

# Needs Analysis Report for Asylum and Refugee Support and Integration Services



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District Council  
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## PROJECT AIMS & OBJECTIVES

Delivery of a needs analysis and implementation of a support and integration programme for asylum seekers and refugees in the area.

## SUMMARY OF FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Via research and consultation with key stake holders, local active citizen's groups and asylum seekers and refugees in the DCSDC area, People 1st concluded the following: Pending the sourcing of suitable dispersal accommodation, numbers of incoming newcomers will continue to increase and spread out of the Derry city area into other parts of the council area.

There are many community groups and key players in the area who feel that they are "operating blind" on limited funding and other resources, and doing what they can to help in a reactive manner. This frustration will likely increase as newcomer numbers rise.

Of the individual asylum seekers and refugees interviewed, there is an obvious want/need to be economically active and to contribute and give back to Northern Irish society. Those who cannot yet work, want to engage in volunteering activities. Those interviewed feel that having local friends and contacts is very important. Many express a wish to stay on in the DCSDC area once their asylum claim is approved.

Gaps are evident in the process of leaving the Home Office/Mears System and becoming a private renter/Housing Executive service user. There is also a lack of knowledge for those approaching asylum claim approval of how the social welfare system works.

The overriding feeling is that length of time taken to process claims and subsequently become economically active, and long periods spent in contingency accommodation does nothing to aid integration and serves to exacerbate mental health issues.

A key need is English language tuition, whether on a basic day-to-day level or to ensure a client is job ready. Course availability, programme frequency and funding are insufficient to cope with the current demand in the DCSDC area.

Other needs identified include: the need to upskill for the job market, an understanding of the process and help with language when going through processes like registering and making appointments with health care professionals and opening bank accounts, general information about services available in the area like food and clothing banks, interpreting services, meeting and making friends with local people, and volunteering opportunities and ways to stay active while awaiting a decision on asylum status.

## THE CURRENT SITUATION, AN OVERVIEW.

It should be clarified that Northern Ireland is not a dispersal location for those asylum seekers who arrive and present themselves in Great Britain. Arrivals are direct into Northern Ireland and present at Drumkeen House which is the centre of the Home Office's immigration Enforcement Operations within Northern Ireland. The government reported on 24th August 2023 that the number of people waiting for an initial decision on their UK asylum application had reached 175,000. At that point, ca. 23,700 initial decisions had been made since the start of the year, with around 70% of applicants receiving refugee status, humanitarian protection or other similar permits allowing them to remain in the country. The previous year, an estimated 14,730 decisions were released. In November 2022, the Guardian reported that more than 40,000 UK asylum seekers had been waiting between one and three years for a decision. A separate estimate showed that about 155 children had been waiting for more than five years for their application to be evaluated.

Asylum statistics published on 12th September 2023 by the government tell us that in Northern Ireland, only Mid Ulster and Fermanagh & Omagh have zero asylum seekers.

Figures from June 2023 show that in DCSDC there were 185 people in receipt of asylum support (section 95 and 98), up from 53 in Q1. Of these 185, 134 were in dispersed accommodation and 51 were in contingency accommodation (hotel). Based on 2021 population figures, in the DCSDC area, this number relates to 12 asylum seekers per 10,000 population. The figure for the same period in 2022 for DCSDC was 9 people. Figures just published on 23rd November from Sept 2023 show 172 people in receipt of section 95 asylum support, of which 133 were in dispersal accommodation and 39 were in contingency accommodation. There are no figures given for those on section 98 support in the DCSDC area for this time.

Whilst there seems to be no official record of people with refugee status in DCSDC area, it would be useful to consider that NINo (National Insurance Number) registrations to adult overseas nationals entering DCSDC area year to June 2023 totalled 1018. These figures include 221 from Sub Saharan countries, 17 from North Africa and 17 from the Middle East and Central Asia.

Historically on the Syrian VPRS scheme (2013 - 2023), the DCSDC area resettled 94 people. None were resettled on the VCRS scheme (Vulnerable Children Resettlement Scheme).

## METHODOLOGY

Our methodology for the “Delivery of a needs analysis and implementation of a support and Integration programme for Asylum Seekers and Refugees” was to directly engage with refugees, asylum seekers, and key stakeholders, to identify needs, baseline current provision and generate ideas and proposals for a meaningful, needs-led support programme. We want to develop a range of deliverable and meaningful activities which are contextualised to the needs of the refugee and asylum seeker community. The newcomer community needs to have ownership and understand that they have a role in shaping and influencing what activities take place. This report provides information on the methodology used, challenges encountered and supplementary findings/information that may not be pertinent to the scope of this project, but that DCSDC may find informative for their own future initiatives.

### Desk Research

Desk research was carried out to establish an idea of basic service provision within the area and to establish data on numbers dispersed within the area. The Researcher also executed this research by endeavouring to contact representatives of many organisations by personally visiting them, telephoning them, and sending emails. The result of the desk research and personal contact made is evidenced in the Directory of Referral Agencies supplied.

#### Challenges:

- *Inaccurate information* listed for community groups and service providers, out of date website and varying information listed on different portals. For example: conflicting addresses, telephone numbers and responsible person listings.
- *DCSDC area or NI specific information.* Much of the statistical information given is for the whole of the UK, much of the detailed information by region shows only data for Great Britain or England and Wales only. As we understand that the figures are growing weekly, the information found on public sources is generally at least 6 months out of date.
- *Time.* Given the numbers of voluntary, community groups, schools and other players in this field and the timeframe of the project. It was not possible to contact, double check and chase all possible targets.
- *Groups and Organisation response.* Many people contacted reported being too busy to respond or take time to give the information requested. Messages, emails, voice messages were left with organisations, many of these were never returned or responded to.

### Baseline Surveys/Organisational Proformas

45 surveys were sent out, via email in the form of a clickable link. These surveys were issued to those identified as key stakeholders/players and local active citizen groups including faith and culture groups, schools, sporting organisations. In the hope for a successful uptake, the researcher attempted to call as many organisations as possible to introduce and explain the project before the link was issued.

The Survey gathered information on the following: number of employees, function of organisation, services offered, age of service users, ethnic mix and first language of service users, organisation’s experience working with asylum seekers and refugees, specific services provided to the target group, their experience of key needs of asylum seekers, the organisation’s key needs to provide services to asylum seekers & refugees, and onward referral and sign posting information.

#### Challenges:

- *Low response rate* of those who received requests to fill in the survey. In total, 13 responses were received. One person reported an issue with the link very early in the survey process, the issue was immediately resolved. Test responses to links were carried out to ensure a functioning link. We don’t believe that this had any negative impact on the individual’s ability to complete the survey.

### Interviews with Staff Working In Dispersed Accommodation In DCSDC Area

People 1st met with Mears employees on 12th October at the Ava Hotel in Derry/Londonderry. This hotel is home to asylum seekers awaiting claim decisions in the DCSDC area, inhabitants are single males. Capacity is currently 40 people; this is expected to rise. This hotel has been receiving Mear’s clients since April 2022. Mears Group PLC hold the contract with the Home Office to source and provide contingency and dispersal accommodation for asylum seekers in Northern Ireland. Dispersal accommodation is longer-term temporary accommodation managed by accommodation providers on behalf of the Home Office. Newcomers normally stay in dispersal accommodation until their asylum claim has been fully determined. Mears took on this contract with the Home Office in 2019, the contract also includes a built-in welfare package. Dispersal accommodation is sourced from private rental stock, not Housing Executive stock. Mears state that of their clients, the key nationalities are: Syrian, Somalian, Eritrean and Iranian.

