants have lived in Belfast for more than 20 years, 39 have lived in Belfast for between 11 and 20 years, and 76 have lived in Belfast for 10 years or less. Of these, 5 have lived here less than one year, 33 between one and five years, and 38 between 6 and 10 years. Twenty have previously lived elsewhere in Northern Ireland.

## A note on terminology

We use the term minority ethnic and migrant throughout this report to remind readers that the report provides this overview. Where a situation particularly affects participants sharing one ethnic or national identity, we describe them using the term that applies best to their shared experience. The term “Black” notably does some heavy lifting in this report since it covers a wide range of nationalities, backgrounds, class positions and immigration statuses but draws together at the experiences of being commonly racialised. In line with current good practice, we do not use the acronyms BME or BAME. In recent years, these have come to be used to describe people individually rather than provide the overview that they were designed for. To reinforce this good practice, we have avoided using them in this report.

## Housing and Neighbourhoods

Housing is a crucial factor determining quality of life of migrants and minority ethnic groups as well as structuring migrants’ experiences of integration. Adequate housing is vital for security and family life.<sup>32</sup> Housing conditions impact on a community’s sense of security and stability, opportunities for social connection, and access to healthcare, education and employment<sup>33</sup> and difficulties in this domain can significantly affect people’s physical and mental health, not only in the general population<sup>34</sup>, but especially for refugees and asylum-seekers.<sup>35</sup> Essential indicators are secure housing, satisfaction with housing conditions, prevalence of homeless or overcrowding, and satisfaction with neighbourhood.

Access to housing varies across minority ethnic and migrant groups, relating to differences in country of origin, routes to migration, economic status, and family circumstances. The majority (61%) of migrants and people of minority ethnic backgrounds in this research had overall positive experiences with securing stable accommodation in Belfast. In general, those who were satisfied had not recently had to seek new accommodation. However, they did report problems with the quality of their housing and access to support to address those problems.

In recent years there has been a housing shortage facing Belfast with over 12,000 people waiting for social housing,<sup>36</sup> but only 835 new social homes were completed across Northern Ireland in the last financial year (2021).<sup>37</sup> People from other or no religion (often minority ethnic or migrant residents) have the smallest homes in terms of square meters, experience the most overcrowding, and are most likely to live in poor standard housing. There is evidence of the effects of poor housing conditions in the city on both physical and mental health, such as respiratory illnesses (particularly amongst children and the elderly), and insecure tenancy has contributed to

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<sup>32</sup> Russell, H., I. Privalko, F. McGinnity and S. Enright (2021). Monitoring Adequate Housing in Ireland. Dublin: ESRI and Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission

<sup>33</sup> Ndofor-Tah et al (2019) Home Office Indicators of Integration framework 2019, p. 32

<sup>34</sup> Pevalin, D. J., Reeves, A., Baker, E., & Bentley, R. (2017). The impact of persistent poor housing conditions on mental health: A longitudinal population-based study. *Preventive medicine*, 105, 304-310.; Jayaweera, H. (2014). Health of migrants in the UK: what do we know. *The migration observatory, University of Oxford.*; Boardman, J., Dogra, N., & Hindley, P. (2015). Mental health and poverty in the UK—time for change?. *BJPsych international*, 12(2), 27-28.

<sup>35</sup> Due, C., Ziersch, A., Walsh, M. & Duivesteyn, E. (2020) Housing and health for people with refugee- and asylum-seeking backgrounds: a photovoice study in Australia, *Housing Studies*, 37:9, 1598-1624

<sup>36</sup> Madden, A. (2022) Why Belfast's housing crisis won't improve any time soon. Belfast Telegraph. Oct 1<sup>st</sup>, 2022. Available at: <https://www.belfasttelegraph.co.uk/news/northern-ireland/why-belfasts-housing-crisis-wont-improve-any-time-soon-42030891.html>

<sup>37</sup> Belfast Telegraph (2022) just 835 new social homes were completed in the last financial year. Belfast Telegraph. Aug 29<sup>th</sup> 2022. Available at: <https://www.belfasttelegraph.co.uk/opinion/viewpoint/northern-ireland-is-in-the-midst-of-a-housing-crisis-41943457.html>

mental health issues such as stress, anxiety, panic attacks, and depression.<sup>38</sup> In areas of the city with the greatest shortages of social housing, applicants from a Catholic community background wait the longest prior to being allocated a home<sup>39</sup>, except in north Belfast, where those waiting the longest are people from other or no religion<sup>40</sup>, and this includes a high proportion of minority ethnic and migrant residents. Migrants and minority ethnic groups in this study mainly lived in private rental accommodation or social housing. Many of the participants are facing difficulties in finding affordable accommodation. There are a growing number of people, particularly Eastern Europeans, accessing mortgages as they become established financially and with the necessary connections. But the path to house ownership is made difficult by increasing prices and limited new builds. Overall, there are clear issues with availability both in the private and social housing sectors in the city.

South Belfast is the home to nearly two-fifths of the participants in this study (38%), and a wide range of nationalities and ethnicities are represented in this number, particularly amongst Asian and Black African participants. Just under a third (29%) of participants live in east Belfast, with Eastern Europeans most likely to live here. These areas appear to be more popular amongst minority ethnic and migrant groups due to the wider availability of rental accommodation, lower rent, and the availability of ethnic shops.<sup>41</sup> The vibrancy of ethnic food shops in the south and east of the city speaks to the importance of access to cultural goods for ethnic minority groups. Irish Travellers in this study mostly live in west Belfast, where there are serviced sites and grouped social housing for Irish Travellers based around the Glen Road area. West Belfast is also where many of the asylum seekers and refugees, particularly Syrian, are living in temporary housing. When they could move out of temporary accommodation refugees in this study mainly moved to the south and north of the city.

Three groups are particularly affected by homelessness and the risk of poverty associated with it. There has been an identified need for Traveller-specific accommodation<sup>42</sup>, and Travellers are particularly affected by homelessness, with more children currently living in hostels than halting sites.<sup>43</sup> Roma are particularly affected by exploitative rental contracts in the private sector, and sudden overcrowding due to evictions is a significant concern in this group.<sup>44</sup>

In the past year there has been a stark rise in asylum-seekers staying in hotels in Northern Ireland, In June 2021, just 14 asylum-seekers were staying in hotels. As of April 2022 this figure rose to

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<sup>38</sup> Bentley, R., Baker, E., & Mason, K. (2012). Cumulative exposure to poor housing affordability and its association with mental health in men and women. *J Epidemiol Community Health*, 66(9), 761-766.; Housing 4 All (2019) *A Prison without Walls: Asylum, Migration, and Human Rights*. Belfast: Participation and the Practice of Rights (PPR) Available at: [https://issuu.com/ppr-org/docs/h4all\\_report\\_june\\_2019\\_final\\_17.06.s/113185](https://issuu.com/ppr-org/docs/h4all_report_june_2019_final_17.06.s/113185)

<sup>39</sup> Participation and Practice of Rights (PPR) (2022) *Housing in Belfast: A Closer Look at What's Changing – And What Isn't*. Available at: <https://www.nlb.ie/investigations/FOI/2022-08-housing-need-in-belfast-a-closer-look-at-whats-changing-and-what-isnt>

<sup>40</sup> Wallace, A. (2016). *Housing and Communities' Inequalities in Northern Ireland*, p. 103.

<sup>41</sup> Kempny, M. (2019) 'Polish spaces in a divided city', in B. Fanning and L. Michael, eds 'Immigrants as Outsiders in the Two Irelands', Manchester University Press

<sup>42</sup> Equality Commission for Northern Ireland Race Equality (2018) *Briefing on Travellers* (May 2018), EC/18/05/03, p.20. Available at: <https://www.equalityni.org/ECNI/media/ECNI/Publications/Corporate/Commission%20Meetings/2018/cmeeting230518/EC180503.pdf>

<sup>43</sup> Belfast Health and Social Care Trust (BHSCT) (2021) *The experiences of minority ethnic and migrant people in Northern Ireland*, Written evidence submitted by Traveller Intervention Belfast Health and Social Care Trust (MEM0029), <https://committees.parliament.uk/writtenevidence/39405/pdf/>

<sup>44</sup> Forward South Partnership (FSP) (2021) *Written evidence submitted by Forward South Partnership, relating to the experiences of minority ethnic and migrant people in Northern Ireland Inquiry* (MEM0031), Available at: <https://committees.parliament.uk/writtenevidence/39773/pdf/>

1,067.<sup>45</sup> Accommodation for asylum seekers in Northern Ireland is funded through the National Asylum Support Service (NASS).<sup>46</sup> Once an asylum application is granted, they are given 28 days to transition to a more permanent housing. However, asylum seekers and refugees often cannot afford to move to privately rented accommodation. Where people have no right to public funds, they are often ineligible for beds in hostels that are funded by public funds through the Housing Executive. There is a growing risk of refugee and migrant destitution in the city. A recent submission by the Equality Commission of NI pointed out the lack of time to find suitable alternative housing for refugees and asylum seekers.<sup>47</sup>

Finding a suitable home is an important step in rebuilding refugee lives.<sup>48</sup> They seek emotional and social attachment to try to establish a sense of control and autonomy in their new surroundings.<sup>49</sup> The extended use of hotels to accommodate asylum seekers in Belfast has led to institutionalisation of residents, and isolation from the wider communities in which they live. Despite UK policy dictating that hotel stays should be for a maximum of six weeks, some asylum seekers have been in city hotels for over six months. People placed in hotels are deprived of interaction with local neighbours, lack indoor or outdoor communal space or play facilities, and in almost all cases are unable to store food or cook anything.

*'We have been moved a lot...We have been moved into 3 hotels, although I was fighting to provide my daughters and I with a house since we arrived to settle... Me and my 2 daughters in one room in a hotel with other ladies. When we arrived, we stayed at [a remote] Hotel, isolated from the whole world for 3 months without any activities to integrate in the society, without a GP, without school. Without studying English. [...] When we keep saying we need to register at the GPs and enrol our kids at school, we want to live a normal life, they say at the moment we can't. We stayed like that for 3 months, then they moved us, they put me in a room and my 2 daughters in another room. All the time I am worried about them...Once my daughter had harassment from one of the staff.'*  
(Syrian woman, 30s)

Recent evidence links inadequate accommodation and poor food with serious physical and mental health issues experienced by asylum seekers.<sup>50</sup> Without the option to buy or prepare their own meals to suit their needs, asylum seekers are reporting drastic weight loss, anaemia, and psychological impacts.

*'I stayed at the hotel for 7 months...After 5 months I was suffering from health issues, [...] There were food problems, eating times, unsuitable food, it is ok some days but not every day for months, nobody would accept the same food every day for months. [...]*

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<sup>45</sup> Participation and the Practice of Rights (PPR) (2022) FOI Requests Reveal Huge Increase in the Use of Hotel Accommodation for Asylum Seekers and their Families. Available at:

<https://www.nlb.ie/investigations/FOI/2022-04-foi-requests-reveal-huge-increase-in-the-use-of-hotel-accommodation-for-asylum-seekers-and-their-families>; Winters, R. (2022) Major rise in hotel use for asylum-seekers: It feels like we are in a prison . The Detail. Available at:

<https://thedetail.tv/articles/major-rise-in-hotel-use-for-asylum-seekers-it-feels-like-we-are-in-a-prison>

<sup>46</sup> Murphy, F. and Vieten U. (2017) Asylum seekers and refugees' experiences of Life in Northern Ireland.

<sup>47</sup> Equality Commission (2021) Submission to the Inquiry by the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee into the experiences of minority ethnic and migrant people in Northern Ireland.

<https://www.equalityni.org/ECNI/media/ECNI/Consultation%20Responses/2021/NIACInquiry-ExpMinorityEthMigrantsInNI.pdf>

<sup>48</sup> Murphy, F and Vieten, U. (2017). Asylum Seekers and Refugees' experiences of Life in Northern Ireland.

<sup>49</sup> Boccagni, P. (2017). Migration and the Search for Home: Mapping Domestic Space in Migrants' Everyday Lives. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

<sup>50</sup> Edwards, R. (2022) Doctors fear for refugees' health because of 'dire' accommodation programme in Northern Ireland. Independent.ie. July 24th, 2022.

*The hotel was full of families and children, noise day and night. Noise from the streets as well. [...] I couldn't eat, I couldn't sleep, I had no power to move, I totally collapsed. My doctor followed my case, and I provided them with medical reports, and they told me they will move me to another hotel for single women. Then they moved me to a hotel with families. [...] It feels like you're in jail.'* (Syrian woman, asylum seeker, 30s)

Unlike asylum seekers, refugees arriving in Northern Ireland through a resettlement scheme are provided with accommodation by the Housing Executive. Amongst resettlement refugees in this study, noise and overcrowding were the main issues. There are also issues with quality of accommodation available in the private rental sector.

A refugee family moved between several accommodations too small for their family spent months with only 2 rooms. They were then moved to a house where the bathroom leaked into the kitchen and there were open walls with exposed electrical cords. During their stay in the house, the landlord demanded that they remain out of the house each day until 5pm due to ongoing redecoration work. On complaint, they were given 24 hours to move out. Because of this they were put in temporary accommodation again, initially for a month. They remain there 18 months later.

This is highly unsettling for people who have experienced trauma from war and are trying to rebuild their lives in Belfast. Frequent moving only exacerbates feelings of being in limbo, with no real anchor points in the city, and may have negative consequences on refugees' mental health.

#### Private rental accommodation

Mobility and quality of housing are common problems faced by people born outside Northern Ireland in this study. Those who live in privately rented accommodation find it hard to move into preferred areas of the city, especially with rising rent prices. Moving to a new neighbourhood is most often connected with a desire for safety, quality of facilities or schools, and opportunities to be part of a local community. It is less likely to be connected with a desire to live with a particular ethnic group.

Discrimination in the rental market affects a wide range of minority ethnic and migrant groups. Black renters feel particularly discriminated against, although pressures in the rental market allows discrimination against other groups too. A Polish participant told us:

*'Nowadays you have so much competition. You have about 10 other people looking at the house, and the landlord is meant to choose whom they prefer. It's very difficult for people who are not originally from here.'*

Minority ethnic and migrant renters are also more likely to struggle with finding a guarantor for a rental contract, which is an increasingly common feature of rental in the city.

*'Sometimes it is not easy to rent accommodation through estate agents as they require a guarantor.'* (Chinese woman, 30's)

Refugees shared similar experiences to other ethnic minorities and migrants in accessing private rental accommodation, such as high rent, and difficulties in securing a deposit and finding a guarantor.

Discrimination in the housing market is also driving ethnic minorities and migrants into precarious living arrangements. Participants report applying to view as many as 40 houses while only having the opportunity to view a fraction of those they applied to see.



*'This is really a struggle so far - there's maybe one agency that seems to be able to accommodate us. Many of the other agencies we try, they just tell us the property's gone already. Sometimes you'll be the first person to see the property and express interest, and they still tell you the property is gone.'* (Black British man, 50s)

These issues apply as much to long-term residents working full-time and well-established with social connections in the community as they do to more recent newcomers. A Lebanese participant described how their family has been forced into an informal rental agreement with no tenancy protections due to the barriers they encountered in securing accommodation.

### Social housing

The main concern of migrants and minority ethnic groups in social housing is overcrowding. This is mostly due to a high pressure on social housing and long waiting lists.<sup>51</sup> Overcrowded accommodation can be detrimental to families, causing negative effects on their wellbeing, physical health, and education.