Single men are initially housed in hotels (Contingency Accommodation). Families are put into dispersal accommodation. This dispersal accommodation will have been checked and given approval by the PSNI. A client will normally have an induction within their new property within 24 hours of arrival to show them how appliances work, do’s, and don’ts etc. Once they are in dispersal accommodation, they have a housing manager who inspects the property once a month for repairs etc. The tenants also receive visits from Mears Welfare Officers. As much as possible, Mears try to ensure that any changes of accommodation are within the same geographical area.

#### Challenges:

- *Finding contact details and making first contact* with the relevant Mears employees was an initial issue and contributed to a delay on this part of the scoping exercise and the subsequent organisation of interviews of asylum seekers within the contingency accommodation.

## Consultation Forums with Key Community Stakeholders & Local Citizen Groups

Via desk research and one to one interviews and chats, a list of key community stakeholders and local active citizen groups was compiled.

Two forums were held on 16th October 2023 at Women's Centre Derry. In attendance were representatives from Women's Centre Derry, DFCNI Jobs & Benefits Office (Foyle & Lisnagelvin Offices), Migrants Centre NI, Waterside Women's Centre, North West Islamic Association, North West Volunteer Centre, Foyle Vineyard Church. Apologies were sent by Longtower Primary School, YMCA, Cornerstone City Church/Hope Centre, and Foyle Food Bank.

One forum was also held on the 19th of October at SECA in Strabane. In attendance were representatives from Strabane Ethnic Community Association, Strabane Community Unemployed Group, DFCNI Jobs & benefits Office (Strabane Office), Western Health Trust. Apologies were sent by Northern Ireland Housing Executive and Strabane Community Project.

All meetings were informal events and focused on the sharing of experiences, best practices and concerns and needs for the future.

Researcher also had various individual face to face meetings, voice and video calls with representatives of various groups and organisations including, but not limited to: The Hope Centre, Foyle Food Bank, The YMCA, NIHE, Women's Centre Derry, SCUG, SECA, DFCNI, Extern, Rosemount Youth Centre, Cathedral Youth Club, Gasyard Centre, The Trussell Trust, Grassroots food market, Londonderry Model Primary School, Street Soccer NI, Claude's Café.

### Challenges:

- *Attendance* – Coordinating and finding a common date and time for all interested parties to attend was problematic. One major key player, North West Migrants Forum received open-ended invitations from People 1st to attend forums or schedule an individual separate meeting, were unable to attend any event or to meet to talk at any time.
- *First contact* was also a problem, for example, the Researcher made multiple attempts to get contact details and speak to an employee of Bryson Intercultural, any details found for their "Derry Floating Support" workers were non-responsive or no longer in service.

## Surveys, Focus Groups & One-To-One Interviews with Refugees & Asylum Seekers

In total, six events were organised to meet and speak to asylum seekers and refugees within the DCSDC area. People 1st spoke to 31 asylum seekers and refugees and collected a total of 30 completed surveys.

*One Focus Group* was held on 17th October at the Women's Centre Derry. In attendance were People 1st, two representatives from the Women's Centre Derry and 7 women, 5 of whom are asylum seekers and 2 have refugee status.

The meeting was an informal event and focused on sharing experiences (both positive and negative) of the asylum-seeking process, barriers to integration, and concerns and needs for the future. The attendees were also issued with a dedicated questionnaire designed to have a clear record of key areas of the clients' lives. Topics include: Education & Skills, Housing/Shelter, Money, Language Support and Interpretation, Access to Healthcare, Work, Integration and Community, Food & Clothing, Education of Minors, Access to Social Justice, Access to Social Welfare, and Future Plans.

*A Focus Group* was scheduled to take place in Strabane at SECA on the 19th of October 2023. People 1st understand that there are currently no (zero) asylum seekers in the Strabane area, however there are 4 Ukrainian families who have refugee status. All these families were invited to attend the meeting via employees of the DFCNI and SECA. No one signed up to attend the Focus Group. People 1st representatives were however present at the venue on the allotted date and time on the off chance that any of the invited clients would arrive. No one attended the focus group.

*Two sessions* were schedule on 24th October, one at the DFCNI Foyle Office and the other at the DFCNI Lisnagelvin Office. Case workers from both offices booked their clients who have been granted refugee status into 20-minute slots to speak with People 1st on an individual basis. Where an interpreter was needed, we used The Big Word. One client arrived with an interpreter.

*One full-day* session was organised at the Ava hotel in Derry. People 1st set themselves up in a designated, easily-visible area of the hotel, allowing residents to pop in and talk to us when they could.

*One full-day* session was organised in the Holywell Trust, Derry. This session was a "drop in" day where anyone in DCSDC with asylum seeker or refugee status could pop in, have a coffee, talk to People 1st, and complete a survey.

### Challenges:

- *Managing expectations* of the clients within the scope of the project. Many of the clients would often go off on a tangent regarding issues that are directly related to their current situation, but not within the scope of this project. The challenge was to find and maintain the balance of empathy with the client and to manage their expectations while building confidence and trust and keeping on track to fulfil the purpose of the focus groups and one to one meetings.
- *Communicating with those in dispersal accommodation*, People 1st had to rely on Mears Case Workers to extend invitations to those asylum seekers placed in dispersal accommodation.
- *Communication with those who have gained refugee status*. Once "leave to remain" is granted, the clients are technically and statistically "off the radar". We had to rely on word of mouth and DFCNI Case Workers to extend invitations to those refugees in the DCSDC area.

## FINDINGS

### Accommodation/Housing

Dispersal locations within Northern Ireland are based on availability of housing. A manager for Extern on the NI Refugee Resettlement Scheme who is responsible for resettling Afghan families tell us that to date, there have been no (zero) Afghan families resettled in DCSDC and none planned for the immediate future. This is because Mears is already active in the DCSDC area, and competition for property is high. Extern's role in DCSDC is to support about 30 Syrian families who have been in the area for 4 to 6 years. We understand that Mears are currently searching in the Strabane area for accommodation, and we conclude therefore that it is a matter of time until asylum seekers are dispersed to the Strabane area. We have been told that, in the month prior to 16th October, Mears had accrued 14 new homes to be used as dispersal accommodation with the Western Health Trust Area.

The lack of housing becomes a real risk during that transition period between having an asylum claim accepted and being given notice to move on. The problem is lack of knowledge of the process and limited time and funds to find a place to live. Some who have been going through the system, report reluctance of landlords to take on people who are in receipt of universal credit. On receipt of refugee status, the notice period to leave dispersal accommodation is, in theory, 28 days. However, People 1st heard multiple accounts of clients who had received a notice to quit giving them just 7 days to leave their asylum accommodation. In one instance, People 1st encountered the example of an expectant mother being given 1 weeks' notice by the Home Office to leave her dispersal accommodation. This was two weeks before she was due to give birth. An issue was also flagged whereby the letters used to communicate this notice to "move on" are provided in English only, this doesn't consider the literacy level or English language capabilities of the person in receipt of the letter.