There are also reported issues with accessing or moving within social housing due to the low housing stock available. Applicants in social housing who apply to move can wait years, and this was an experience well known to participants in this study.

*'I have been living in this house for over 10 years and I contacted the Housing Executive over 10 years ago to apply for a better house, but no result.'* (Chinese woman, 50s)

### The impact of poor housing on health

Most participants, across all ethnic groups, felt that whenever they have a concern about issues in their housing it is only partly resolved or not at all. This response was consistent across private rented accommodation and social housing. Nearly two-thirds (65%) of participants had contacted their housing provider due to issues in the accommodation, but only 24% reported any positive outcome. Participants from a wide variety of ethnic and national backgrounds highlighted the reluctance of landlords and the Housing Executive to deal with the issues promptly, such as access to heat or hot water, damp, mould, or infestations.

Damp and mould are a persistent issue in private rented accommodation. An Indian woman in her 20s told us that everyone at her flat suffers from upper respiratory problems due to severe dampness. A Sudanese family reported that the social housing they were provided had severe mould causing significant health problems to their asthmatic son.

Polish and Chinese participants reported repeated negative experiences with multiple landlords not willing to carry out repairs in reasonable timeframes. These were particularly of concern where they left families without heat for weeks in winter.

*'The house we are in now, there have been problems with the gas boiler. Each time I phone them, they say they'll come ... they don't turn up.'* (Chinese man, 23)

*'I have rented in a few different places, and I have had very negative experiences in regard to landlords not being willing to carry out repairs. Recently we had a problem*

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<sup>51</sup> Overcrowding is defined under Section 325 of the Housing Act (1985) as wherever there are so many people in a house that any two or more of those persons, being ten or more years old, and of opposite sexes, not being persons living together as husband and wife, must sleep in the same room.

*with our electric boiler and the hot water, and we had to wait five weeks for the repair.'*  
(Polish man, 40s)

Travellers reported similar experiences with housing associations' responses.

*'When I report any problems, they keep saying they will put it down as an emergency but still a week later it is not fixed. This has happened on more than one occasion, and we are not the only family with this experience.'* (Traveller woman, 20s)

The impact of current housing quality on health and wellbeing is a concern shared by many of the participants in this study, regardless of nationality or ethnicity.

## Neighbourhood

More than 80% of participants are happy with the neighbourhood they live in. It is likely that the sociability and openness of a neighbourhood is crucial to people's homemaking in the city. Mundane interactions and encounters with neighbours can play a vital role in people's sense of belonging.

*'Very excellent, people here are so friendly and kind...they are very optimistic and I feel that they are helpful with each other...when I told my friends that they going to move me to this area, they said it is the best place in the north and the people are so peaceful and have no racism troubles...and really that I noticed...everyone talks to you and welcomes you and smiles at you and even they start not you.'* (Yemeni man, 50s)

There are incidents of racial abuse which are experienced regularly, but those who experience them in this study tended to distinguish between the perpetrators of the abuse and the more general experience of the neighbourhood. People who had negative experiences with their neighbourhood mainly connected this with anti-social behaviour. A north Belfast resident told us:

*'Our neighbourhood is very clean, the streets, the houses, this area is very good, but my problem is that I am in a flat...if I have house, will be my own house my own entrance... I will be comfortable physically especially if it has a small back yard, I won't feel worry about my kids, my wife...is different from a flat...for example, my above neighbour keep make noises, shouting late night, my small children wakes up terrified.'*  
(Syrian man, 20s)

Anti-social behaviour associated with student areas presents particular challenges for migrant and minority ethnic groups resident there. A Pakistani woman in her 40s, who used to live in Botanic complained about garbage lying in the streets. Roma women from the Holyland of south Belfast described being subjected to racial abuse by drunk students.

*'I think this area, and all people agree, it's not suitable for families or people who work because it's area of students and always there is lots of issues. The minimum one is waking every night at two or three because of loudly voices without any reason.'* (Iraqi woman, 40)

Sectarian divisions in the neighbourhoods in which they reside deeply affects experiences of life in specific areas of Belfast. People living in the city become aware of sectarian views of different areas around the city, and this influences ethnic minorities' and migrants' decisions for where they live. Some are reticent to explore the city because of what they have been told, and this restricts residential mobility as well as use of shared facilities and spaces and participation in community groups. A Polish woman was warned by friends not to move to a particular

neighbourhood, but decided to move anyway. She proudly reported to us how welcoming her neighbours had been. They shared a cake on the day she moved in and developed a friendly relationship. Other participants in the research were more cautious, investigating neighbourhoods carefully and seeking extensive advice from others in their community as well as from media and other sources.

*'There's a very traditional culture in divided society divided. So, I talk about troublesome Protestants and Catholics. So, because I am not going to live in those areas I believe, you know, I have moved into areas where I know I will be fine. And it's quite respectable area.'* (Czech woman, 40s)

Most participants felt comfortable within areas which appear very multicultural, as visible diversity suggests that sectarianism is not a driving force in these areas. There is a greater sense of shared ownership and belonging in the neighbourhood.

*'My neighbourhood is nice... this street we are living in, all are so friendly, there different nationalities... British, Irish, Somalian, African, Romanian, Sudanese, very beautiful mix, quiet neighbourhood, each one respect other neighbours, no problems.. nothing is wrong with it.'* (Syrian woman, 30s)

Some participants chose to live in diverse neighbourhoods to improve their sense of belonging as they 'feel accepted in their otherness'. This potentially makes diverse neighbourhoods appealing for those who are more easily recognised as non-local. Participants that had moved into areas with sectarian views were more likely to report feelings of uneasiness. This is discussed further in the section on safety.

## Health and Wellbeing

Good health enables people to socialise and sustain relationships, find and go to work, and participate in education and civic life.<sup>52</sup> A public health approach for equality should include prevention (reducing causes of illness and encouraging healthier lifestyles), protection (surveillance and monitoring of infectious disease, emergency responses, and immunisation), and promotion (health education and commissioning services to meet specific health needs).<sup>53</sup>

Equality in the area of health mainly concerns equity of access to health and social services and responsiveness of such services, but we also look at the wider determinants of health. These are also known as social determinants, and include social, economic, and environmental factors which impact on health.<sup>54</sup> The variations in experiences of wider determinants (i.e., social inequalities) are considered the fundamental cause of health outcomes, and as such health inequalities are likely to persist so long as social inequalities persist. The Belfast Healthy Cities Strategy recognises that inequalities are strongly embedded in the social determinants of health.<sup>55</sup> Differences in access to good quality food, housing, education, health services, employment, and transport all perpetuate social inequalities in health. These inequalities are

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<sup>52</sup> Ndofor-Tah et al (2019) Home Office Indicators of Integration framework 2019, p. 34

<sup>53</sup> World Health Organisation (WHO) (2011) Glossary of globalization, trade and health terms. Geneva, WHO. Pg 9. Available at: [https://www.euro.who.int/\\_\\_data/assets/pdf\\_file/0007/152683/e95877.pdf](https://www.euro.who.int/__data/assets/pdf_file/0007/152683/e95877.pdf)

<sup>54</sup> Office for Health Improvement and Disparities (2022) Wider Determinants of Health. Available at: <https://fingertips.phe.org.uk/profile/wider-determinants>

<sup>55</sup> Belfast Healthy Cities (2022) Belfast - 25 Years as a WHO Healthy City. Available at: <https://www.belfasthealthycities.com/belfast-25-years-who-healthy-city>

cumulative and intersectional, including factors of sex, race, disability, age, religion, sexual orientation, and gender identity.

Indicators of integration in health include registration with services such as a General Practitioner (GP) and dentist and access to prevention services and specialised services (such as antenatal care, mental health services, support for domestic abuse victims and victims of trauma), as well as how many have access to interpretation or translation services during medical appointments.

Issues impacting ethnic minorities' health identified in the city previously include lack of awareness or appropriate information of the services available; low levels of registration with GPs (especially among those without a permanent address); fears about entitlements to health care; lack of confidence or understanding of accessing the healthcare system; institutional racism, including the negative attitudes of some healthcare staff; and immigration restrictions on healthcare.<sup>56</sup>

In the current study, the key issues arising in the area of health concern language barriers, difficulties in registering with dentists, timely access to GP and other health services, and need for increased access to mental health supports, including with cultural and language translation.

### GP services

Most participants rate GP services in the city as good or very good, but a significant number of participants have had difficulties accessing GP services and communicating with healthcare staff. A quarter (25%) of participants rated GP services poor or very poor due to the difficulties experienced.

*"I tried to register many times and they refused me all the time, they used to ask for one thing and when I provided what they requested, they asked for something else. Always rushed, barely paying attention to me, they did not care that I had a small child. A friend sent me to a community worker, and they helped me to register with a GP, but after they accepted me, it was very difficult to get an appointment. It takes too long to be seen by a doctor. It is also very difficult to communicate with the receptionist. I can tell by their expression that they don't like me, but this is life." (Roma woman, 20s)*

Common access problems have been exacerbated since the start of the Covid-19 pandemic. Language presents a formidable barrier to patients navigating the triage and call-back system in place in GP practices where they are required to explain health problems to a receptionist without interpreter assistance. This presents a serious challenge for individuals with poor English, and even those with good levels of proficiency say they often lack the specialist vocabulary to communicate their needs. This can leave them without medical support for prolonged periods.

*'It's very difficult to see the GP or semi-impossible. There are medical cases or symptoms you cannot tell or describe by phone even if you know the language, you need to be examined by the doctor. And sometimes you are sick for a month or two without seeing anyone.'* (Syrian man, 50s)

*"They don't really give interpreters and if they do, it's on the phone and we can't really understand each other. But first they ask you if you have someone in your family that could help and only after they give you an interpreter." (Roma woman, 20s)*

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<sup>56</sup> Belfast Health Development Unit (2010): Barriers to Health - Migrant Health and Well-being in Belfast, Pg 31.

When patients do get in-person appointments with a GP, the appointments are often too short to discuss the multiple health issues that have accumulated during one visit, even before considering the time needed for interpretation services. This adds to the frustrations experienced by people trying to seek support as they must then attempt to make another appointment.

Participants who can access interpreting services are generally satisfied. 75% of those needing language support had an interpreter for GP and hospital appointments. The introduction of phone interpreters has increased availability slightly, but the use of face-to-face interpreters has decreased significantly for participants, and they report some problems with the clarity of information interpreted.

*'They do not give us translators at our appointments, only on the phone and we can't really understand each other on the phone. There are some translators who do not translate what we say, so it would be better in person. [...] It would be better if the translator was there in person, this way we could tell if they translate everything...because I always end up getting paracetamol no matter what I say.'* (Roma woman, 30s)

### Dental services

Dental practices received somewhat positive ratings.

The most prominent complaint in dental services is the difficulty registering with a dentist. It is common for participants to mention the long waiting times to see a dentist, as dental practices are still dealing with a backlog of cases from the beginning of the Covid-19 pandemic. Just under half (48%) rated dental services above average, 17% rated it as 'average', and 16% rated the dentist services 'below average'. However, 16% of participants were not registered with a dentist at all, mostly due to the difficulty in finding a dental service which accepts new patients.

*'It's very, very hard to get access or register to a dentist. To find a dentist near where I live, it was a nightmare. It's not enough space in them. The other thing is, I needed medical attention from my dentist, and I think that they put me on a waiting list for a long time. And after that I discovered I wasn't even in the list.'* (Sudanese woman, 40s)

### Hospital services

While a significant proportion of participants (58%) rated hospital services above average, 1 in 5 (20%) of participants rated hospital services 'below average'. Poor experiences of hospital services are reasonably common. Participants who cannot access a GP service in a timely way (usually within months) generally attend A&E when they feel that their health issue is becoming more acute, or when the GP service has not resolved the issue.

The most prominent complaint shared was around the waiting times. This was particularly frustrating for participants if they were attending A&E because they could not get an appointment with their GP. Once seen however they were mostly satisfied with their care in hospital. Timely and responsive GP care is key.

*'If I went to the hospital through the GP is ok, I will get all care. But if I go by myself, I will take my blanket, pillow, and some picnic as if am going for a trip because I would stay from the morning till night-time. I understand sometimes it is crowded but seriously, most of the time I don't find it crowded. I swear to God. But still, it takes ages to wait.'* (Black Sudanese man, 30s)

Participants were generally happy with the services they get from pharmacies. 80% rated pharmacy services above average. Participants offered praise of their services for being very efficient and helpful. Many participants found the pharmacy collection service as well as an option to obtain emergency medications very useful. A few participants offered accounts of pharmacists going the extra mile to help them, both during and since the pandemic lockdown.

*'There was one occasion when I was unable to collect the medication and the woman in the pharmacy offered to drive and deliver the medication to my house in her own car. I simply couldn't personally collect them during business hours and the woman who worked there personally offered to deliver them to me. (Polish man, in his 40s)*

## Mental health

Access to mental health support, including medication and counselling, is important to aiding the integration of migrants as individuals dealing with mental health conditions are more likely to withdraw and isolate themselves. Although there is a common perception that minority ethnic groups experience more stigma in this area and are less likely to discuss mental health issues with each other, the clear need for supports in this area made it common topic of discussion in this study across all groups.

Participants commonly shared their experiences of the difficulties they faced in accessing mental health support. Not being registered with a GP has pushed some participants to rely on A&E services to access medication for acute mental health problems. This is not an effective alternative since it does not connect patients to continuing services such as counselling.

*'We went once to the doctor regarding tests for my daughters and now, since 5 months ago, my daughters need to see a doctor urgently, especially my eldest one. So far she has not seen any counselling, she has been traumatised a lot.'* (Syrian woman, 30s)

There are additionally difficulties with language support in mental health services. It is uncommon for therapists or counselling services to be available in languages other than English. Interpreters could potentially be encouraged into this role. There is also demand for culturally-adapted and trauma-sensitive services in mental health. Previously, research with Black-African migrants and refugees found low uptake of mental health services.<sup>57</sup> However, this study found clearly unmet needs and demand for mental health services amongst Black-African migrants and refugees as well as people from other ethnic and national groups. Although raised in the focus groups as an area of concern, the issue of mental health, well-being and how they are addressed was not the concern of the respondents. Rather the focus of the discussion was placed on their causalities; unemployment, financial hardship and separation from family.

The stress of moving to a new country away from family and the familiar can be stressful for all migrants. The impact of separation anxiety and pressures of resettlement in the new country can increase the risk of developing mental health conditions.<sup>58</sup> This is especially true for refugees, who are considered at high risk of developing mental health conditions because of trauma from exposure to war and conflict. Conditions such as anxiety disorder, post-traumatic stress disorder, and depression are higher among refugee populations in comparison to the general population. Refugee children are arguably the most susceptible to mental health issues following

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<sup>57</sup> Institute of Conflict Research (2012): The Horn of Africa Community in Belfast - A Needs Assessment, Pg 22; The Equality Commission for Northern Ireland (2021) Written evidence submitted by Equality Commission for Northern Ireland (MEM0017). Available at: <https://committees.parliament.uk/writtenevidence/36848/pdf/>

<sup>58</sup> Hameed, S., Sadiq, A., & Din, A. U. (2018). The Increased Vulnerability of Refugee Population to Mental Health Disorders. *Kansas journal of medicine*, 11(1), 1–12.

resettlement, including emotional and behavioural issues.<sup>59</sup> In Belfast before Covid-19, 79% of asylum seekers stated they experienced anxiety, depression, or isolation, with 77% claiming their mental health had become worse since seeking asylum in the UK. This is significantly higher than the 20% in the general population of Northern Ireland who reported mental health issues.<sup>60</sup> The pandemic has likely increased the rate of mental health issues as a consequence of isolation and stress, and has had clear impact on the participants in this study who have unmet requests for mental health supports.

### Knowledge of health issues affecting minority ethnic groups

Some health issues faced certain ethnic groups more than others. Black and South Asian minority ethnic groups reported difficulties with getting proper diagnosis and treatment for skin problems. Participants affected by this said that they felt doctors here were simply not trained to diagnose conditions on various skin types.

*'There is something which is quite common with Black African, Caribbean. ... I think they need some more training... I don't blame them. If they can do it, then they will do it. (Nigerian man, 30s)*

Black and South Asian people are also more prone to diabetes, and it was raised in interviews that preventative measures could be introduced to help these communities.

*'In terms of things like diabetes or other sorts of diseases that might affect Black people more, or diets that Black people might have, you know... understanding those sorts of things more ... and give those sorts of information to people from ethnic minority communities early.' (Jamaican man, 40s)*

It is not uncommon for people in Belfast to return to their country of origin for proper diagnosis of some conditions, believing it faster and cheaper for certain medical services, but this is only possible if they have a good income and are not restricted by caring commitments.

### Physical Activity and Wellbeing

Physical activity is an important factor in people's wellbeing, exercise being essential to maintaining physical and mental health. Exercise also facilitates opportunities for building social connections in shared spaces, such as leisure centres and gyms. Ease of access to spaces for physical activity is therefore considered an indicator of quality of life.

Most (91%) of the participants had access to outdoor space for exercise. The vast majority (92%) enjoyed regular exercise, most commonly walking in parks or other green areas. Other activities mentioned included jogging, cycling, gym sessions, and swimming. Walking outdoors reportedly became more common during the lockdown when people couldn't attend leisure centres or gyms.

*'When it was a lockdown in 2020, I used to go to Botanic gardens, and I had a good experience.' (Somalian woman, 20s)*

Participants reported choosing outdoor facilities based on safety, and some chose to use outdoor spaces in other parts of the city for the sense of security.

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<sup>59</sup> Murphy, F., & Vieten, U. (2022). Asylum seekers and refugees in Northern Ireland: The impact of post-migration stressors on mental health. *Irish Journal of Psychological Medicine*, 39(2), 163-172. doi:10.1017/ipm.2020.102

<sup>60</sup> Housing 4 All (2019) A Prison without Walls: Asylum, Migration, and Human Rights. Belfast: Participation and the Practice of Rights (PPR) Available at: [https://issuu.com/ppr-org/docs/h4all\\_report\\_june\\_2019\\_final\\_17.06./s/113185](https://issuu.com/ppr-org/docs/h4all_report_june_2019_final_17.06./s/113185)

*'I am afraid to go for a walk or to spend too much time outside. In the area where I live, people don't really like immigrants and I prefer to spend most time indoors with my child. Sometimes we will go to the park with friends but not often because they live far up the Falls Road.'* (Romanian Roma woman, 20s)

Just under half of participants (45%) made regular use of local leisure and community centres for physical activity. Participants used sports facilities for their own participation in badminton, volleyball, and football, as well as visiting them with their children's activities. Indoor spaces also offer a greater sense of security and shelter from the weather. Women-only spaces were important to a wide range of participants for building and maintaining social connections. Muslim women participants particularly expressed interest in making use of leisure centres and gyms but did not feel comfortable doing so without a women-only section or time.

Sports facilities also offer a space for socialising. Sport can offer an opportunity for connections in the community to support integration. This is supported by the fact there are multiple national football teams across the city made up of ethnic groups such as the Romanian or Zimbabwean teams.

### Optimism and wellbeing

A sense of optimism about the future is a strong indicator of wellbeing. Optimism is not a reflection of equality, good services, or inclusion. Instead, it shows the extent to which a person believes their problems can be solved, and they are willing to play an active role in solving them. People who are optimistic are more likely to seek engagement with services, look for new opportunities, live a healthier lifestyle and care about connections with the community around them. An optimistic population is a strong asset when planning interventions to address inequalities because it improves the likelihood of engagement and success of those interventions. Interventions are lower cost and more likely to have long-term impact. Declining optimism is a sign that key opportunities have been missed, and interventions are more urgent, but also more complex and costly.

Most participants (74%) reported a high rate of optimism about future wellbeing in Belfast. Some reasons offered included feeling safe in their neighbourhood, having connections, or their children being settled, and these are all established indicators of integration. In other words, integration makes people more optimistic, and more positive about their capacity to solve the problems in their lives.

*'I have been living here for 11 years in NI. I have a 10-year-old son, he was born here. Thank God he is doing really well in school. He adores his life here. I think my English is now good enough to get another type of job.'* (Hungarian woman, 30s)

*'Belfast is beautiful, I have visited other cities like London, Birmingham. I noticed that Belfast is quiet and not crowded like other cities, it is safer and the society is pure, very friendly people.'* (Yemeni man, 30s)

Diversity is also be a factor in determining how minority ethnic and migrant residents feel about life in the city. Diversity added to participants' sense of belonging and security in an area, and parents like diversity in their children's schools. As a minority resident, the opportunity to participate in diverse spaces, in the neighbourhood, in work and in public spaces, is important.

*'I think Belfast is a wonderful city, and it's actually, you know, a good place to live and work in many respects...[but] it doesn't have the level of diversity that I like. I'd love for my children to be in an environment where that's not the case for them, that they're in an environment that is truly diverse. And that they're also in an environment where the*



*top of respective career ladders, or different career pursuits, there are people that also look like them, you know. So they could go to Queen's [University] and see Black professors or go to different places of work, and see Black people at the very highest levels in those places.'* (Nigerian man, 30s)

Just over 6% of participants rated their optimism about being Belfast as low or very low. Those reporting this low level of optimism shared that it was because of the specific combination of difficulties they were facing. These participants were more likely to have experienced disappointing or dismissive responses from public services, and many of these experiences were connected to being migrants. The most influential factors were racial harassment, poor quality health and access to mental health services, housing issues, poverty and unemployment.

Asylum seekers living in hotels were least likely to be optimistic.

*'I don't feel optimistic. We have been moved a lot. When we arrived, we stayed in a hotel for 6 months. They have moved us to three hotels, although I was fighting to provide me and my daughters with a house since we arrived to settle and register my 2 daughters in schools. After many complaints and our tragic situation for my son, my daughter's health deteriorated, and all the health sectors aware of that. But they moved us in to the third hotel. Me and my 2 daughters in one room in a hotel, with Eritrean ladies.'* (Syrian woman, 30s)

Community connections are a strong predictor of optimism amongst asylum seekers and refugees in this study. Asylum seekers at Whiterock Community Centre described it as one of the only places that they felt accepted and where it was safe to talk about the challenges they faced. English classes provided at the Centre allowed for opportunities for connection, advice, mutual support and importantly, the development of a positive vision of their future in Belfast to counter the racism they experienced elsewhere, and they described it as directly increasing their optimism about life in Belfast.

## Employment

The Indicators of Integration framework describes employment as “a mechanism for income generation and economic independence and possibly advancement; as such, it is a key factor supporting integration”.<sup>61</sup> Employment facilitates income, social status, and connection with others in society. Work can also offer newcomers social status and connection with others, as well as opportunities to improve language and acquire local knowledge.

### Barriers to employment

The main barriers for migrants in getting a job in Northern Ireland include difficulties in accessing information on supports, language barriers, digital access, barriers to accessing childcare, poor transport options (often connected to night work or manual work locations), and cultural differences.<sup>62</sup>

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<sup>61</sup> Ndofor-Tah et al (2019) Home Office Indicators of Integration framework 2019, Pg 28

<sup>62</sup> Employers For Childcare (16 June 2021) Written evidence submitted by Employer For Childcare: The experience of minority ethnic and migrant people in Northern Ireland (MEM0010). Available at: <https://committees.parliament.uk/writtenevidence/36440/pdf/>

Issues with accessing employment start for migrants before they apply for jobs. Language was a prominent barrier to employment as people who don't speak fluent English find it significantly more difficult to get employment appropriate for their qualifications. There can also be challenges adapting to a different work culture. Polish focus group participants mentioned that how they present in interviews can be a barrier to employment because of styles of professional etiquette differing between countries.

Practical skills in the job application process, including CV writing and interviews, as well as understanding of the process, varies considerably between countries. A lack of knowledge of local professional etiquette may also impact people's integration in their working environment. There is a need to ensure these are flagged to migrants in the labour market and support made available easily to them.

The main barrier to employment affecting women across all ethnic groups was childcare. Migrant and minority ethnic women find it challenging to balance childcare with employment, and with no extended family support available they must consider paid childcare, which for many is not an affordable option.

*'It's like food culture in India. We will feed our children food. So, this is another reason, and some men don't want to send them [to work]. That's why they are not even trying to go for jobs. Some jobs are available. But those are full time. Here relatives or grandparents can look after women's children. Indian women don't have this support. Some of the ladies come back from work and collect their children and drop them off to some other places and go back to work. That's really hard. They're finding it very difficult.'* (Indian woman, 20s)

Taking up employment is particularly challenging for women from strong patriarchal societies where it is believed that a woman's place is in the home. This may lead to a negative impact on women's mental health, as described by women from the Roma focus group who shared experiencing impacts on their wellbeing from staying at home with their children. Roma women wanting to work said they had benefited from living in closely knit communities, as they can support each other with childcare.

The final barrier that was explored among our participants was discrimination. Migrants and ethnic minorities face discrimination in the recruitment process, but discrimination is also evident in job insecurity. A Polish woman in her 30s complained that it took her over 10 years to get an agency contract that would be appropriate to the level of her qualifications gained in Belfast. However, based on participant responses it seems Irish Travellers experience the most systemic discrimination in seeking employment.

*'Settled people's attitudes are outdated towards Travellers, especially in employment. I believe this is partly why Travellers don't fully go through education, because they believe they would not get employment or apprenticeships or placements anyway, so it's a case of what's the point.'* (Irish Traveller man, 44)

Additionally, participants reported high levels of workplace discrimination in white collar jobs, and a lack of knowledge about how to get support or seek redress. One women's community organisation regularly provides personal support to their members on how to take legal action on racial discrimination because the experience is so common and awareness of workplace rights low.

*'I have a degree and 10 years of experience working in India. But when I moved with my husband, he came with a job, and I had to leave my job back in India. I couldn't get any job when I arrived because I had no experience in the UK and employers were hesitant to*

*hire me. I went and obtained a qualification in [another career] to get a better job. But there is so little diversity in Ireland. People are hesitant to employ anyone who is not from here. It did affect my career growth; I was at senior level in India. I had to come back to the same level in the UK. I lost several years of a career because I had to get to the same level here.'* (Indian woman, 30s)

## Quality of work

In the UK, migrants are over-represented in the hospitality sector (28% of the workforce), the transport and storage sector (26%), and the information communication and technology sector (25%).<sup>63</sup> Around half of all highly educated workers from EU member states are in low and medium-low skilled jobs in 2020. Recognition of qualifications is a key barrier for migrants from EU and non-EU countries, although sectors which recruit internationally are more likely to address this problem. Workers born in India or major EU countries (Germany, France, Spain) are more likely to be in high-skilled occupations than those born in the UK (often recruited directly from overseas), while those born in new EU member states (Romania, Bulgaria, Croatia) were more likely to be in occupations classified as low-skilled. It is at the lower paid end of the scale, and in sectors which tend to have high turnover of staff, where migrants can find themselves caught in non-progression. Rapid entry into paid work can provide greater immediate security but can also trap migrants in low paid work unless there are opportunities to learn languages or further skills and gain recognised qualifications. Foreign-born workers are more likely to work during night shifts and in non-permanent jobs than the UK born.

In this study of Belfast, 21% of our participants were in jobs below their level of qualifications. A third of these had difficulties with having overseas qualifications recognised. This contributed to participants entering employment below their level of skill.

*'Being here is very different. Because in my country I was getting a degree and now my peers are in very high ranks, in the banking sector, financial sector, the civil services, all of them in Sudan. Now, there's no comparison between me and them. When I reflect on this sometimes, I would say I have wasted my time, I've wasted my skills. But at the same time... I have to take into account my circumstances at that time.'* (Sudanese man, 40s)

This has meant retraining or changing sectors, but also taking up jobs which offer no route back to their anticipated careers. A Pakistani professional woman told us:

*'It is not possible to get a job [in my professional field] when you land here, so it's also another thing is like here to get a job in UK like even when you start to like, for example even KFC and McDonald's you can't get the job immediately. First you have to go to like Deli restaurants like the restaurants run by Indians and Pakistanis or Bangladeshis. You go there, you get some experience and after that you might get into McDonald's or KFC.'*

Participants in this study from Eastern Europe were more likely to be in jobs that were below the level of their formal qualifications when compared to other groups. Many East Europeans were blue-collar workers, cleaners, kitchen assistants, factory operatives, meat processors, etc. They often work under poor conditions, including without protective equipment where needed. As a result, a significant number of migrants suffer work related injuries and chronic conditions such

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<sup>63</sup> Fernández-Reino, M. & Rienzo, C. (2022) Migrants in the UK Labour Market: An Overview. Migration Observatory Briefing. Available at: <https://migrationobservatory.ox.ac.uk/resources/briefings/migrants-in-the-uk-labour-market-an-overview/>

as pneumonia. It is much discussed that workers experienced life-threatening injuries at factories outside the Belfast area, and some of these are resident in Belfast.

African and Afro-Caribbean participants in the labour market in Belfast are well represented in medium to highly skilled work in medicine, management, and IT. This was not the case for African asylum seekers and refugees. Chinese participants, most often working in hospitality, related their experiences of working long hours and the impact of this on their health and family life.

Nearly a third of participants (30%) told us they had better jobs in their country of origin but decided to give this up for a better standard of living and quality of life.

### Unemployment and exploitation

In this study, asylum seekers were less likely to be employed than other migrant groups. This is in part due to strict immigration rules limiting their options, as asylum seekers are typically not permitted to work until granted Refugee Status. The Home Office may grant permission to work to asylum seekers if their claim has been outstanding for more than 12 months through no fault of their own. Asylum seekers are particularly frustrated by their exclusion from work, leaving their valuable skills and qualifications unutilised.<sup>64</sup>

In 2020, asylum seekers in the UK were 14 percentage points less likely to be in employment than the overall population.<sup>65</sup> Refugees in the UK are less likely to be employed and earn less than natives or other migrants, and even when they are employed, they have lower earnings on average than other groups. In this study, 33% of participants were unemployed at the time of interview. The most common group to be unemployed were Roma, followed by Eastern Europeans (Polish, Romanian, and Hungarian) and Africans (Sudanese, Nigerian, and Zimbabwean).

This is consistent with a 2019 House of Commons Committee report that found that Roma and Irish Travellers had the worst outcomes of any ethnic groups in seeking employment, including being paid below the National Living Wage.<sup>66</sup> Exploitation of the Roma and Traveller communities is a serious systemic problem in the UK and Ireland. Working Irish Travellers in our research were employed in blue collar jobs, and Roma were mostly employed at meat processing factories and carwashes.

Although Romanian Roma hold EU passports, many do not have National Insurance numbers. Roma participants complained about their exploitation by employers, including long shifts and not being paid for overtime. The introduction of the European Settlement Status (EUSS) might have supported the rights of the Roma community. However, some have had difficulties demonstrating a history of employment or residence to the Home Office, and as a result they haven't applied for settlement status, leaving them at risk of exploitation. Others have not understood the implications of new border policies on their mobility and residence rights.