**Contingency Accommodation** - Interim Home Office figures from the end of June 2023 indicate that 50,546 individuals were residing in "contingency accommodation," which includes hotels and reception centres. In March 2023, there were 20 such hotels in Northern Ireland. People are having to stay in contingency accommodation for very long periods of time. The Home Office states that hotel accommodation should only be used as a last resort and that people should be moved into longer term housing after 35 days. Of those clients interviewed within the hotel contingency accommodation, the majority had been there for at least 6 months, at least one client had been there for over 1 year, two clients had been living in contingency accommodation including that in the DCSDC area for 2 years' while awaiting a decision on their asylum application. During our research, People 1st recognised that there is a gap in the process that is the move from Home Office /Mears/Dispersal Accommodation to becoming a private renter/housing executive service user. This gap also goes hand in hand with a gap in knowledge of the process of understanding social welfare rights and the process to be followed.

### Education

Mears report that many of their clients have a high level of education and a vast range of skills, this was also evident in the meetings carried out with the target group.

Figure 1 (below) shows level of education completed. Of the asylum seekers and refugees interviewed, 16.7% (5 people) of those interviewed had not completed any formal schooling, while 30% were educated to bachelor's or master's degree level. Professions and vocational study listed included: teaching diploma, computer science, accountancy, media and public relations and civil engineering.

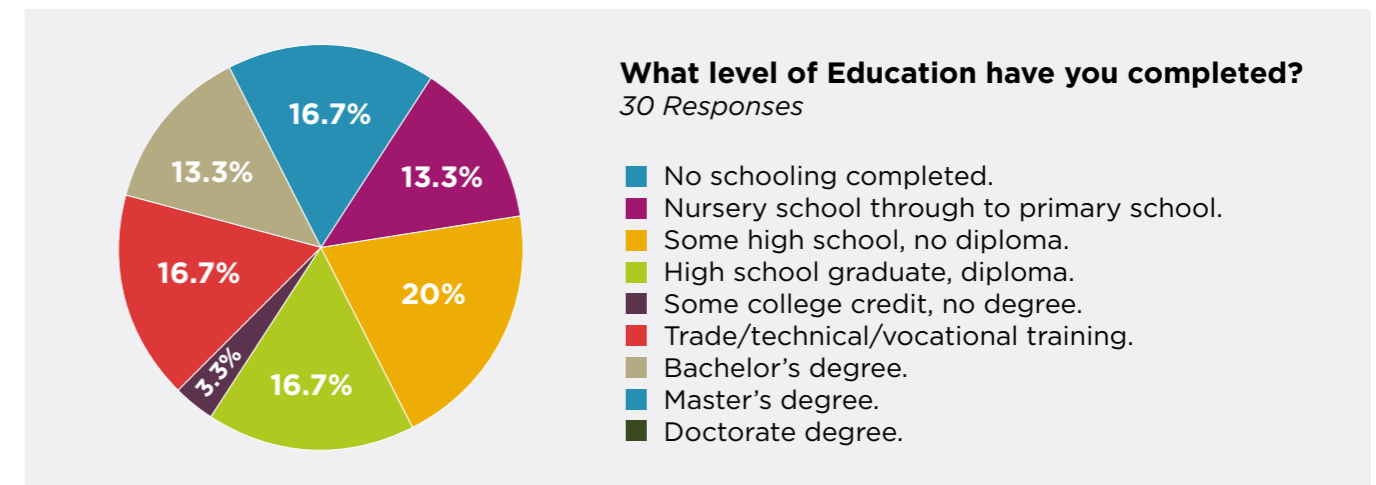


Figure 1

People 1st also encountered Syrian males, under the age of 26 who, because of the war in Syria and subsequent years in transit etc. have missed chunks of their formal education, many with schooling interrupted during primary school. This has resulted in low level literacy in their own language and practically zero English language skills. On questioning, those clients, show little enthusiasm to attend

English language lessons (possible cultural and gender-based pride issues on admitting their perceived "educational short fallings"). In these cases, there needs to be a way to prevent these clients falling through the gaps and while working and integrating is one of the best ways to be verbal in English, those basic literacy skills need to be addressed. Community group workers report that these types of clients find it difficult to take that step of attending classroom-based learning. They are easily discouraged; confidence and motivation are frequently a big issue.

For those clients with school-age children, no major issues were reported by community groups, stakeholders, or the clients themselves with regards to issues with school enrolment. There is experience of some delays in getting school placement. Adult newcomers report an issue dealing with enrolment and homework, and understanding the education process when they themselves don't speak English. Other issues stem from housing location and low proximity to schools. One risk of the current lack of accommodation in the DCSDC area is that, should families need to be moved to another area because of availability of accommodation, this could cause disruption to those children already enrolled and settled in a local school. Frustration was expressed by several newcomers who have children under 18 but above the age of 16.

These children may have missed large chunks of their schooling, however they would not necessarily have the UK mainstream curriculum made accessible to them because they are over the age of 16. People 1st spoke to one 17-year-old girl who couldn't attend a local school even though she wanted to do her GCSEs and had never completed her secondary education, she would have to attend local FE college and had missed enrolment dates for this year. Key workers reported that children who came on the VPRS Syrian scheme should have had extra English support in schools, this isn't believed to have happened. It is believed that they should have had several months of intensive English before undertaking standard lessons.

### Employment and Volunteering

Asylum seekers do not have the right to work. If they have been awaiting an asylum claim decision for one year, they can then apply for permission to work under the Shortage Occupation List. Mears workers report that this expectation needs to be carefully managed, many asylum seekers believe that the process to gain this permission is easy, in reality it depends heavily on the client's solicitor's availability to request this permission on behalf of the client. It also depends on the ability of the client to fall into the category of one of the shortage professions.

Many of the asylum seekers that we spoke to were enthusiastically engaged in some level of volunteer work and many felt that the hours allocated were not sufficient. Many feel the need to volunteer in a line of work that is related their actual profession. Some volunteering positions require Access NI checks which requires a National Insurance number which can be obtained only when refugee status is granted.

With refugee status comes the right to work. People 1st encountered refugees who, while practically fluent in English, and who had previously used English daily in their work in their home country, were being rejected for jobs because they couldn't provide an English and Maths GCSE certificate or essential skills qualifications. While all reported that they would prefer to work within their previous profession, there was a realistic attitude to prioritise the need to be economically active and independent. One refugee reported that she "couldn't wait to start paying taxes and just be a normal person." Another reason given for job rejections was that the candidate was over qualified and that there was a fear that they would leave when something "better" came along.

Of the asylum seekers and refugees interviewed, 76.6% of responders had a job in their home country. Jobs listed included: pizza maker, tailor, policeman, farmer, professor, accountant, sales manager, engineer, IT technician, joiner, member of armed forces, barber, and construction worker. Of those interviewed with the right to work in the UK, 25% felt that they needed to improve their skills/qualifications to find work. People 1st asked those with the right to work to "Explain any barriers that you are experiencing in their job hunt." *Reponses included:*

- Language and literacy
- Uncertainty about where they will locate when given notice to "move on".
- Child care
- Lost qualification certificates
- Medical issues

### Financial

A person who is being provided with full-board hotel contingency accommodation receives a weekly allowance of £9.58 in addition to receiving food and toiletries. (Section 98 support).