Barriers to employment for prolonged periods can drive people to seek informal work, increasing their risk of exploitation and abuse. Some participants have accepted exploitative labour as a

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<sup>64</sup> Housing 4 All (2019) A Prison without Walls: Asylum, Migration, and Human Rights. Belfast: Participation and the Practice of Rights (PPR) Available at: [https://issuu.com/ppr-org/docs/h4all\\_report\\_june\\_2019\\_final\\_17.06./s/113185](https://issuu.com/ppr-org/docs/h4all_report_june_2019_final_17.06./s/113185)

<sup>65</sup> Ruiz, I., & Vargas-Silva, C. (2018) Differences in labour market outcomes between natives, refugees and other migrants in the UK, *Journal of Economic Geography*, volume 18, Issue 4, pp 855–885. Available online

<sup>66</sup> House of Commons Women and Equalities Committee (2019) Tackling inequalities faced by Gypsy, Roma and Traveller communities. Seventh Report of Session 2017–19. Westminster: House of Commons.

necessary step in their upward market mobility.<sup>67</sup> Additionally, such labour conditions may still be attractive to people as they offer opportunities to learn and obtain experience, which will contribute to their future upward mobility.

### Training and development

It was common for participants to express an interest in their own development. The main skills that participants wanted to develop were mainly their English language and IT skills, but there was also a keen interest in business skills. A small number of participants decided to make a career change while pursuing work in Belfast. One participant even reported that universal credit staff supported them in finding relevant work to their new field of interest, including training.

*'When I thought to apply for this position, while I was searching, the Universal Credit used to help me, sending me some job opportunities. So, when I told them that I am interested in the social care field...this position was from the ones they sent me for training...People First with Belfast council...they do 2 weeks training then they provide you a job.'* (Sudanese woman, 40s)

Around two-thirds of participants (64%) have never used a back-to-work programme, jobs club or a start-up programme. Many participants indicated they were not even aware that these opportunities existed. Those who did participate in such training were usually self-employed and largely attending the business start-up programmes. Amongst the unemployed and those employed in precarious work<sup>68</sup>, awareness was extremely low.

### Discrimination at work

Employment was one of the most common places that incidents of discrimination were reported by participants, frustration with finding work, workplace bullying, and unfair dismissal were all reported. Discrimination at the workplace can also include the division of labour among the staff, with ethnic minorities and migrants receiving the less desired roles. This was reflected in the experience of a Polish participant who described when they were employed at a shop being told to do the worst menial tasks, such as clearing the garbage disposal, whereas her Irish counterparts were always working on the tills. Women were more likely to experience intersectional discrimination, being both on the basis of gender characteristics and multiplied by ethnic or racial stereotypes.

*'I have been dismissed from my work because I was pregnant. But fair enough. I had a case and won it, so I had a good experience. The response was good, because when I had a complaint, they were taken to court. And the court told me that it's my right to have compensation. They gave me compensation. They gave me the option to go back to work. But I refused, because the environment, it wasn't good for me to go back after that unfair dismissal.'* (Sudanese woman, 40s)

Everyday experiences of racial slurs, exclusion and isolation are also common for some ethnic groups, as well as generally rude and disrespectful behaviour. Examples of verbal abuse were more common from customers or members of the public than staff, however all examples involved the use of derogatory stereotypes and generalisations. Instances include calling people

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<sup>67</sup> Bloch, A., & McKay, S. (2013). Hidden dishes – How food gets on to our plates: Undocumented migrants and the restaurant sector. *Journal of Workplace Rights*, 17(1), 69–91.

<sup>68</sup> Precarious work is a term used to describe non-standard or temporary employment that may be poorly paid, insecure, unprotected, and unable to support a household.

a drain on the state, accusing them of coming here illegally, or being responsible for the pandemic.

*'Yes, about a year ago, there was a customer who came to buy takeaway at my shop. The man said because of you the coronavirus came from China and told me to go back to where I came from.'* (Chinese woman, 30s)

Many of the slurs and insults shared mirror those projected in an increasingly anti-immigration mainstream politics in recent years. Such negative views of minority groups have become commonplace in the media and public discourses surrounding migration.

## Education

Access and progress within the education system is a significant marker of integration because it directly affects individuals' opportunities to find employment and offers opportunities for extended social connection.<sup>69</sup> For migrant children, schools are also important social spaces where children develop their social and cultural capital.<sup>70</sup> Inclusive participation of migrants in education is not only about academic achievement, but connects to a range of issues affecting integration, including identity, and belonging.

### Education for under 18s

Overall, there were 61 participants with children in school. The vast majority reported positive experiences of their children's education in Belfast. Three-quarters (74%) rated their experience 'highly' or 'very highly'. Additional language support for children is satisfactory to the parents we interviewed, and parents generally agree that the school staff are helpful and keen on addressing any concerns they have.

Just over half, however, had some concerns. These concerns revolved around sparse communication from the school to parents, especially around children's experiences of trauma, language barriers, and racism experienced by children at school or in the school community.

Parents with lower literacy in English reported that their language was a barrier for them to engage with the school community, the staff, and other parents. Research recognises the important role that strong positive bonds between homes and schools play in the development and education of children.<sup>71</sup> Parental involvement in school activities has a positive effect on parents, child, and school. A Roma woman told us that she was unable to understand English, and her illiteracy only added to the situation. She could not help their children complete homework, although it was clearly expected of parents.

*'It is very hard when my daughter comes to me to help her with homework, but I find it difficult cause I don't know what to tell her. Sometimes I start crying. She also brought me some award certificate and I don't know how to read that. So, for both me and my husband we don't know how to read and write and it's quite sad.'* (Roma woman, 30s)

The language barrier not only affects parents' ability to communicate with the school or help with homework. Being unable to understand English creates a serious barrier for parents

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<sup>69</sup> Ndofor-Tah et al (2019) Home Office Indicators of Integration framework 2019, Pg 30

<sup>70</sup> Archer, L. (2008). The Impossibility of Minority Ethnic Educational 'Success'? An Examination of the Discourses of Teachers and Pupils in British Secondary Schools. *European Educational Research Journal*. 7. 10.2304/eej.2008.7.1.89.

<sup>71</sup> Sanders, M. G. & Sheldon, S. B. (2009). *Principals matter: A guide to school, family, and community partnerships*. Corwin: A SAGE Company.

understanding the Northern Ireland education system. A Pakistani mother told us that as she was not familiar with the local education system, she was struggling to find information about the local curriculum.

Just 8% of parents in this study said their children had access to a computer or tablet and the internet. This is an important marker of educational support for students, and the recent pandemic emphasised the importance of digital access for improving education and fostering children's inclusion.

Asylum seekers report notable challenges related to financial issues. Amongst this group, 88% of parents reported they could not afford basic items such as food and clothing, along with other child related costs, transport, recreational activities, school trips, and extracurricular activities.

One participant highlighted that refugee children often come to school after having undergone traumatic experiences, and shared concern at the lack of mental health support for these children. This is an important issue to raise, as neurobiological research has found that trauma impacts brain areas associated with cognition, memory, and learning.<sup>72</sup> Their trauma is likely to impact their learning and their ability to develop relationships with their peers. One participant, a refugee, described how the schools' efforts to support their child may be causing problems.

*'We came as refugees recently and our children didn't learn English before we came here. And they are doing their best and working hard to learn faster and faster so he can be able in same line with other. What happened is they give them specific curriculum as daily English exercises but in regard of the other main subjects, it is very neglectful... I always try to request from the school to provide me with information about his studying to follow and observe his studies, but there is no cooperation from the school at all.'* (Yemeni man, 50s)

The education system in Belfast is strongly characterised by ethno-national segregation. Schools are either 'maintained' (largely Catholic) or 'controlled' (largely Protestant), both of which are state-funded schools and differ not only in status, but also in their student base, funding, and curriculum. This includes the content of history and religious education, extracurricular activities including sports, and the political ideologies of the school. From this perspective migrant and minority ethnic groups find themselves navigating foreign institutions they do not automatically fit in. It is important to highlight the impact of this education system. Migrants and ethnic minorities are 'inevitably affected by by-products of educational segregation, such as mono-religious/cultural environments in schools and limited inter-community relationships.'<sup>73</sup>

*'I had three girls in three different schools, and I can see there is three different systems regards education. For my oldest daughter, the education system in her school is poor honestly. But the other daughter, in grammar school, I seen the system in her school was very good. My older daughter failed because of the system of this school, they didn't care too much about the students, especially when they are children from minority backgrounds or have different languages. Not all children had good English. I've seen a lot of families, their children failed in schools because English is the second language...the level of English is lower than any other child in the same class so it's very hard to understand subjects like math, science, or English. My older daughter chose to study double science, but she failed. The system of the schools in Northern Ireland is different between schools, Protestant schools have a specific system different from Catholic schools or integrated schools. I had two girls into different schools, one highly educated and the*

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<sup>72</sup> The National Child Traumatic Stress Network (2022) Effects. Available at: <https://www.nctsn.org/what-is-child-trauma/trauma-types/complex-trauma/effects>

<sup>73</sup> Chiba, Y. (2009). Educational integration in a divided society: lived experiences of settled immigrants in Northern Ireland. *Translocations An Inter-Disciplinary Open Access E-Journal*. Pg 14.

*other very low educated...So, I am for the unity of the system of the all schools. I don't even like the schools to be named by different religions. I am also against schools just for boys or girls. I am for mixed schools.'* (Tunisian woman, 40s)

Racism is a common experience for children inside and outside the school, and it is reinforced by racist attitudes amongst both parents and teachers. A significant proportion of parents describe their children not being invited to others houses. Diversity in the school population reduced the impact of racism on children.

*'I think they include my daughter a lot. And I've also noticed, with my daughter's playgroup there's a lot of mixed, and you have, there's Polish people there, there's Indian kids there is...I mean, it's a very mixed, which I kind of like for my daughter'* (Mixed Race woman, 20s)

It was common for parents in this study to discuss racist experiences in school, whether direct racial slurs or interactions with children which reinforce racial hierarchies. The latter are more likely to be connected to ignorance about racism and its impact on children, based on examples described in this study. Both can impact seriously on children, particularly those who are very young.

One mother described her child being pressured to colour his self-portrait in with a dark brown pencil unlike the other children in his class and the stress it caused her child.

*"He used to be a bright confident boy. They tried to pressure me to move him to a special needs school. When my son complains about bullying, they don't act, they only act when he reacts back. I went to my MLA and the Children's Law Centre, and they could do nothing. Eventually I met with the Principal and they agreed to make him safe at school"* (Yemeni woman, 40s)

Participants of Muslim background were more likely to have concerns about their children's education than other participants. They often reported feeling that teachers were reluctant to accommodate Muslim pupils. It is important to Muslim parents that they can raise their children under their religious practices but feel this causes conflict with the local schools.

*'I have good and bad experience. Normally when you go with your kids, and for example, my daughter, for example, she need to dress and wear a scarf or hijab and wear something longer not short, you know from sometimes they might accommodate that except that the challenges would be for example, that when we have our feast or festivals or Ramadan fasting like that, and you want the children to take a day off and not be considered absent, this might be a challenge. They're not given the holidays; they might miss some of the lessons and get sharp. So, this is still a way to be looked at as well. And also, sometimes if your kids want to pray, where they can pray and so far so. These are some of the hard things.'* (Sudanese man, 50s)

Adding to this, parents reported incidents of bullying, Islamophobic bullying was most prominent.

*'They face bullying every day in school, too much bullying, especially my 11-year-old daughter. She has problems at the school. She is in primary 7, my other daughter is P3 in the same school. She always got bullied a lot, they hit her so hard. She used to wear hijab, but she removed it because of them, now she regrets she removed the hijab. This incident was before she removed the hijab, but they used to always shout and tell her "Poor you, don't have hair! You Baldy! You wear hijab because you have no hair!"'* (Iraqi woman, 40s)



Many young Roma leave school at 15-16, in part due, at both primary and secondary level, to being physically, mentally, and emotionally bullied by their non-Roma peers.<sup>74</sup> This experience of bullying is likely shared by Irish Travellers, as according to the All-Ireland Travellers Health Study (AITHS), Traveller children are absent from school 6-7 times that of the general population or other minority ethnic groups at both primary and post-primary level.<sup>75</sup> Asylum seekers in education face bullying as well.

*'This happened with my daughter, it was a racial act against her, and I spoke with the school about it several times but there was no big response. The story kept repeating, for several times there was a group of girls in the school that kept calling her different bad names, like go home negro, and the school doesn't show big response. Even when she had been exposed to a beating by one of the girls for a week, and she was the victim. And because of that she started to hate the school and doesn't like to go.'* (Tunisian woman, 40s)

*'When I pick my daughter up from school, they don't see me, they don't notice me. They first dismiss other kids, and the Roma kids are the last to go.'* (Roma parent)

Muslim parents also often shared examples of their children being bullied at school because of their hijabs. Teachers were usually ineffective in addressing the bullying. In a few cases, children had to move schools as a result. Changing schools is disruptive and can add barriers to children's integration.

*'My daughter experienced a lot of harassment, bullying by a lot from students in school, in different schools. She had to move from her first school after experiencing discrimination. It was when she wore the hijab, her friends alienated her, and they bothered her so much...Then in the second school the same thing...then we had to move her to the third.'* (Syrian man, 60s)

Bullying is not limited to school either. It is not uncommon for children to be bullied outside school grounds, making it more difficult for teachers to make students accountable. This means that children experience fear and stress as a consequence of bullying on the street.

*'Everything was OK in school, but outside of school it wasn't OK and that's why I dropped out of school. They used to wait for me at the street corner and laugh at me, throw water and juice on me. They told me I was not like them and to stop going to school. My parents contacted the school, but the teachers said there was nothing they could do because the issues were not happening in school.'* (Roma woman, 20s)

More than two-thirds of parents (43%) reported their child had shared a racist experience. It is highly likely that this is more common than reported here, as children will not typically share all experiences of bullying. As a result of bullying and harassment, students feel afraid, threatened, and disconnected from school. Their academic performance may also suffer, and therefore bullying can have long-term impacts.

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<sup>74</sup> Forward South Partnership (FSP) (20 oct 2021) The experiences of minority ethnic and migrant people in Northern Ireland, Written evidence submitted by Forward South Partnership, relating to the experiences of minority ethnic and migrant people in Northern Ireland Inquiry (MEM0031), <https://committees.parliament.uk/writtenevidence/39773/pdf/>

<sup>75</sup> Belfast Health and Social Care Trust (BHST) (Sept 2021) Written evidence submitted by Traveller Intervention Belfast Health and Social Care Trust (MEM0029)

## Language Provision in Schools

Learning and mastering a language during childhood is an important social skill and tool for communication. Language learning for minority ethnic children growing up in an English-speaking country plays an important role in maintaining social networks with people who share their heritage.<sup>76</sup> Community finding and making is always an on-going process, and linguistic behaviour is an important element in that. Languages can function as identity markers and loss of language abilities over several generations can weaken an individual's identification with a particular ethnic group.

Migrant families can also emphasise language learning for their children because of an intention to move back to their country of origin or to expand their child's potential career prospects, but often the motivation comes from a range of different emotions such as nostalgia, pride, guilt, family honour, nationalism, or fulfilment of parental and family responsibilities. However, evidence suggests that foreign language learning is impacted when living in an English-speaking country due to the fact children will use more English in school and social settings, limiting the potential time for exposure and learning the language of their parents.<sup>77</sup> Northern Ireland (like the rest of the UK) has a 'policy of self-reliance', so that community languages support often relies on supplementary schools which depend on parental and grassroots-level community funding.<sup>78</sup>

Individuals learning English as a second language living in English speaking countries can experience language attrition. This is a process whereby an individual begins to feel their own first language becomes foreign to them, underuse effects pronunciation, forgetfulness of words, and becoming more hesitant with speech.<sup>79</sup> Parents in this study are concerned about their children's language skills being lost, especially in situations where a lack of community connections greatly limits opportunities to use their own language.

*'I am afraid... I want to teach them Arabic... here they will learn English, but if there is a chance, I want them to learn Arabic. I am afraid they don't get it with their integration here.'* (Syrian man, 20s)

Northern Ireland is the only part of the UK where there is no statutory provision for Primary Languages.<sup>80</sup> Evidence suggests that available language support in schools varies significantly in quality.<sup>81</sup> Although some individual schools in Northern Ireland are extremely proactive, language provision lacks financial support. Many schools continue to perceive pupils' competence in home languages as a disadvantage.<sup>82</sup> Research strongly supports the position that multilingual diversity

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<sup>76</sup> Wang, S. (2017) The Sociocultural Milieux of 'Chinese' Language Learning in Belfast: Diaspora and Difference. Student thesis: Doctor of Philosophy. Queen's University: Belfast.

<sup>78</sup> Wei, L. (2018). Community languages in late modernity. In J. W. Tollefson, & M. Pérez-Milans (Eds.), *The Oxford handbook of language policy and planning* (pp. 591–609). Oxford University Press.

<sup>79</sup> Language Attrition. (2022) What is language attrition? Available at: <https://languageattrition.org/what-is-language-attrition/>

<sup>80</sup> Since 2012, there has been a statutory requirement for all maintained primary schools in the UK, excepting Northern Ireland, to teach a foreign language from Year 3 to Year 6. This was a key part of the National Curriculum Review; ; Ayres-Bennett, W. and Carruthers, J. (2019) Policy briefing on modern languages educational policy in the UK. 16 January 2019. [https://www.meits.org/files/policy\\_documents/uploads/Policy\\_Briefing\\_on\\_Modern\\_Languages\\_Educational\\_Policy\\_in\\_the\\_UK.pdf](https://www.meits.org/files/policy_documents/uploads/Policy_Briefing_on_Modern_Languages_Educational_Policy_in_the_UK.pdf)

<sup>81</sup> Carruthers, J., Nandi, A. (2020). Supporting Speakers of Community Languages. A Case Study of Policy and Practice in Primary Schools. *Current Issues in Language Planning*. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14664208.2020.1838748>

<sup>82</sup> Ainscow, M., Dyson, A., Hopwood, L., & Thomson, S. (2016) Primary schools responding to diversity: Barriers and possibilities. Cambridge Primary Review Trust (CPRT): York.

should be accommodated for through schools, workplaces, universities, families, and routinely considered by policy makers.<sup>83</sup> Support in schools could include enhancing foreign language learning, providing interpreters, or providing materials in multiple languages. The use of formal and informal translation for children of both migrants and asylum seekers is important.<sup>84</sup>

### Community language schools

There are several voluntary-operated language schools operating in Belfast, some of which are mostly used by migrants and their children. These include Polish, French, and Russian schools. They provide an important point of connection for many migrant families to their home language and culture, as well as valuable opportunities for others in the community to learn a language in an immersive environment with native speakers. There are common challenges for language schools when starting up such as premises, safeguarding, recruiting teachers, and providing a range of age-specific activities in the spaces available. The workload is notably heavy and there is room for more support for these valuable points of community organisation. Interviews with staff from these schools highlighted the difficulties in establishing these schools, particularly finding appropriate spaces. Arabic language lessons, for example, are carried out alongside religious practice, either among an informal group or mosque. However, for other language groups it can be more challenging to organise. Polish lessons in Belfast have had this issue, moving classes to 4 different schools over the past 10 years as circumstances changed.

Schools are often used because they already have appropriate facilities and safety measures in place, and language schools used by migrant families tend to operate on weekends, but schools are not always welcoming of the additional users. Several language schools have been forced to move premises at short notice, and the growth of student numbers poses particular challenges for finding appropriate spaces. There is some shared good practice on an informal basis between language schools run by community groups, but support to formalise this would be welcome.

### Adult Education

Most participants in this study had had completed a formal education either in Northern Ireland or their country of origin. A fifth (20%) of participants were in adult education at the time of this study. Women were more likely to be in education than men. The group most represented in adult education was people from African countries, particularly Sudanese, followed by Eastern Europeans, particularly Polish.

A majority of participants (78%) believed that there are good education opportunities for adults in Belfast.

*'We've got all kinds of colleges. We have Open University. Yes, I think there are a lot of opportunities if you want to learn further.'* (Chinese woman, 50s)

However more than half (59%) of participants also reported barriers to accessing these educational opportunities. The most common barrier was language of delivery (41%), since participants felt they were not fluent enough to study, and even those with high English proficiency lacked confidence in their English.

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<sup>83</sup> McDermott, P. (2011). Migrant languages in the public space: A case study from Northern Ireland. Munster: LIT Verlag.

<sup>84</sup> Linse, C. (2016, Jun 15). Formal and informal translation and interpretation for immigrants and asylum seekers . <http://www.niassembly.gov.uk/assembly-business/research-and-information-service-raise/knowledgeexchange/#understanding>

*'The only main barrier might be your self-confidence and your level of English. So, as long as you cannot speak English, it will be the main barrier. But once you get that sorted, you can get it easily you know.'* (Polish man, 30s)

This is consistent with the findings of other research on ethnic minorities focused on dispositional barriers to education, such as lack of self-esteem and fear of education. Several of our participants referred to the psychological barriers they faced, especially without fluent English faced with the daunting task of finding information about courses and qualifications.

Awareness of the opportunities available was partial amongst participants. This was sometimes because of language barriers, but also lack of familiarity with the education system, providers and qualifications. Navigating online information is particularly difficult for speakers of other languages because of the specialist language used in education, and it is not always clear who to approach for explanation and guidance.

*'There is a lot of places it is very hard to find this, it's very hard to find where to look.'* (Sudanese woman, 40s)

For people who speak English fluently, barriers such as completing the IELTS (International English Language Testing System) exams, or the cost of the education were factors that prevented them from studying further. Cost was a barrier mentioned more by highly educated refugees trying to complete university degrees or convert advanced qualifications, who can access vocational training for free, but must pay international student fees to access third level education. They are also limited by the loss of their personal documents such as a birth certificate or qualification certifications. This barrier to accessing higher education leaves refugees and their children at a notable disadvantage compared to migrants from the EU and ethnic minorities born in Belfast, who both would have substantially less to pay for higher education. This is particularly discouraging for refugees who could offer specialist skills with the opportunity to evidence them through a locally recognised qualification.

*'At Belfast Met, they started several courses like nursery, hair dressing, medical, even electrician courses. Even the media. And they provided it for free for asylum seekers and refugees. But I had difficulty at higher education. It is my issue how to find a grant or loan to finish my [postgraduate studies] so I can work here and be active in the community, not just claiming benefits.'* (Syrian man, 50s)

Childcare was the most common barrier to adult learning reported by female participants, across all groups. A lack of childcare creates situational barriers, such as reduced flexibility in time and money, particularly with very young children.

There are also cultural factors that can affect certain groups from taking up available adult education, especially gender.

### ESOL Provision for Adults

The ability to communicate in English allows migrants to communicate when they need help, make connections, and find employment in line with their skills and experience. ESOL (English for Speakers of Other Languages) provision is a critical element for achieving equality and integration.

Under a third (30%) of participants had attended formal English lessons in the last 5 years. Accessing ESOL classes is made difficult by the waiting times for courses both at local publicly funded colleges and private English language schools in the city. Beginner levels are more plentiful and therefore easier to access, but there are fewer opportunities to progress or to take advanced English as a new entrant with some English already. Many turn to classes organised by local churches and community centres due to the waiting-lists. Few courses in the city offer instruction by native speakers of other languages.

*“Free English classes would be a big help, because we know how much schools cost. The man from Universal Credit was so helpful, he gave me a list of English classes to contact. The problem is that the teachers are English, not [my nationality]. It is more difficult to explain it this way.”*

Roma women, for example, shared that they attend English classes organised for Roma women only. It is easier for them to communicate with their teacher in their native language if their level of English is very basic, and they feel more at ease within their own ethnic group. This was a common sentiment across a wide number of ethnic and national groups. Participants felt that being in classes of mixed nationalities was more stressful.

*‘I used to go to Belfast Met twice a week but then I stopped, because, due to the mixture of all countries. I don’t understand at the college, I don’t understand from the teachers due to the large number of students inside the class. Most of the students, they speak Arabic, communicate with each other in Arabic.’ (Polish man, 30s)*

Both Romanian Roma and refugee Arabic-speakers noted the difficulty of translating materials when a person is illiterate in their native language. Opportunities to become literate in a native language may help migrants to develop the language skills and confidence to develop self-reliance in basic translation that we see in other literate migrants.

## **Safety**

The Indicators of Integration framework marks safety as ‘an essential foundation to forming relationships with people and society’. Safety is essential to have the sense of security to socialise and cultivate connections. Safety also helps people feel confident going to work and school. Experiences of discrimination, harassment, and hate crime erode people’s confidence in their safety, which in turn hinders their ability to build or maintain connections and distorts their cultural integration.<sup>85</sup>

In recent years, two thirds of the increased reporting of hate crime and incidents came from areas of Belfast.<sup>86</sup> While positive relationships appear between minority ethnic people and the Police Service of Northern Ireland (PSNI), there are reports of poor responses by police and failures to understand the impact of harassment on minorities.<sup>87</sup> This undermines the confidence of ethnic minorities in the criminal justice system, making them less like to report incidents of hate crime or discrimination in the future.

*‘Yes, I reported it to the Police, they just came to inspect the property, that’s all. There were occasions I rang the Police in the evening, and they did not attend to us until midday or very late the next day. I feel the Police cannot do anything, they just advised us to be careful ourselves and it is not much help. As if it would just disappear. The Police only came to check the place then they never followed it up.’ (Chinese woman, 50s)*

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<sup>85</sup> Ndofor-Tah et al (2019) Home Office Indicators of Integration framework 2019, Pg 50

<sup>86</sup> Wallace, A. (2016). Housing and Communities' Inequalities in Northern Ireland, Centre for Housing Policy, University of York. Pg 127.  
<https://www.equalityni.org/ECNI/media/ECNI/Publications/Delivering%20Equality/HousingInequalities-FullReport.pdf>

<sup>87</sup> McVeigh, R. (2013) Race and Criminal Justice in Northern Ireland. Belfast, NICEM cited in Wallace, A. (2016). Housing and Communities' Inequalities in Northern Ireland. Centre for Housing Policy, University of York. Pg 127.  
<https://www.equalityni.org/ECNI/media/ECNI/Publications/Delivering%20Equality/HousingInequalities-FullReport.pdf>

*'Yes, I called the PSNI, and they came and did their report without any results. My car has been damaged twice since then, they destroyed the plates. The PSNI even sent me a questionnaire asking what we can offer in your street to make it better, I told them at least one CCTV camera on the street like any place in the world.'* (Syrian man, 50s)

There has been a steady rise in discrimination in Belfast, and the UK generally, against migrants and ethnic minorities in recent years. Recently released PSNI statistics show that in 2021, there were 366 more racist incidents and 313 more racist crimes recorded than in the previous year.<sup>88</sup> Some discrimination can be connected to recent events. For example, Asian communities have faced increased verbal abuse and harassment since the start of Covid-19 pandemic.<sup>89</sup> Following the Brexit referendum groups such as the Roma, Polish, and other Eastern Europeans have reported increased harassment. The persistence of Islamophobic and anti-refugee rhetoric in politics has contributed to harassment of Muslims in Belfast. There are significant feelings of unsafety shared amongst many groups who consider themselves targeted by 'hostile environment' politics and whose experiences of discrimination reflect that politics in its language.

Since the very nature of hate crime means that an individual is targeted due to an aspect of their identity, hate crimes can have a profound impact on victims, and their wider communities.<sup>90</sup> Victims and those in their ethnic group will feel increased fear of crime, of isolation and hostility, majorly impacting their ability to integrate. A high-profile arson was committed against the Belfast Multicultural Resource Association building on two occasions in the last year, as well as attacks on homes of minority ethnic and migrant residents.<sup>91</sup> This instils a precarious feeling even amongst those who feel safe in their own neighbourhoods.

Three quarters (75%) of participants in this study felt that they were secure and safe in Belfast. Participants that did not feel safe highlighted anti-social behaviour as a key reason why they didn't feel safe, such as drunken people in the streets. Such situations can make people reluctant to leave their home.

Among our participants there seems to be some trust and confidence in the PSNI, around half (52%) had contacted the police for one reason or another. Similarly, 51% of participants said they would contact the police if they needed to. This shows some trust, but it also means half of our participants potentially lack trust in the PSNI.

*'I experienced a hate crime, and I reported it and the police did not do anything about it. Because at the time, the neighbourhood we were living in, basically it wouldn't serve us well to press charges.'* (Zimbabwean woman, 30s)

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<sup>88</sup> PSNI (2021) Incidents and Crimes with a Hate Motivation Recorded by PSNI.

[https://www.psni.police.uk/globalassets/inside-the-psni/our-statistics/hate-motivation-statistics/2021-22/q3/hate-motivations\\_bulletin-dec-21.pdf](https://www.psni.police.uk/globalassets/inside-the-psni/our-statistics/hate-motivation-statistics/2021-22/q3/hate-motivations_bulletin-dec-21.pdf)

<sup>89</sup> Davies, P. (2021) Covid racism: Hate Crime attacks against East and Southeast Asians in UK rise by 50% in two years. ITV News. October 7th, 2021. Available at: <https://www.itv.com/news/2021-10-06/true-scale-of-covid-hate-crime-against-asians-in-uk-revealed-as-victims-speak-up>

<sup>90</sup> Home Office (2018a) Hate Crime, England, and Wales, 2017/2018 – Statistical Bulletin. Available at: [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/748598/hate-crime-1718-hosb2018.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/748598/hate-crime-1718-hosb2018.pdf)

<sup>91</sup> House of Commons. Northern Ireland Affairs Committee (2022). The Experiences of Minority Ethnic and Migrant People in Northern Ireland.

<https://committees.parliament.uk/publications/9166/documents/159683/default/>

The PSNI themselves have acknowledged that victims of discrimination and hate crime face barriers to reporting.<sup>92</sup> These barriers can include language, awareness of rights, or fear of retaliation. Fear of repercussions due to immigration status is a further barrier to reporting.

*'We were afraid to call, they broke the windows in the house we used to live in a while back, we did not call because we cannot speak English too well and we were afraid that if we say something they'll come back to break our windows again.'* (Romanian Roma woman, 20s)

Responses by participants may be in part due to previous experiences, as some participants shared that the PSNI were ineffective in previous situations.

*'Three years ago, there was leafleting intended to make people hate Arabs. The police came and I gave it to them. Now Black people live there and Chinese, so it is a peaceful area.'* (Hungarian woman, 50s)

Among our participants, 38% had experienced a hate crime, this includes incidents of vandalism, hate speech, and physical assault.

*'My son 3 years ago (now 18 yrs.) had experienced racism problems with children, and they attacked our house. Throwing fireworks inside the house. They wanted to burn the house and they were threatening us with racist threats, they wanted to kill the boy (son) and to burn the house.'* (Palestinian man, 40s)

However, this is not an exhaustive list of examples. Some examples of hate crime are not violent, but simple acts that set across a clear message that certain groups are not wanted or welcomed.