In dispersal accommodation, clients receive £47.39 per person per week (Section 95 support). Pregnant women receive an extra £3 per week during pregnancy as well as £5 per week for a child under 1 year and £3 per week for a child between one and three years old. A pregnant asylum seeker in receipt of Section 95 is entitled to a one-off maternity grant of £300. Section 95 support is withdrawn if a person is granted leave to remain. A notice period will be provided to enable the person to make a claim for benefits and access housing assistance from their local council. This is often referred to as the 'move on' period. This notice period should be 28 days.

People 1st understand that some banks would not set up a bank account before refugee status was established, NI numbers issued, and permanent address provided, and many wouldn't not accept the ARC card as a form of ID. Responders felt it would be better to have a "local" with them who could fight their corner.

### Food and Clothing

Foyle Food Bank reports that they deal with 150 plus refugees and asylum seekers on a regular basis. There are two Welcome Churches in Londonderry/Derry: Foyle Vineyard and Cornerstone City Church. Both help with food and clothing and baby equipment among their many other services offered. Grass Roots Café and Food Market in Strabane is also a food source for those in the Strabane area.

Of those interviewed, 86.7% felt that they had access to healthy food and regular meals. It should be noted that a high percentage of those interviewed are in contingency accommodation where regular free meals are provided.

Despite Mears and the Red Cross issuing vouchers or cash for clothing, many of those questioned are still inadequately prepared for winter. Of those interviewed, 42.9% reported that they struggle to access or urgently need suitable clothing. See Figure 2 below.



Figure 2

Many of the asylum seekers and refugees who we spoke to were unaware of these services and during our chats, People 1st referred many of them to these organisations, especially The Hope Centre (Cornerstone City Church) which could help with immediate winter clothing needs and baby equipment. We also encountered single men in the hotel who had been granted refugee status and were awaiting “move on” communications. We ensured they had been notified of these services which could prove vital in that period while awaiting the processing of universal credit and job hunting.

As in all cultures, the cultural and social aspects of food and its preparation is important. Those in hotel accommodation express a desire to be able to cook and eat their own food. All when questioned about the food of their country, demonstrated a pride and willingness to share details of their indigenous cuisine with People 1st.

### Health Care

One key issue reported is the lack of immediate and comprehensive Health Screening on arrival. One Western Health Trust employee is currently leading a project to, among other things, think about what a programme like the Belfast NINES programme would look like in DCSDC.

Women’s groups report a rising number of women joining their events from countries like Somalia, Sudan, and Eritrea. Some communities within these countries are known to practise Female Genital Mutilation. Women’s groups report that recently, some women from these countries have confided in them that they underwent this procedure or fled to avoid the procedure being carried out on a young female child. As more women from these areas seem to be arriving in the north of Ireland, this presents new considerations for physical and mental health care.

On speaking to representatives of the Western Health Trust, the hopes for the future are that every asylum seeker or refugee coming to the area will be given an intensive health assessment within 5 days of entering the dispersal area, this proposal is however, still awaiting approval.

There is an ongoing issue with registering for GP services and, subsequently getting appointments whilst having limited English. In general, there seem to be minimal issues being accepted as a patient of a GP Practice.

*Dentistry* – It was reported that finding an NHS dentist is difficult. Many spoken to had not yet registered for the following reasons:

- Didn’t know how.
- Couldn’t do this until they receive refugee status and received a HC1 form.
- Didn’t yet need a dentist.

There seems to be confusion over eligibility. Many believe that they aren’t entitled until they receive their refugee status, while many will understandably wait until they have this status and can use a HC1 form to get help with costs. In addition to the above, the same frustration was voiced as that of the indigenous population of the inability to find a surgery with an available NHS dentist.

Western Trust reported that there is a need for access to dentistry for kids, they think this may be due to over reliance on formula or milk with too many sugars added. Roisin Curry mentioned that the Chief Dental Officer (Donncha O’Carolan) had been trying to develop a programme specifically for asylum seekers to give them access to NHS dentists. This is ongoing and they were trying to encourage more dentists to come on to the programme.

### Integration & Support

Contingency accommodation in the form of hotels is by nature a barrier to integration. Privacy screening on foyer/reception windows serves to retain the privacy and security of those being hosted in the hotel, but they also serve, unintentionally, to enclose and segregate the client inside the hotel. During our interviews with asylum seekers in the hotels, People 1st encountered numerous admissions of depression, anxiety etc. and a belief that those hosted felt like they were in a “fish bowl” looking out at the world. For those who have been in contingency accommodation for extended periods of time, the impact can be imagined. A recent discussion with a leading volunteer worker in the DCSDC area reported that about 50% of the asylum seekers (living in the hotel) who they meet are taking anti-depressants. Some residents of contingency accommodation who were previously abstemious, have admitted to consuming alcohol as a coping mechanism.

Added to the above, the weekly allowance of £9.58 doesn’t allow for many activities that give opportunities for integration. At one stage, some residents of the hotel accommodation received free gym membership. This was a time-bound pilot funded scheme by DCSDC through the Good Relations Programme. Attendance was high at the start of the scheme, however by the end of the pilot, attendance to the gym had reduced dramatically. The gym membership was appreciated; however, many would feel self-conscious entering a gym for the first time alone, there would also be a barrier with not having the appropriate clothing to attend a gym.

With regards to Integration and Support, Mears report the challenges that their clients encounter being as follows:

- Right to work/be economically active
- Language and confidence when dealing with bureaucratic issues  
i.e. telephoning doctors and dentists
- Mental health
- General Health Care access issues because of language and lack of knowledge.
- Legal representation
- Case work support
- General integration into the community

Gender also plays a part in integration or lack of. Many wives miss opportunities to attend classes and social events because their husband would not traditionally look after their children. The women are restricted to events where creche facilities are provided or where the child can be involved too. Many would not be permitted to attend mixed gender events without their husband being present. Young females would also miss opportunities to integrate, their culture might dictate that they wouldn’t be allowed out to attend a youth club or similar activity.



One Mears employee who has come through the Asylum system himself, has been in Northern Ireland for ten years and has British citizenship stipulates that the issues and needs can also be considered by age: 25 to 30 - education and community engagement, over 40 - health care. He believes that volunteering, while valuable, isn't the long-term solution. The people need to be economically active; they want to practice their professions. This brings up the recurring issue of "right to work" while awaiting a claim decision.

Of the asylum seekers and refugees interviewed, only 2 individuals (6.9%) were not interested in getting to know people in their area. This is attributed to language skills, the lack of certainty about where they will be located once an asylum decision is reached, and to the previously mentioned depression or lack of motivation brought on by their personal experience and subsequent location within a contingency hotel. 58.6% expressed the desire to meet more people but didn't know where or how to do this, or they didn't have the financial means to get out and socialise or join clubs etc. Of those who have joined groups or clubs, some examples are given here: gym, essential skills club, Women's Centre Derry, football group, boxing class, local church, volunteer groups.

### Language Skills

There are mixed experiences on the topic of language classes/ESOL provision. Mears staff tell us that Asylum seekers are due ESOL training via Department of Economy funding, but places are very limited. Community groups cite ongoing strike action and staff shortages at FE colleges as creating problem of provision during the ongoing autumn term.

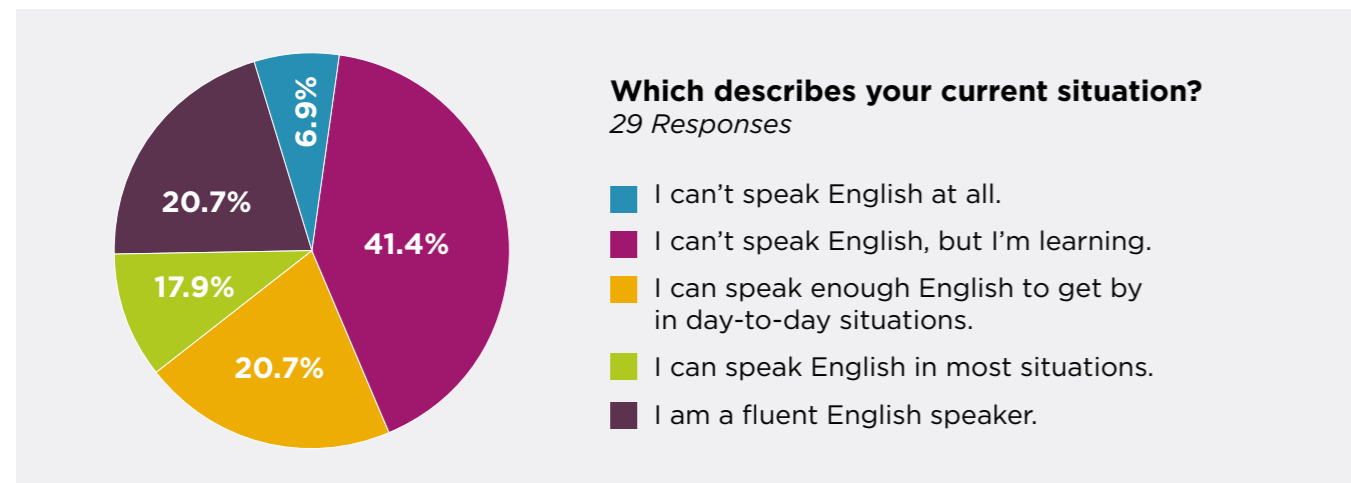


Figure 3

Several community groups told us about some asylum seekers being barred from accessing English language classes due to not having a National Insurance number and therefore not being eligible to enrol. All report that lack of funding and shortage of teachers coupled with a rise of newcomers has meant that demand for ESOL is very high. All stakeholders and community groups agree that English language lessons are a vital need. They report that many are illiterate in their own language, see example above about Syrians under the age of 26. The same literacy issue was also observed for Arabic women of older age groups.

Of those asylum seekers and refugees interviewed, 6.9% couldn't speak any English and were making no inroads to learning the language, 41.4% didn't speak English but were trying to learn (See Figure 3 on previous page). Of those learning English, the main provider is NWRC and conversational classes run by local community groups.

English language competence would remove many of the barriers to daily life including volunteering opportunities and subsequently restore levels of self-respect in having the autonomy to do things themselves.

### Language Spoken

Key Stake holders and community groups report a high ethnic mix of those using their services and subsequently a wide range of languages spoken including Arabic, Hindi, Chinese, Farsi, Tigrinya, Ukrainian, Chinese, Nepali, Bengali, Panjabi, and a wide range of European languages. Curiously, none report Amharic as a used language. Of the asylum seekers and refugees interviewed, Figure 4 below shows that the key language spoken by responders is Arabic (56.6%) followed by Tigrinya and Amharic.

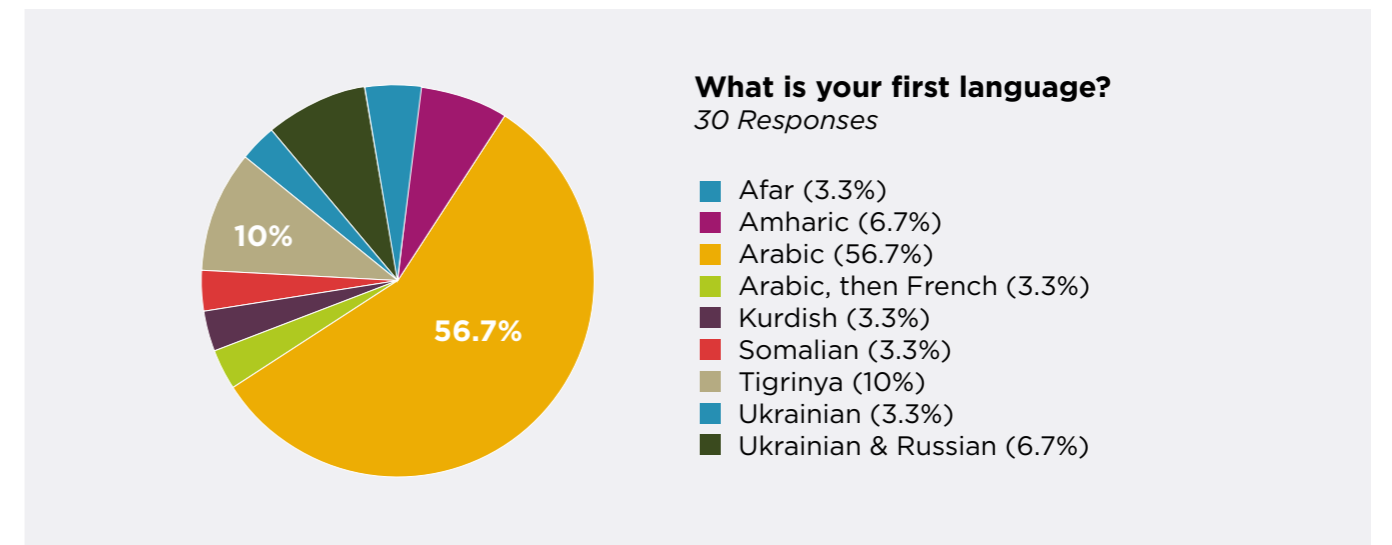


Figure 4

### Legal/Social Justice

Issues were reported around the availability or lack of legal representation in the DCSDC area. The researcher identified only 2 Law firms in DCSDC area that deal with immigration law, these are listed in the Directory of Referral Agencies provided. Many of those interviewed had legal representation set up when they arrived into Belfast. They continued to use these law practices in Belfast even after relocating to DCSDC area despite the financial implications of paying for travel to and from Belfast for meetings with their legal representative. With the roll out of the free Translink travel pass scheme in November 2023, some of this financial burden will be eliminated temporarily for those who arrived before the date to qualify for the travel pass.

Of the asylum seekers and refugees interviewed, 66.7% reported that they understood their rights with regards to their legal status within the UK. 1 individual noted that they didn't know how to access the social justice system.

## Mental Health

Stake holders and community groups report instances of trauma being observed, and they believe there is not enough done to deal with the trauma manifested by clients.

An Extern employee told us that trauma help is practically non-existent in the DCSDC area, they recounted the story of a local counsellor who refused to take on a client stating that the permitted 6 sessions on the NHS would not be enough and more damage would be inflicted by opening the trauma discussion only to leave it unresolved after 6 sessions. The client would then have been referred to Mental Health Services. Extern also see a need for statutory organisations to have some level of awareness training in trust building and use of language like the use of the word “sanctions” which may have a triggering affect.