*'My present neighbourhood is good I mean, my neighbours very welcoming, except one guy just about four houses away, and don't really pay attention to him. Every Halloween he will put an effigy of a Black person on a rope in front of his house, which I found very disturbing.'* (British Black man, 40s)

Only just over half (54%) of the victims of hate crime reported the incident to the police. Of those who did, there were more participants that had a negative experience (68%) of reporting the incident than those with a positive experience (32%). The main issues participants experienced was that the PSNI were unable to resolve the issue or prosecute the offender. They also expressed frustration at having PSNI downplay incidents.

*'So, whenever I called the police, that time I called the police. The police arrived and they checked everything, and they said it was not only your house that was attacked. So, they explained that that was not a hate crime, that the other houses were attacked as well by the group of teenagers. And they never did anything about my car either.'* (Polish woman, 40s)

Incidents involving minors pose a particular challenge for victims and police. It is particularly worrying that there appears to be strategic involvement of minors in hate for the purpose of racist harassment. There are repeated incidents which appear to have no consequences for the perpetrators. It leaves families feeling very unsafe.

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<sup>92</sup> Written evidence from the Police Service of Northern Ireland, relating to the experiences of minority ethnic and migrant people in Northern Ireland Inquiry (MEM0030). Available at: <https://committees.parliament.uk/writtenevidence/39706/pdf/>

*'So, they advise us to get a camera and just say they know the neighbours who are harassing us. Unfortunately, he was a minor. So, all they can do is just give a caution.'* (Sudanese woman, 40s)

The ineffectiveness of police responses in these cases is a leading factor deterring people from reporting hate crime. This creates an issue as a lack of reporting to the police conceals the true extent of the problem. A recent House of Commons report stated there is strong evidence to suggest that many incidents go unreported to the police, 'meaning the true position of hate within society can be difficult to articulate'.<sup>93</sup> However, participants told us that other factors beyond the effectiveness of the police affected their likelihood of reporting. For example, some participants did not report an incident due to fear of unintended consequences for themselves. Awareness of the victim or witness reporting an incident of discrimination, particularly when they come from a minority group, may increase vulnerability to victimisation or retaliation.<sup>94</sup>

*'When my children were young, I experienced racial incidents where local young children threw stones at us and called us [Chinese racial slurs]. There were incidents where my whole house windows were all broken. I did not report it to Police as I did not want any retaliation as I was living in the area, and we did not want any trouble.'* (Chinese woman, 50s)

In this study, 41% of participants also reported that they had experienced incidents of verbal harassment or other forms of discrimination.

Previous research suggests a strong connection between anti-immigrant views, sectarianism, and neighbourhood segregation. Anti-immigrant views are no more prevalent in Northern Ireland than elsewhere in the UK, however, negativity towards Muslims and Eastern Europeans is significantly higher and has increased in recent years across a range of age groups.<sup>95</sup>

## **Civic and Political Participation**

Civic participation, such as volunteering or membership of clubs or other organisations, is seen as a key indicator of social inclusion, offering a valuable forum for community and network building, as well as facilitating the formation of social links. 'Social links' are defined in the Home Office Indicators of Integration framework as engagement with the institutions of society, such as local governmental and non-governmental services, civic duties, and political processes.<sup>96</sup>

The engagement of ethnic minorities and migrants with political and civic institutions is crucial for both setting political agendas and decision-making processes. Additionally, the representation of different ethnicities among leadership in political and civil sectors is necessary not only to encourage participation of minority ethnic and migrant communities but also to accurately represent the changing demographics of Northern Ireland. Diversity in leadership should be seen

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<sup>93</sup> House of Commons. Northern Ireland Affairs Committee (2022), Pg 9

<sup>94</sup> Equality Commission for Northern Ireland (2020) Hate Crime in Northern Ireland: Policy Recommendations and Supporting Rationales. Full Report. Equality Commission: Belfast. Available at: <https://www.equalityni.org/ECNI/media/ECNI/Publications/Delivering%20Equality/HateCrime-FullPolicyPosition.pdf>

<sup>95</sup> Doebler, Stefanie & McAreavey, Ruth & Shortall, Sally. (2017). Is racism the new sectarianism? Negativity towards immigrants and ethnic minorities in Northern Ireland from 2004 to 2015. *Ethnic and Racial Studies*. Pg 41.

<sup>96</sup> Ndofor-Tah et al (2019) Home Office Indicators of Integration framework 2019, Pg 42



to increase across all sectors from government, public services, and NGOs as the public become more diverse.

Both civil and political participation can be useful in the accumulation of social capital, scholars differentiate between bridging and bonding social capital.<sup>97</sup> Bonding social capital refers to stronger ties with people who identify most closely with each other. Bridging capital on the other hand refers to ties between people who are unlike in an important way, meaning connections between people coming from different backgrounds. Bridging social capital enables connections between people who are different from each other. With this perspective both civic and political participation can affect people's senses of belonging within the local community.

Little is known about migrant engagement with politics and civil society in the region.<sup>98</sup> There has been little attention paid to political inclusion of migrants or their political preferences, due to the problem of 'small numbers'.<sup>99</sup> However, minority ethnic communities engage in public life in a variety of ways. A survey conducted in 2015 with Chinese, Indian, and Polish individuals around fifteen specific civic activities found the most common forms of civic or political activity were relatively low-cost low stakes options, such as donating money to charitable causes (75.7%), and voting (53.6 %), while only 11 % reported belonging to any civic or political associations or groups, typically those representing ethnic minorities such as the Chinese Welfare Association.<sup>100</sup>

### Meeting others

When asked what the best facility in their community is participants stated shops, parks, libraries, and leisure centres were the best.

It was not uncommon for participants to share that they had no time to socialise, and the most cited reasons were that they are too busy working and/or raising children. Participants most often met their friends at home, or in cafes and restaurants. During the Covid-19 lockdown it was common for participants to meet others at local parks. Participants from the Roma, Muslim and Chinese communities were more likely to report meeting their friends at their church.

Most (70%) participants felt they were able to use the Internet to search for community activities, and just under two thirds of participants saying they had searched for activities this way.

Work was one of the most common ways participants reported meeting new people and making friends. Most participants (78%) felt connected to their work colleagues and, if they are parents, to their children's school. However, people from Middle Eastern and Asian backgrounds were more likely to say that they didn't feel connected to their children's school community, despite efforts by both children and parents to make connections.

*'Parents may see each other only on sports day in school, apart from that we are seldom connected, especially during the pandemic when we are not allowed into school.'* (Chinese woman, 40s)

There are some evident cultural differences around establishing new friendships which make socialising difficult for families where there are different norms. Muslim participants particularly face challenges as participants reported Islamophobia and ignorance about Islam amongst the

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<sup>97</sup>Erel, U. and Ryan, L. (2019) 'Migrant Capitals: proposing a multi-level spatio-temporal analytical framework', *Sociology* 53(2): 246-263

<sup>98</sup> McCurry, J. (2018) Migration, belonging and the 'place-based contract': The civic and political participation of Polish migrants in Northern Ireland from a transnational perspective. Queen's Mary University of London Theses.

<sup>99</sup> Waterhouse-Bradley, B. (2019) Sectarian legacies and the marginalisation of migrants. In B. Fanning and L. Michael (eds.) *Immigrants as outsiders in the two Irelands* (pp. 33-46). Manchester: Manchester University Press.

<sup>100</sup> *ibid.*

families of their children's' schoolmates. This also impacted their children's ability to make connections in school.

*'My son is connected with Somalian and Arabic friends, he couldn't connect with friendship with Irish, he says today he is my friend the next day he is turns his face away...so his relation with them very limited not more than respect and hi hi...very formal...but to hang out with and laugh is with other immigrants...not the Irish'.  
(Yemeni man, 50s)*

When asked what other community groups people would like to join, most participants had no response to this question (71%). Amongst those who did answer, volunteering was the most common response, along with shared culture/language groups, such as a Chinese or Syrian community group. This is in line with findings of other research on ethnic minorities and community engagement which shows that migrants often prefer joining groups which help them to maintain their home culture and language and strengthen their resilience for intercultural relations in other contexts (neighbourhood, work, school, etc.). It is likely that these groups facilitate a sense of belonging and integration by allowing them to develop connections as a group with other groups. Refugees appear to be uniquely interested as a group in volunteering to support others (particularly newly arrived refugees) and as a pathway into work.

### Sense of Belonging in Belfast

Sense of belonging has long been used as a way of understanding integration and inclusion. It does not measure equality. However, we asked about sense of belonging in this study because such a perception can support resilience in the face of individual incidents discrimination and inequality. Discrimination, marginalization, and failing to see oneself and one's own culture represented reduces the sense of belonging.

Previous research in Northern Ireland has shown that the groups least likely to report a feeling of belonging in Northern Ireland included people identifying as an ethnic minority (64%), those who did not self-identity as British, Irish, or Northern Irish (65%), people with no religious affiliation (78%), and 25-34 years olds (79%).<sup>101</sup> Sense of belonging can be influenced by feeling accepted into a community, and affected by the way that certain ethnic groups are accepted more easily than others. Northern Ireland Life and Times (NILT) survey data in 2020 demonstrates hierarchies of acceptance of different ethnic backgrounds, where participants were found to be particularly less accepting of Eastern European, Muslim, and Irish Traveller backgrounds than other ethnic groups.<sup>102</sup>

Participants were asked to rate their sense of belonging in their neighbourhood and in the city as a whole. Most participants feel a sense of belonging both in the city as a whole.

*'I mean, there are different levels to that sense of belonging, I feel that within Belfast, I do feel a sense of belonging because I can access a lot of community activities that are culturally oriented, I feel that there are a lot of friends that I've made in Belfast, you know, from within and without my culture.'* (Afro-Caribbean woman, 40s)

The amount of time spent in Belfast matters, particularly for the second-generation migrants who spend most of their lives in Northern Ireland.

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<sup>101</sup> Devine, P. and Schubotz, D. (2019) A sense of Belonging, ARK Research Update 126. Available at: <https://www.ark.ac.uk/ARK/sites/default/files/2019-03/update126.pdf>

<sup>102</sup> Michael, L. and McKee, R. (2021) Black Lives Matter? Attitudes to minorities and migrants in Northern Ireland. ARK Research Update 136. Available at: <https://www.ark.ac.uk/ARK/sites/default/files/2021-01/update136.pdf>

*'Yes, this is where I grew up, ever since I was 7'. (Roma man, 20s)*

Having the experience of growing up in and living in Belfast is important in reinforcing a sense of belonging in the city. Several participants mentioned the fact that their children were born in Belfast had a positive aspect on their sense of belonging.

*'Yes, my child was born here and this is what makes all the difference.' (Romanian woman, 40s)*

This is consistent with other research findings that more time in the UK had a positive impact upon feelings of belonging and inclusion.<sup>103</sup> However, its impact on satisfaction with a neighbourhood was limited.

Those who did not feel a sense of belonging to their neighbourhood or Belfast were mostly Eastern Europeans, who have formed several cultural associations to address isolation and create community connection, and refugees. Eastern Europeans, Hungarians and Polish, who did not feel a sense of belonging in their responses shared similar themes of feeling they can never belong in Belfast due to coming from another culture, a lack of time to make connections, or because of distance from loved ones. A Hungarian woman in her 30s shared her experience:

*'To tell the truth, I have been living here for 11 years. We can say it is a very long time. However, my friends as well who live here, they are just people who you know and friends. Your relatives are not beside you. Your mom, your dad and your siblings. Many times, you would need these people to be here the most.'* (Hungarian woman, 30s)

Refugees in particular told us about how their opportunity to develop a sense of belonging was directly undermined by lack of connection with local communities and not knowing how to join in with local activities and events.

*'Hmm a sense of belonging? Not really because I am not... How would I say this? The community doesn't really give more chance for people to participate, especially people from other backgrounds. There is not enough programmes or community stuff that other people can really [participate in]. So, if they're doing something, you will know that, okay, this is Catholic stuff, this is Protestant people doing stuff, and then it's not usually inclusive.'* (Nigerian man, 30s)

Finding time to navigate information about community activities, and how to join them, is difficult for many refugees who have recently arrived. Proactive outreach in multiple languages is essential to help them to find activities they can use to relieve the isolation they feel and signpost to social connections.

*'So far not yet...and in my neighbourhood not yet... because until now I always try to be integrated more with the society, but my circumstance is a bit complicated. Like for example I don't have a mother for my children, to take care of them, so I can have time for myself to integrate, most of my time I spend at home all the time with my children.'* (Yemeni man, 51)

A sense of belonging in Belfast did not always correspond to a sense of belonging in the local neighbourhood. Six participants felt part of their local neighbourhood but not Belfast. These participants all shared similar experiences of feeling safer within their neighbourhood because there were people who knew them. Two participants reported their experiences of harassment

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<sup>103</sup> Kearns, A., & Whitley, E. (2015). Getting There? The Effects of Functional Factors, Time and Place on the Social Integration of Migrants. *Journal of ethnic and migration studies*, 41(13), 2105–2129. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1369183X.2015.1030374>

outside their neighbourhood as impacting their view. People identifying as Black were most likely to feel belonging at neighbourhood while not feeling it in relation to the city.

*'There are some parts of Belfast where I've been before, and you know you're not welcome. You know? I don't even think it even needs to do with the colour of your skin. It's just you are not welcome.'* (Mixed race Irish woman, 20s)

Amongst the three participants who felt belonging in Belfast but not in their local neighbourhood, relationships with neighbours was the key factor. Interaction with neighbours was difficult due to a lack of reciprocated effort by local residents and partly because of highly visible displays of unionist identity which these residents felt were made in order to intimidate expression of other identities.

*'In my neighbourhood, I don't feel that much, because I tend not to participate in most of the activities that they organise. Like the July twelfth things, it's not my thing. But, my neighbourhood, they are very much into the bonfire thing.'* (Black British Man, 40s)

### Awareness of advice and rights

Seeking information and assistance is a common experience for any migrant. Rights and entitlements as a migrant will vary considerably between countries, and the information is not always easily found or clear. It can also be a key challenge finding information not presented in English.

Overall, 61% of participants felt they had enough awareness of their rights. It was common for participants to seek advice from minority ethnic organisations, such as NICRAS, the Chinese Welfare Association, or the Roma Community Hub. These organisations are important because they offer services and advice tailored to the needs of the ethnic groups in language they can understand.

*'My husband used to ask for help at his workplace, he used to ask his colleagues to help but now we go to the Roma Hub and to the Belfast Trust workers'* (Roma woman, 20s)

However, these organisations are clearly under resourced for the demand they are experiencing. Funding often covers project costs for short periods and at short notice, and core costs are excluded, or match funding required. Expertise is routinely lost because of funding arrangements and related precarious employment, often entirely from the sector.

Other organisations mentioned included the Law Centre, Advice NI and Citizen's Advice. There was evidence that staff in these organisations cultivate trust with clients seeking advice, and participants mentioned staff by name. However, some complaints were made about how the services have increased the waiting time, as they have become overstretched.

*'The way is blocked. I used to go to Extern, but they are under pressure. When I go there the key worker who should help doesn't have enough time and always busy and you will never have satisfied answer or appropriate help just to understand the role and the system and your rights. It's really hard. You feel yourself lost. Especially in medical and financial wise, and housing.'* (Syrian man, 50s)

### Community organisation

This study was promoted through the organisations who are members of the Migrant Forum of Belfast City Council as well as through posters in local facilities and contact with identified people leading formal and informal organisations which represent migrant or minority ethnic residents.

Focus groups were facilitated by several of these organisations, as well as contact with interview participants. Almost all of the groups we were in contact with during this project stressed the additional pressure on their activities or services caused by Covid-19, but also the pressure on resources which they had already been feeling prior to the pandemic due to erratic and short-term funding. Lost expertise from the sector because of precarious employment particularly affected those workers of minority ethnic or migrant background who took essential language and cultural skills with them as they moved into more secure employment elsewhere by necessity. One multi-lingual community worker, a former migrant herself, who moved into an office administration job, told the interviewer how much she missed working to support marginalised people in the area, but the funding that supported her work had ended, although the need had not reduced at all. Migrant- and minority ethnic-led projects were evident in this research, although there is variable support for the principle of affected leadership in support organisations that are not themselves led by migrant or minority ethnic people. Organisations that provide support and capacity building to migrant and minority-ethnic people are important vehicles for building trust in civic institutions and public services and providing capacity building opportunities which in turn increase representation and expertise. In the course of the project, we received extensive correspondence regarding the representation of the Traveller community in Belfast and services provided to it through other organisations. This correspondence highlighted the distrust which can arise when organisations are seen to capture and serve only parts of a marginalised community, and the frustration which is created by being excluded from the structures and mechanisms designed to promote inclusion. We make no further comment on this ongoing correspondence between Travellers and a variety of public organisations and public-funded projects. It is important to highlight that developing practice in neighbouring jurisdictions towards supporting affected-led representation should be kept in sight, and all efforts made to ensure that projects designed to serve very marginalised communities engage seriously with the range of challenges they face, amongst which is a history of distrust and co-option. While the nature of funded projects often drives towards increasing activity with the already engaged members of a group, long term inclusion (particularly at the level of civic participation) means engaging with challenges to current arrangements of power and representation is essential.

### Political participation

Only one MLA from a minority ethnic background sat in the Northern Ireland Assembly between 2007 and 2016, Anna Lo of the Alliance party, serving South Belfast. She stood down in part due to racism within the government and the public.<sup>104</sup> One ethnic minority candidate stood in the 2022 Assembly elections, in the constituency of South Belfast. Siphon Sibanda, a refugee from Zimbabwe, arrived in Belfast in 2015. She was not elected. Currently there are no elected MLAs from a minority ethnic background, and only one at the local council level. Councillor Lillian Seenoi-Barr in Derry is a former asylum seeker who arrived in Northern Ireland in 2010 who

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<sup>104</sup> BBC News (2014) Anna Lo to Quit Politics Over Disillusionment. BBC NEWS. 29th May 2014. Available at: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-northern-ireland-27616319>; McDonald, H (2014) Only Chinese-born parliamentarian in UK to quit politics over racist abuse. The Guardian. May 29th, 2014. Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2014/may/29/northern-ireland-chinese-mp-might-leave-province-racist-abuse>; Campbell, N. (2022) Former MLA Anna Lo on online abuse that forced her out of politics: 'Trolls posted sex images of Asian women, linking brothels with me'. Belfast Telegraph. January 7th 2022. Available at: <https://www.belfasttelegraph.co.uk/news/politics/former-mla-anna-lo-on-online-abuse-that-forced-her-out-of-politics-trolls-posted-sex-images-of-asian-women-linking-brothels-with-me-41216582.html>

narrowly missed election in 2019 and was co-opted in 2021.<sup>105</sup> Ethnic minorities are also under-represented in the civil service and in public appointments.<sup>106</sup> The visible lack of representation of minority ethnic identities in governance likely correlates with the limited attention given to issues affecting minority ethnic residents of Northern Ireland.

A majority (70%) of the participants in this study have the right to vote in Northern Ireland. However less than half of those with the right to vote have participated in any election. This is consistent with international trends showing that migrants and minority ethnic groups tend to engage less in political participation than native born citizens.<sup>107</sup> The reasons for not voting varied, but the most common reasons were they either had not had the opportunity to vote or simply did not want to participate. There is evidence that the political situation in Northern Ireland discourages some migrants from considering their own political interests.

*'We are in better circumstances here than if we would have stayed in Hungary. But I will never belong here. That is why I am not getting involved with local politics. I would not go to vote because I don't feel I have the right to decide who should be the mayor or who should have a sit in Stormont.'* (Hungarian man, 40s)

Lack of political participation was not only seen in voting. Just 32% of participants had been involved in any petition or protest. Some had given their support to political events or movements supporting refugees and migrants, Black Lives Matter, and local issues such as petitions on the death of schoolboy Noah Donohoe. There was some concern amongst participants that their lack of familiarity with key political actors in Northern Ireland meant they might join a political action which was in bad faith, or even harmful to them. Part of this fear came from their awareness of the political divide.

Working with a political party was rare amongst participants. Only 5 had been significantly involved with politics in any way, most commonly through an action group. These participants were particularly committed to political action, often across multiple social issues, such as *Black Lives Matter* or climate change.

Women in some groups were less likely to get involved in politics, due to cultural gender norms in their community, but that was not the case for most of our participants.

*'No, and I have no intention to. Plus, as a Roma woman, I am not really permitted to, because of the traditions and the families ... men yes, but not the women.'* (Roma woman, 20s)

Even amongst those people of minority ethnic background who are British, there is a discomfort with regional politics.

*'The blunt answer is that I don't understand Northern Ireland politics enough to trust any of the politicians. I'm not interested in being on one side or the other of the divide. So, if I were to be interested in a political group or party, I'm going to find the middle ground. I have only had a reason to contact one politician and that was only very recently on the*

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<sup>105</sup> The Northern Ireland Affairs Committee (2022) The experiences of minority ethnic and migrant people in Northern Ireland: Second Report of Session 2021–22. Available at: <https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm5802/cmselect/cmniaf/159/report.html>

<sup>106</sup> The Commissioner for Public Appointments Northern Ireland (CPANI) (2014) 'Under-representation and lack of diversity in public appointments in Northern Ireland', p. 5. Available at: [https://www.publicappointmentsni.org/sites/cpani/files/media-files/underrepresentation\\_and\\_lack\\_of\\_diversity\\_in\\_public\\_appointments\\_in\\_northern\\_ireland.pdf](https://www.publicappointmentsni.org/sites/cpani/files/media-files/underrepresentation_and_lack_of_diversity_in_public_appointments_in_northern_ireland.pdf)

<sup>107</sup> Li, R., & Jones, B. (2020). Why Do Immigrants Participate in Politics Less Than Native-Born Citizens? A Formative Years Explanation. *The Journal of Race, Ethnicity, and Politics*, 5(1), 62-91. doi:10.1017/rep.2019.22

*back of our mutual involvement in an International Women's Day event.' (Black British woman, 40s)*

Trust in local politicians is low amongst the participants in this research. Two-thirds of participants (66%) say they do not trust local politicians. Only 21% express some trust in local politicians, and 23% have been in contact with a local politician.

## **Impact of Covid-19**

The global pandemic has disrupted not only migration flows across the world, but also activities designed to support refugees and migrants in their arrival countries. The emergency has impacted on all the key domains of integration, including refugees and other migrants' ability to access/use support services, and the implications of new emerging needs for support priorities.

In mid-March 2020, protective measures were implemented across Europe to prevent the spread of COVID-19, mainly by reducing or avoiding face-to-face contacts and introducing extra hygienic precautions. These efforts to control the pandemic epidemiologically coincided with severe restrictions in the economic, public, and social life culminating in curfews and a far-reaching shutdown of the economy and public administration.

The protective measures severely hampered a wide range of areas of social, economic, and political life. All of these have implications for the integration of newcomers in particular. The particularly lengthy nature of the restrictions, going on over more than a year in many countries, have prompted serious concerns about the isolation of migrants, particularly those who are newly arrived. Many migrant groups are specifically vulnerable to the health and socioeconomic impacts of the outbreak and encounter challenges due to restricted mobility and heightened xenophobia.

In Belfast, the Covid-19 pandemic and lockdowns caused significant impact on many services and organisations, closing in-person services almost entirely for months, and creating problems for disadvantaged and vulnerable persons in access to income, food, and healthcare specifically. Many statutory services and migrant support organisations were forced to radically alter their mode of operations and introduce emergency supports to prevent hardship. It must be recognised that many minority ethnic and migrant residents of Belfast contributed significantly to the city's efforts during this time, delivering food parcels, supporting people in isolation, and providing outreach supports to key city services.

Two years after Covid-19 first closed services, many have still not returned to full in-person access. Many organisations supporting and/or led by minority ethnic and migrant residents of Belfast were still, during Spring 2022, gradually returning to in-person activities. Use of community centres and other public spaces amongst participants is still significantly lower than before this pandemic.

As we described in previous sections, this has impacted on awareness of services (particularly amongst newcomers), access to services, and effectiveness of supports such as interpreting. There are also residual problems of poverty, isolation, and ill health (including but not restricted to 'long Covid').

Migrants with English as a second language had particular difficulty explaining to healthcare providers their health issues, as a consequence they were often not seen, their issues worsened and they became in need of prompt attention. As a result, the severity of some issues prompts them to use A&E services. as they have no other way of checking how serious a health problem

is after months. A&E is intended for emergencies only, but for some it is the only access to a doctor that they can reasonably get without paying the expensive cost of private care.

The difficulty of communicating with GP reception staff was mentioned as a particular point of frustration. This was not only due to the language barrier. Participants felt disregarded and ignored even when they could communicate their issues. Complaints were made about having to discuss health issues with receptionists, and the lack of good service provided by reception staff.

*'The other issue, so I recently had Covid, and I developed an awful chest infection afterwards. I contacted them and requested an antibiotic and they refused to give me one and I may add that I didn't even get to speak to a doctor, it was the receptionist herself who told me that I couldn't get an antibiotic. She simply dismissed my condition and said it was the side effects of Covid.'* (Polish woman, 30s)

There may be long-term impacts on the perception of health services. While the lockdowns have stopped, medical services are still running on restricted services. With participants sharing they have been waiting years for appointments, even before the pandemic, there was a theme that participants were losing faith in the health care services being provided.

*'It is extremely difficult to get anything sorted in the community. For example, right now, I don't feel confident that if I had a health issue like yeah, like, you know, I've recently recovered from COVID... Luckily everything went through okay, but I don't feel confident at all that if I were to go to my GP, they would be able to help me, or that they would make an effort to help me.'* (Polish man, 30s)

Medical services were not the only public service that was affected by the pandemic lockdowns. Housing services were impacted as well. Participants stated that the difference in the quality of service before and after the lockdowns was significant.

*'They are very careless. Only if I email them five times and phone them 28 times, they do something. It wasn't always like that. Before Covid they were usually quick enough to sort things. But those times I went to their office in person, and they did their job immediately. They don't push themselves.'* (Hungarian woman, 30s)

*'They used to help me but then the covid issue started everything stopped, but I will keep trying get their help. I won't stop working on this.'* (Sudanese man, 30s)

Similarly, participants trying to access services to be informed on their rights were equally frustrated by the lower quality services.

*'But recently, because of the COVID, everything is on the telephones. Yeah. And I find it more difficult. Because I prefer appointments face to face.'* (Polish woman, 30s)

The Covid-19 lockdowns included the closure of most public facilities, gyms, leisure centres, and community halls. Consequently, some participants had not had the opportunity to use, or even become aware of, the facilities available in their local area.

*'I have never been, I have no idea where it is. Covid took two years of our life, I did not have time to explore. This is the problem.'* (Hungarian woman, 30s)

*'I think after COVID, all the children's fun areas, they closed a lot of fun areas and some facilities.'* (Chinese woman 30s)

Those who have lived longer in Belfast were more likely to have used community facilities before Covid closures. Despite the lockdowns ending, some participants did not feel confident returning to facilities yet, even participants that had been active users of the facilities before the pandemic.



*'No, not at the moment. It is because of covid, and I don't want to go to crowded places. I used to go before the pandemic, and I don't go to those places anymore.'* (Chinese woman, 40s)

*'I used to but because of COVID I stopped, and I just like, don't have enough motivation to come back.'* (Polish woman, 40s)

The impact of Covid-19 as a deterrent on physical meetings or going out generally was present even in early 2022. Despite widespread vaccinations participants were still uncomfortable in crowded spaces. This impacted on participants' relationships with colleagues at work, making new connections, and even being involved with their children's school community.

*'Yeah, well I got to know some parents as well, but I think it is a different experience because of COVID Social distancing'* (American woman, 40s)

For others, being of minority ethnic or migrant background in public spaces drew suspicion of carrying Covid, and there are examples of racist incidents experienced by participants because of the mentality.

*'You know, because I'm very worried about the state of how the BME communities is perceived to have COVID. That really worries me a lot because whenever you go is like you are the one who has COVID. And other people don't have COVID. You are perceived like this, whether in a supermarket, if I have to cough, and my white friend is coughing, I would be... people would really run away from me like literally, which is... that, that's racism! Why do you do that? That really annoys me.'* (South African woman, 30s)

*'My neighbourhood? Well, it's very bad. Yeah. It's very much like, see before COVID We used to have parties, like almost every weekend. Yeah. After COVID the parties started to become less and less common. Less common. Yeah. So, my neighbourhood I would say, it's not very quiet...Five years ago, or three years ago, it was much louder.'* (Palestinian man, 30s)

The actions of Government during the pandemic increased trust in politics to some degree. Participants were particularly impressed with the furlough scheme provided during the pandemic.

*'The financial support during Covid was a great help for me. I did not receive Universal Credit at the time. It was a great help. I work with people, and I wasn't allowed to work. I could not go to the houses of others, and they could not come to my house. We could not meet, it was a big restriction for everyone, but this was a big help.'* (Hungarian woman, 30s)

Unfortunately, there was not a similar response to the support provided around education. During the pandemic when schools, courses, and programmes all moved to remote studying, there was an equality of access noted. While the majority of participants had digital access, refugees and asylum seekers were less likely to report digital access. While during the first lockdown internet services were provided for free to these groups, this was a short-term support that did not continue throughout the duration of the lockdowns. This has likely been detrimental to the education of asylum seekers and refugee children who already face disadvantages in the education system due to the interruption of their schooling when fleeing conflict. This also likely impacted Irish Travellers and Roma who are generally less likely to have digital access.<sup>108</sup>

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<sup>108</sup> Scadding, J. & Sweeney, S. (2018) Digital Exclusion in Gypsy and Traveller communities in the United Kingdom: Report. Friends Families and Travellers: Sussex. Available at: <https://www.gypsy->

*'One particular concern was the biggest challenge when the COVID-19 that everyone's child was sending school home to, and then they have to join online. And they didn't have a digital device or internet and that is applied through their parents (who can't?) work for asylum seekers' children, so they don't have to work. So, the children, so what did he expect if the parents cannot have broadband? Or have no laptop?' (Black Danish man, 30s)*

*'Asylum seekers were provided with six months of free data to support access to education and services. However, after that period, there was financial pressure on families to maintain access to the internet.'* (South African woman, 30s)

The education of adults was also disrupted. People accessing English classes had their session moved online or cancelled. As discussed above this would leave certain groups unable to access the classes.

## **Key findings**

Housing quality and overcrowding are the most significant issues facing migrant and minority ethnic residents of Belfast. House ownership is seen as desirable but difficult due to low-income insecure occupations, cost of living and availability of credit networks. Overcrowding is the most significant issue in social housing. Discrimination in the private rental market is also driving people into precarious living situations, with short-term and even exploitative illegal rental agreements. It also impacts on responses to tenant complaints about repairs or health risks. There appears to be a growing risk of migrant and refugee destitution in Belfast for those in precarious housing situations.