## Social Welfare

Asylum seekers are barred from accessing the social security system and have no right to work. On making an asylum claim, they are issued with a government ARC card. The right to work, or not, is shown in the remarks section of the ARC card. The ARC card does not give the right to study, however some colleges etc. may require this card. DFCNI employees report that there is no “warm handover” from anyone, no information to warn them of the possible arrival of a new claimant/client. They note that while the client needs a NI number to make a claim, some notes from a GP would also help DFCNI staff better understand the client needs.

DFCNI employees report that, most times, newcomer clients arrive at their offices and don't have any knowledge of how and where to go to for the right help. Of the asylum seekers and refugees interviewed, just over half (53.6%) understood their entitlements with regards to the social welfare system and knew how to access it. The remaining 46.4% didn't know how or where to start or needed help to initiate the process.

## General Information from Stakeholder and Active Citizen Group Interviews

### 1. Key community stakeholders and local active citizen groups were asked:

#### *What are the greatest needs of asylum seekers / refugees who access your services?*

##### Summarised responses included:

- Language classes, language ability.\*
- Translators/interpreters.\*
- Socialisation/Getting involved in the community to make new friends.\*
- Friendship.\*
- Engaging activities.\*
- Education courses – essential skills and upskilling.\*
- Help with administration both understanding and carrying out - bank accounts, benefit applications, document conversion i.e. driving licence.\*
- Access to dental care.
- Mental health support.
- Full Health Screening on Arrival – NINES service.
- Vulnerability assessments.
- Housing maintenance.

*\*These were repeatedly mentioned by the majority of responders.*

### 2. Key community stakeholders and local active citizen groups were asked:

#### *What is your company's greatest need in providing the services offered?*

##### Summarised responses included:

- Finance/funding and staffing.
- Interpreters/translation services.
- Volunteer opportunities.
- Cultural Awareness for involved workers.
- Childcare places/funded creche facilities.
- More meeting space for activities and programmes. Kitchen space.
- Need more qualified youth workers – youth workers need a level 3 qualification; people holding the qualification are difficult to source in the area.

### 3. Key community stakeholders and local active citizen groups were asked:

#### *What are your concerns for the future?*

##### Summarised responses included:

- Limited resources (including housing) and reducing funding
- Increasing numbers of newcomers
- Lack of support services
- Lack of cultural awareness by both local community, volunteer and paid workers
- Engagement in/from the community
- Growing need to support unaccompanied asylum-seeking children and refugees –current contact is very low, but is foreseen to change very soon

There was a general feeling among community and faith groups that they work very much on a reactive basis and have little or no preparation for situations arising when having contact with the asylum seekers and refugees in the area. They report that there is a strong need for some kind of awareness training for those who work and volunteer in this sector both on the lines of cultural awareness and awareness of the actual asylum to refugee process. Similarly, it is felt that the local community could benefit from having more exposure and being more aware of the culture of those newcomers to the area.

### General Information from Refugee and Asylum Seeker Interviews and Surveys

Of the asylum seekers and refugees interviewed, 93.3% were in DCSDC area as a lone adult, 6.7% came from family units of 2 adults (see figure 5 below). From those individuals and couples who responded to the survey there were 21 males and 10 females. Previous comments made about challenges in contacting those in dispersal accommodation are evidenced here through the lack of information gained from adults/families with children who would live in dispersal accommodation, Housing Executive, or private rental. Only 5 responders came from family units with minors. Key age groups interviewed were 30 -39 (43.3%) and 18-29 (36.7%), see Figure 6.

The breakdown of nationality can be seen in Figure 7. Syrians comprised 28.6% of responders followed by 25% being Sudanese.

Of those interviewed, 17 had arrived in the DCSDC area in 2023, 8 in 2022 and 5 between 2018 and 2021. Of those interviewed, on their arrival to DCSDC area, only 8% already had family or friends who had settled in the area.