Mobility within the city is low due to availability of rental housing, but also because of issues of safety. Minority ethnic and migrant residents rely on networks of informal knowledge about safe areas to live. There is some mobility between nationalist and loyalist areas, but there continues to be a substantial level of racist and xenophobic hate crime in the city, and this is used strategically in some areas to deter migrants and minority ethnic residents from choosing to live there. Four in five people feel happy with the neighbourhood they live in, because of relationships with their neighbours and access to good local facilities.

Employment experiences in Belfast vary significantly by ethnic and national group, but these are more related to the educational levels common to the group and the transferability of qualifications. Those in work largely report good relations with their work colleagues. Progress is an issue, however. Professionals generally reported good access to employment but poor promotion prospects in work. People in middle-income jobs had often started in lower-income jobs on arrival in Belfast, but the mobility of low-income workers is not predictable. Many participants describe having taken lower-income jobs on arrival with the expectation of progressing, yet remain in jobs far below their qualifications, even after becoming fluent in English.

Just under a third of participants are unemployed, in part due to discrimination in the labour market, but also due to language barriers and difficulties accessing work-related training. Most participants are not aware of work-related training and support available. Most women who wished to enter the labour market were restricted from doing so by the cost of childcare. Women who preferred to defer entry to the labour market while they raise young children would benefit

from early support and guidance to increase their later confidence about their ability to do so. Language and IT skills are key areas for increased investment in flexible training access.

The education system is rated highly by most parents of minority ethnic and migrant background. Additional language support and positive relationships with staff are sources of satisfaction. However more than half of parents have concerns about their child's school, particularly around discrimination and exclusion. In some schools, and for some groups, there is evidence of systematic discrimination, including against Roma, Muslims, and people of African descent. Digital access was good for most children. Language barriers are a particular barrier to strong communication between parents and schools.

Adult education is perceived positively in general, but there are many barriers to accessing it, and these present cumulatively for the most disadvantaged groups. Targeted interventions are needed to support adult learners into education and training while they are motivated. Language and childcare are common barriers for most groups, but access to ESOL provision is perhaps one of the most significant issues, with long waiting lists for courses reported across the city. Adapted ESOL provision is needed for those without literacy in their native language.

Health services continue to be impacted by Covid-19 changes to access, and migrants in particular are impacted by language barriers that arise during triage and consultations. Interpreting services are generally good, although a quarter of those needing an interpreter at the GP or hospital were not able to access them. Telephone-based interpreting services have caused considerable concern amongst migrant users. Hospital care, apart from waiting times, is rated highly. Ongoing access problems with GP surgeries have driven some people to use A&E services at hospitals to address their significant concerns about aggravated health issues. These include mental health crises as well as cardiac and mobility-related issues. There is some need for specialist knowledge on conditions particularly affecting minority ethnic people.

Most participants were registered with a dentist and are broadly satisfied with services. Pharmacy services far outperform all other areas of healthcare provision for migrant users, in relation to access, language and outreach. There are well-established relationships of trust with pharmacists and these potentially offer a focal point for any new or expanded supports. Access to mental health support is particularly important for refugees, who have been exposed to trauma during transit to Northern Ireland as well as during conflict and war.

There is a good level of knowledge about wellbeing and everyday health amongst minority ethnic and migrant residents across all groups. More than 90% have access to outdoor space for exercise and enjoy time outdoors. Walking is the most popular form of exercise, although this is in part a legacy of restricted access to sports or gym facilities. Less than half (46%) of people use shared leisure facilities (excluding children's playgrounds), but those that do report good opportunities for meeting people beyond their immediate social network. Muslim women are particularly keen to use gender-specific leisure facilities. Participants commonly choose outdoor facilities based on safety, driving to use outdoor spaces in other parts of the city if needed.

There are significant differences between ethnic and national groups depending on length of residence in Northern Ireland, the UK and Ireland, levels of education, employment in high or low skilled jobs, class background and extent of cooperation within communities. For high-earning professionals, concerns about racial discrimination at work and safety in their neighbourhoods and the city are more prevalent, as well as their ability to participate fully in Northern Irish society. They provide a well-informed critique of the inequalities they see within the city, as well as those they have experienced themselves. Long-established communities reflect on the lack of change over time for them in terms of work opportunities, exploitation, the difficulties of late language acquisition and housing, compared with the experiences of their children born in Northern Ireland in education, friendships, and work. Both generations struggle with housing, adequate value for their work, and experiences of racism. More recently arrived migrants highlight the difficulty of

navigating basic services and accessing education and work opportunities to improve their prospects. Poverty is a real risk for migrants who work in low-paid low-skilled jobs (sometimes despite having higher qualifications), who are parents of young children, and who find the services supporting them already significantly stretched. Their children experience unfair disadvantage in schools and social activities because of both language and perceived cultural or religious differences which are amplified by racism.

Overall, 74% of minority ethnic and migrant residents rate their optimism about future well-being in Belfast highly. Factors affecting optimism include feeling safe in a neighbourhood, having social connections beyond the immediate family or ethnic/national community, and the good experiences of children in education. Those who were not optimistic about the future (7%) were most likely to be influenced by racism in the city, in education and work environments as well as hate crimes in their neighbourhood. This was particularly the case for Muslims and people of African descent.

Just three-quarters of minority ethnic and migrant participants feel safe and secure in Belfast, compared to more than 90% of the city's residents in a recent survey<sup>109</sup>. Those who reported hate crimes to the police in the past are largely disinclined to do so again because of unsatisfactory outcomes. 38% of participants have experienced a racist hate crime in Belfast, and 41% experienced discrimination in other contexts. Two-fifths of parents reported that their children experienced racist bullying in schools.

Around two-thirds of participants were satisfied that they had enough awareness of their rights. Newcomers who arrived since 2020 are particularly affected in this area by the closure of services. Digital access is difficult for individuals in low-income situations, and navigating online information is extremely difficult for people who are not already familiar with the main statutory and community organisations in Northern Ireland. Participants commonly turn to minority ethnic-led or migrant support organisations for trusted information and advice, as well as law centres and citizens advice services. There is little opportunity or interest in joining other community groups, as local resident's groups are perceived as uninterested in migrant or minority ethnic members joining them, and opportunities for interaction are seen as limited. The badging of events for nationalist or loyalist communities deters migrants from attending.

Most participants have the right to vote, but less than half have ever used their vote. Politics is broadly seen as inaccessible and irrelevant because of a Green/Orange emphasis, even in local constituency and neighbourhood matters. Trust in political representatives is particularly low across all ethnic and national groups in this study. A fifth of participants had personally contacted a Councillor, MLA, and MP.

As the sample did not include commuters and regular visitors to the city, including users of city services and facilities, there is scope for additional research to explore their experiences and how they reflect inequalities.

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<sup>109</sup> Belfast City Council (2022) Belfast Residents Survey 2021. Strategic Policy and Resources Committee, 28 March, 2022. <https://minutes.belfastcity.gov.uk/documents/s98063/Appendix%201%20-%20Residents%20Survey%20Results%202021.pdf>

## Next steps

The report has highlighted the opportunities for engagement with minority ethnic and migrant residents of the city in a wide range of areas of public services, support for community action, and civic participation. There is an optimistic and engaged population who have actively sought out opportunities in education and work, are knowledgeable about the systemic problems of accessing housing and health supports in Belfast and the significant demands and constraints on non-governmental support organisations. Many of the participants in this research are engaged in building informal mutual support networks to address the racial discrimination and exclusion they experience regularly and significantly.

In this report we used the Indicators of Integration framework both to identify areas of investigation and to assess the responses received. The framework, designed for the ongoing adaptation of all communities to include newcomers, provides a means of establishing measures of inclusion for all residents, including but not limited to minority ethnic citizens, long-time resident migrants, and recently arriving migrants. Benchmarking inclusion in light of overall patterns of inclusion is important, and racial discrimination must be considered as a part of this assessment as a key factor in reduced opportunities and reduced wellbeing.

The findings of this report highlight the need for strategic interventions in all the major areas of public services, and a shared approach by public institutions to acknowledging inequalities highlighted here, and locating, collecting, and using disaggregated data to sustain an informed strategy.

We suggest below a number of areas in which interventions may be developed by the agencies which commissioned this report in their own activities and in conjunction with other organisations.

In all respects, the commissioning agencies should robustly defend the diversity of the city and the equality of its residents.

### **A zero-tolerance approach to racism**

- The Council must provide leadership on race equality in all of its partnerships and collaborations.
- Strong messaging from political and executive leaders in Belfast City Council emphasising a zero tolerance for racism, including rapid response communications strategies for the protection of asylum seekers and refugees and other highly vulnerable groups.
- Support the resourcing of support arrangements for victims of harassment or hate crimes to monitor ongoing harassment and direct to non-policing support as well as PSNI.
- Create a strong public and governance understanding of a shared and inclusive city.
- Establish coordination between the Belfast Community Planning partners on race equality actions within the Belfast Agenda.
- Encourage all representatives to speak with minority ethnic and migrant constituents and support them in developing intercultural competence.

### **Race Equality standards**

- All departments in the commissioning organisations should have or be part of a Race Equality Action Plan, which is reported on periodically.
- All staff within the commissioning organisations should undertake Intercultural Competence training and understand equality law protections.

- Ensure that complaints about discrimination in public services can be easily made, properly recorded and investigated.
- Provide anti-racism, race equality and cultural competence briefings for local political representatives.

### **Supporting good relations**

- Review all funding schemes supporting community organisations to investigate and address the barriers to funding of minority ethnic and migrant-led organisations.
- Embed and promote equality principles in communities funding, encouraging and supporting sustainable inter-group activities and collaborations.
- Review Council funding and oversight for sports, culture and leisure organisations or facilities to encourage inclusive programming and reduction of barriers to participation, including at Council-owned facilities.
- Strengthen city, regional and international cultural networks on equality.
- Promote the benefits of diversity for all Belfast residents, including highlighting the human stories of diversity in the city.
- Develop and carry out a strong anti-racism campaign to increase public awareness of legal protections for equality.
- Develop a schools-targeted resource for delivering anti-racism and cultural information and activities.
- Review council provision in areas such as community provision, culture and arts, leisure and sporting activity, economic development, procurement to scope out opportunities for promoting the integration and inclusion of migrant and minority ethnic communities.
- Consider the inclusion of key attitudinal and integration data as standard in the Belfast Residents Survey and other surveys by Belfast City Council, drawing on best practice in the Northern Ireland Life and Times Survey and measures in the Indicators of Integration framework.
- Consultation with minority ethnic and migrant groups must be developed that are sustainable and responsible.

### **Monitoring inequalities**

- Review the impact of existing policies and programmes aimed at promoting integration to ensure there is no indirect discrimination.
- Strategies for data collection, disaggregation and analysis should be done in a granular way in order to have a better understanding areas of inequalities.
- Acknowledge intragroup variation within minority ethnic and migrant populations and develop appropriate data management responses to inform policymaking.
- Data collection strategies should be developed in consultation or partnership with minority ethnic and migrant groups.
- Work with the Executive Office and Equality Commission to develop systems for monitoring inequalities and capturing data on ethnicity.

### **Health and wellbeing**

- Public Health Agency to explore opportunities for promoting inclusion of people from ethnic minorities including those from the Traveller community in PHA-commissioned Health Improvement services.
- Belfast Health and Social Care Trust to explore pathways to employment for asylum seekers with skills and experience from the shortage occupation list.
- Undertake scoping review for a regional refugee and migrant-specific health service to support entry to mainstream services.

- Provide training for all frontline staff including GP practices on cultural competence and access to interpreting.
- Investigate the specific barriers to mental health support access for migrants and minority ethnic residents, including access to culturally appropriate counselling, trauma-responsive supports and other services.

#### **To address the particular situation of asylum seekers living in hotels**

- Provide financial assistance to community and voluntary led responses supporting asylum seekers accommodated in hotels.
- Support the development of longer-term planning on accommodation for asylum seekers in Northern Ireland, including through collaboration with other Councils, and the NGO sector to provide transition supports.
- Use leisure and community services to directly support the inclusion of asylum seekers living in institutionalised accommodation including hotels through bespoke projects.

In respect of the areas where Belfast City Council, the Public Health Agency and Belfast Health and Social Care Trust work with the Belfast Community Planning Partners and other relevant organisations, we recommend investigation of the following.

#### **Language diversity**

- Support for community-based minority language schools to address resources issues, venues and shared good practice and development.

#### **Employment**

- Support the right to work for asylum seekers in Northern Ireland.
- Support the inclusion of minority entrepreneurs in the local business community.
- Address with city employment and business forums the issue of racism as a barrier to employment, as well as supporting efforts to address re-entry into the labour market for migrant women and asylum seekers (for example, through be-spoke work-placement training programmes).
- Disseminate clear information on procedures for recognising qualifications and skills received outside of the UK.

#### **Adult education**

- Work with adult education partners to assess English language education needs in the city, and address the identified barriers for migrants to uptake current provision.
- Scope out opportunities for resourcing for the community provision of flexible language classes with built in childcare provision.

#### **School education**

- Establish and resource a network of Community Relations trainers to provide intercultural competence training to school pupils at all ages.
- Work with the Education Authority to assess and monitor racist harassment in school communities and educational exclusion issues affecting minority ethnic and migrant families in the city.

#### **Housing**

- Encourage coordination between the Belfast Community Planning partners to address barriers that arise for migrant tenants in accessing quality housing, advice and enforcement.

- Support the community and voluntary sector to provide migrant-targeted information and advocacy on tenants' rights.

#### **Governance**

- Engage and encourage the Belfast Community Planning Partnership, as well as its associated Boards, to embed effective minority ethnic and migrant community planning and to consider the needs, circumstances and aspirations of minority ethnic and migrant residents in the priorities they set for improving local outcomes and tackling inequalities.



Appendix 1: Demographics of interview participants

Table: Gender

Male	53
Female	78

Table: Age

18-24	15
24-30	17
31-40	38
41-50	34
51-60	21
60+	4
Undisclosed	2

Table: Self-Reported English Level

Basic	32
Intermediate	42
Advanced	57

Table: Have Children Under 18

Yes	66
No	65

Table: length of residence in Belfast

Less than 1 year	5
1-5 years	33

6-10 years	38
11-15 years	26
16-20 years	13
20+ years	16

Table: Religion

No Religion	79
Christian (Non-Denominational)	16
Catholic	13
Protestant	2
Pentecostal	6
Muslim	11
Buddhist	2
Hindu	1

Table: Ethnic Self-Identification

White	32
Black African	29
Black Caribbean	3
Arabic	19
East Asian	20
South Asian	4
Roma	15
Irish Traveller	7
Mixed	1

Table: Nationalities (Note: some participants held Dual Nationalities)

British or EU Nationalities

British	20
Polish	17
Romanian	17
Irish	12
Hungarian	8
Czech	1
Danish	1
Spanish	1
Total	77

Non-EU nationalities

American	1		Palestinian	2
Burundi	1		Slovakian	3
Chinese	5		Somali	2
Egyptian	1		South African	2
Filipino	1		Sudanese	8
Indian	3		Syrian	7
Iraqi	1		Tunisian	1
Jamaican	1		Vincentian	2
Jordanian	2		Yemeni	5
Lebanese	1		Zimbabwean	3
Nigerian	7			
Total 59				



**Belfast**  
City Council