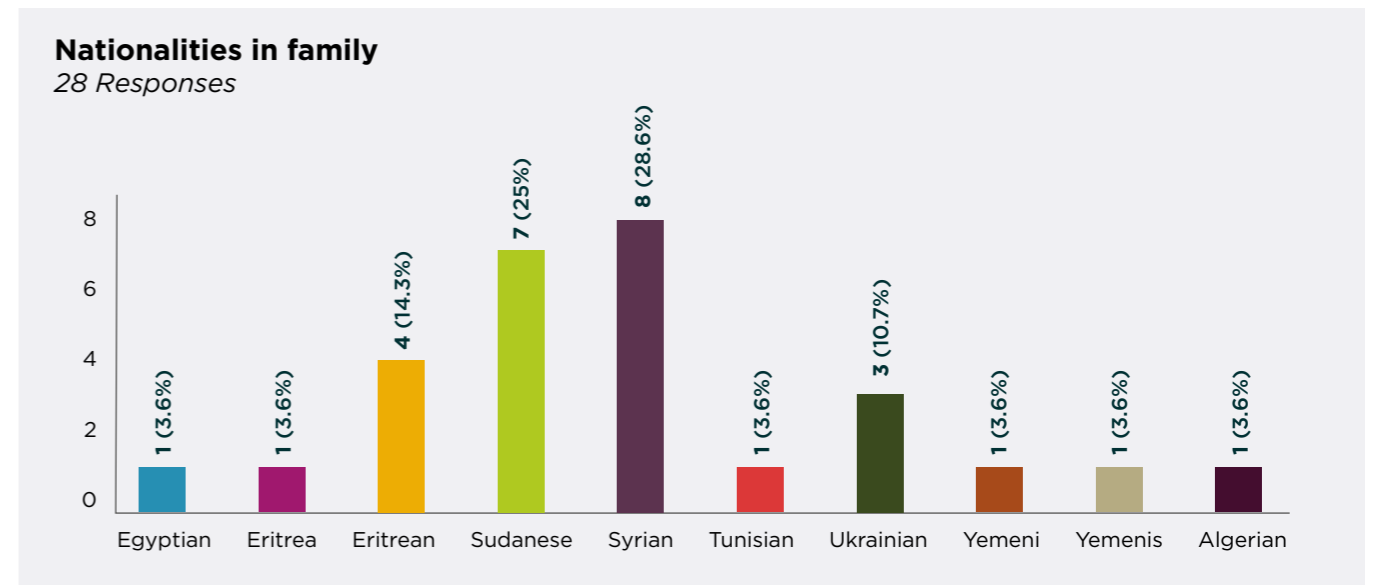


Figure 7

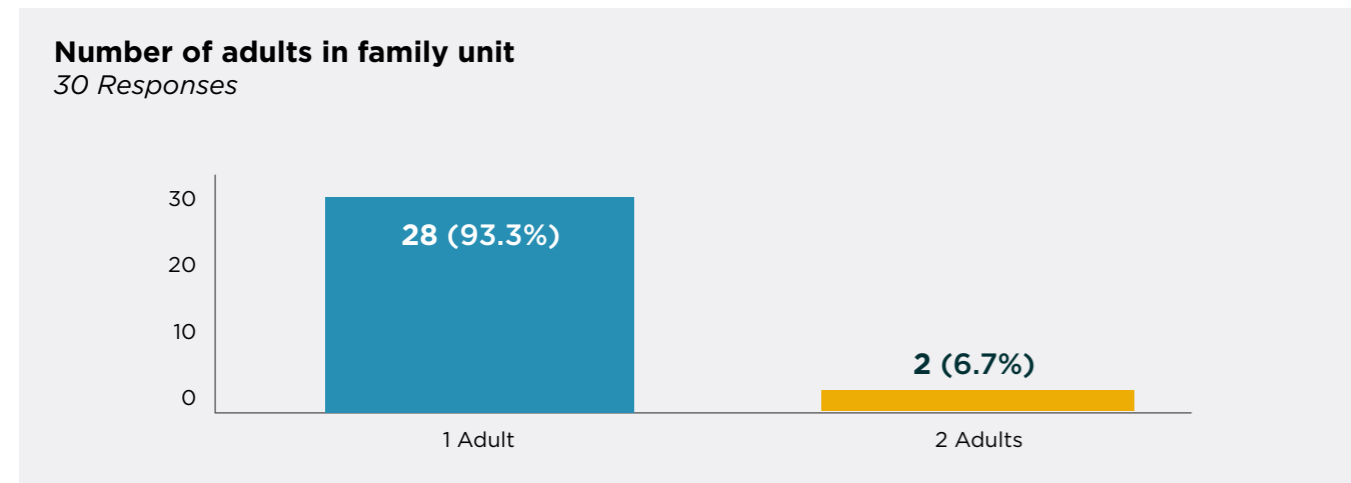


Figure 5

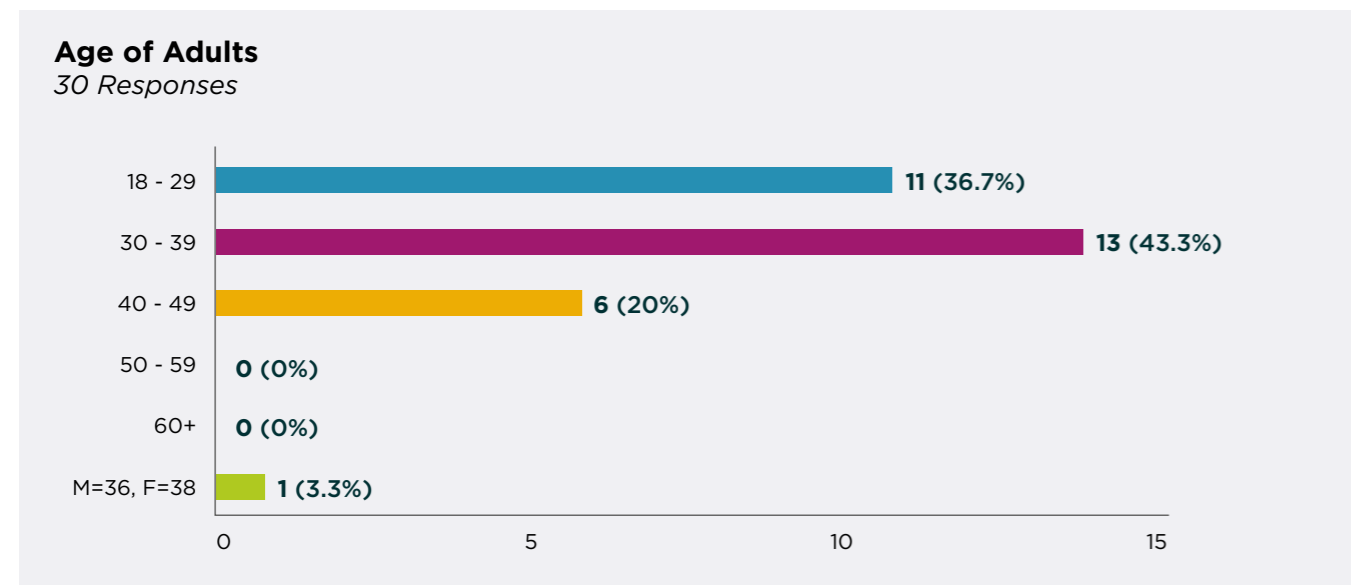


Figure 6

### People 1st asked what kind of help was needed in general.

#### Answers included:

- Interpreting and translation
- English classes
- Warm winter clothing
- Meeting local people
- Help setting up bank accounts

### People 1st asked asylum seekers and refugees what their plans for the future were.

Of the responses given, 52.9% intended to remain in DCSDC area. Only 1 intended to return to their home country. Others expressed a desire to move back to Belfast or to Great Britain, mostly to Liverpool, Birmingham, or Manchester. Reasons given for leaving the DCSDC area included work opportunities, university and scholarship opportunities, and proximity to family and friends.

### People 1st asked the asylum seekers and refugees list items that would be included on their "wish list" regarding feeling supported and integrating into the DCSDC area.

#### Answers included:

- Learn English
- Find work
- Finish education
- Upskilling and short courses
- Have a place of their own to live
- Volunteer opportunities
- More cultural awareness/sensitivity for local indigenous population
- Awareness for newcomers of social rules/etiquette
- Make friends with local people

## PROGRAMME RECOMMENDATIONS

**NB** – These are draft recommendations only; they do not constitute a final programme proposal. Final programme proposal will be submitted for approval following further evaluation and feedback from stakeholders.

People 1st recommend a series of events aimed at addressing some of the issues and barriers to integration highlighted above. Some of the issues highlighted are outside the scope of this project and some are currently being considered by local statutory bodies.

**Barrier to Integration:** *Lack of basic English Language skills* for carrying out day-to-day tasks whether on a social level or when dealing with statutory bodies. English skills are also lacking for those who wish to volunteer or are currently or soon to be jobseekers.

A comprehensive programme of English language training is recommended to the majority of those to be identified to take part in the programme. Learning can be classroom based when possible and, where childcare issues and reluctance to enter a classroom exist, other options to learn English should be investigated like English Learning Apps and providers who offer one-to-one and small group lessons online. For this part, digital inclusion should be considered to ensure full learner commitment and engagement.

**Barrier to Integration:** *Employability.* The majority of those interviewed expressed a need to be economically active. Those who intend to seek employment lack up-to-date CVs and the skills that accompany job searches like interview skills. As newcomers, many don't know how and where to start with a job search. Academic and vocational qualifications need conversion to UK levelling/equivalency.

For those who are preparing to have their claim approved and those who have received refugee status, a programme of employability skills should be considered. This could include CV building, interview skills, qualification/certification equivalency service and, where needed, sign posting to community groups and statutory bodies who can offer help with interview and work clothing and equipment.

**Barrier to Integration:** *Lack of interpreters* in the DCSDC area.

*Upskilling* – Because of the lack of interpreters and translators in the area, many must travel from Belfast. We recommend that several clients with various mother tongues are identified with a view to undertaking an interpreting qualification. On completion, their names could be added to a database held by the council to be utilised by whatever groups in the DCSDC area need their services.

**Barrier to Integration:** *Lack of knowledge* around the asylum/refugee process and of the key cultures of newcomers.

A programme of training and awareness is recommended for those who work and volunteer and have contact with newcomers to the area. For those who frequently go the extra mile and find themselves being asked to give advice etc., this programme should cover some aspect of an introduction to the asylum process and the move to refugee status. Of the refugees spoken to who follow Islam, and from feedback from a few community organisations, there is a view that a cultural awareness programme focusing on Islam would be beneficial and appreciated.

**Barrier to Integration:** *Lack of knowledge* about Northern Ireland and Derry/Londonderry, culture, history, and language etc.

On other migrants' programmes that People 1st have managed, they have delivered/hosted cultural awareness events for newcomers. A similar programme is recommended which gives newcomers an introduction to Northern Irish and specifically, Derry/Londonderry culture, history, language and food. This could also be coupled with a reciprocal presentation from those from the various cultures within the chosen newcomer cohort. Or, in a similar manner to accommodate much of which is mentioned above regarding cultural awareness, some kind of a "common ground" event could be designed and hosted.

**Barrier to Integration:** *Financial, child care and linguistic barriers.*

Regarding meeting others and integrating with locals and mental health, events could be organised to ensure that many of the barriers listed (child care, lack of money, language) are removed. People 1st are aware of events taking place in other areas like soccer tournaments and women's talk and walk groups and should look into the feasibility of similar events on this programme.

**Barrier to Integration:** *Lack of opportunities to get out, meet people and be productive while awaiting permission to work.*

An event that increases opportunities for volunteering and awareness of how and where to offer one's services for volunteering should be considered and evaluated.

**Barrier to Integration:** *Lack of awareness* around dealing with statutory bodies and how to access services and help.

Information and Signposting Events. People 1st should investigate the logistics of an event which brings multiple statutory agencies and community groups etc. into one place at the same time to provide comprehensive information, presentations and signposting to the asylum seeker and refugee community. Similarly, some kind of clear literature/information should be provided to newcomers that clarifies the system from start to finish including tasks like registering for health services etc.

## SUPPLEMENTARY INFORMATION FOR DCSDC

Mears workers report and reiterate that their scope is housing, their Welfare Officers often find themselves going beyond their scope of duty, a lot of this is signposting and helping clients with daily life tasks like communicating with GPs.

Mears workers believe that there should be a proper health needs assessment on arrival and more responsibility should be taken by the health authority for the more vulnerable in contingency and dispersal accommodation. (As previously stated, a Western Health Trust employee is currently looking at this).

Notice to quit/eviction issue - This issue is being highlighted also by the media and various refugee and aid organisations. The issue seems to be that the process has changed. People 1st understands that the 28-day clock now starts ticking when the refugee status is granted. This is 28 days until ASPEN payments stop and eviction happens. Previously, the 28 days started on the issue of the biometric residence permit, this is needed to prove they have the right to work and have access to social welfare, apply for universal credit etc. The permit was generally received 5 to 7 days after a claim was decided... giving 21 or 28 days before eviction. Now it seems the HO are using the letter as the starting point for the eviction countdown, even though many wait weeks for the Biometric permit, meaning they can't start the housing or welfare process during the period before they are evicted. This issue increases the risk of homelessness. These letters should be issued in the language of the receiver.

As we imagine DCSDC are already aware, when speaking to key workers, stakeholders, and community groups etc. frustration was continually voiced around the myriad of issues arising from the fact that the Stormont Assembly is not sitting.

It might be useful to investigate the provision of Youth Working Qualifications in the Area and providing some kind of publicity and recruitment drive.

All community groups spoken to reported that the lack of communication with them by statutory bodies is frustrating and some kind of professional communication process needs to be implemented to ensure that all key players understand the situation at any given time.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

People 1st would like to acknowledge the large numbers of organisations, employees and volunteers in the DCSDC area who have opened their doors to collaborate and assist on the project up to this point. We'd specifically like to acknowledge:

Women's Centre Derry for reaching out when the project was awarded to offer unconditional support and collaboration, and for helping us to make first contact with a large number of asylum-seeking and refugee women.

DFCNI - Foyle (Sinead McDermott), Waterside (Louise Devine) Jobs & Benefits Offices for time taken on video calls, attending focus groups and allowing us to use their facilities and interpreting services to reach out to their clients.

Roisin Curry from Western Health Trust for taking the time to attend meetings, take video calls and present us with her outstanding knowledge of data, facts and needs.

Mears Group Plc, Melanie Watson, Natasha Lynch, Tiarnan Monaghan and Taysier Salman for travelling from Belfast to meet and talk with us, and for allowing us to spend a day in their contingency hotel while meeting and interviewing their clients.

DFCNI Strabane Jobs & Benefits Office (Adrian Flannagan), SECA/Strabane Ethnic Community Association (Kamini Rao) and SCUG/Strabane Community Unemployed Group (Perpetula Foley) for giving us a comprehensive overview into the "current situation" in Strabane. Thanks also to Kamini at SECA for offering us their space to use, and coffee to drink for our focus groups and proposed meetings with refugees.

## DISCLAIMER

This report, including the data and information contained in the report, is provided on an "as is" basis and for the purpose of the "Delivery of needs analysis and support and integration programme for Asylum Seekers and Refugees T23-056HCO" project for DCSDC. The information supplied is accurate to the best of our knowledge, the reader should bear in mind the challenges and time constraints, and the anecdotal nature of some of the information supplied. We do not accept any liability if this report is issued for an alternative purpose from which it is intended, nor to any third party.

## **APPENDIX A – DESK RESEARCH SOURCE INFORMATION**

[www.infomigrants.net](http://www.infomigrants.net)

[www.andyhewett.com/section-95-by-local-authority](http://www.andyhewett.com/section-95-by-local-authority)

[www.commonslibrary.parliament.uk/research-briefings/sn01403/](http://www.commonslibrary.parliament.uk/research-briefings/sn01403/)

[www.gov.uk/government/statistics/national-insurance-numbers-allocated-to-adult-overseas-nationals-to-june-2023](http://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/national-insurance-numbers-allocated-to-adult-overseas-nationals-to-june-2023)

[www.refugeecouncil.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2023/09/Letter-to-Home-Secretary-and-SOS-DLUHC-on-move-on-changes.pdf](http://www.refugeecouncil.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2023/09/Letter-to-Home-Secretary-and-SOS-DLUHC-on-move-on-changes.pdf)

[www.gov.uk/government/statistical-data-sets/immigration-system-statistics-data-tables#asylum-and-resettlement](http://www.gov.uk/government/statistical-data-sets/immigration-system-statistics-data-tables#asylum-and-resettlement)

## **APPENDIX B – CONSULTATION AND NEEDS ANALYSIS CONSULTEES**

Antrim & Newtownabbey Borough Council Good Relations Department

Cathedral Youth Club & Community Centre

Causeway Coast & Glens Borough Council Good Relations Department

Cornerstone City Church

Education Authority

Extern

Foyle Food Bank

Foyle Jobs & Benefits Office

Foyle Vineyard Church

Gasyard Centre

Grass Roots Food Market, Strabane

Hilda Orr, independent volunteer worker

Law Centre NI

Lisnagelvin Jobs & Benefits Office

Londonderry Model PS

Londonderry YMCA

Long Tower Primary School

Mears Group PLC

Migrant Centre NI

NI Sikh Association Derry

North West Islamic Association

North West Volunteer Centre

Northern Ireland Housing Executive

Rosemount Youth Centre

Strabane Community Unemployed Group

Strabane Ethnic Community Association

Strabane Jobs & Benefits Office

Strabane Jobs & Benefits Office

Street Soccer NI

Waterside Women's Centre

Western Health & Social Care Trust

Women's Centre Derry



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**Derry City & Strabane**  
District Council

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Comhairle  
**Chathair Dhoire &  
Cheantar an tSratha Báin**

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**Derry Cittie & Stràbane**  
Destrìck Cooncil