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Refugee Week 2017

The results of racial prejudice are, sadly, very visible right here and right now. Last week we saw a young white woman haranguing three black schoolgirls, two of whom are refugees from Sudan and Eritrea, in Belfast city centre. Last month we heard about a young pregnant refugee mother from Sudan and her family being intimidated out of their home in Belfast after an escalating series of attacks.

This is Refugee Week and the Equality Commission is using the opportunity it provides to remind everyone of the importance of addressing myths around asylum seekers and refugees, and of challenging those who foster fear and prejudice.

The Commission has recommended that racial difference needs to be recognised and accepted as a first step to tackling racism. We recommend that work is done to better understand how attitudes are formed, increase understanding of asylum and migration issues and positively influence attitudes around diversity.

A second step is promoting knowledge and facts about refugees and enabling and encouraging contact and communication between refugees and local people.

Contact and communication are contingent on a whole variety of factors – overcoming language barriers, access to services for refugees and using their skills, experience and abilities to benefit our society. We believe this can be done through long-term, properly resourced integration support for all asylum seekers and refugees via a dedicated Refugee Integration Strategy.



It's hard to get a clear picture of the numbers of refugees and asylum seekers in Northern Ireland. Refugees are people who have been forced to leave their country to escape war, persecution or natural disaster. We know that around 400 Syrian refugees have arrived here under the government-led Syrian Refugee programme. The Law Centre estimated that there are 200 – 300 new refugees in Northern Ireland every year, including family members. We also know that around 600 asylum seekers were living in asylum support accommodation. Not all those who arrive in Northern Ireland receive support and are therefore not included in these figures.

Refugee integration is a two-way process, placing demands on us and on the refugees themselves. It is not about putting refugee needs above those of the local community or helping refugees to 'fit in'. It's about empowering refugees to live full lives and giving them an equal chance to participate in Northern Ireland's society.

The Commission has called for a dedicated cross-department strategy that will enable Northern Ireland to better benefit from the skills and abilities that people bring with them. We also want to address the complex educational needs of asylum seeking and refugee children. Schools are fundamental to the inclusion of newcomer children into their communities. We have also called for action to address the disadvantages faced by refugees in accessing healthcare, in particular, mental health services.

All these challenges could be met if Northern Ireland had a long-term, properly resourced Refugee Integration Strategy that would support refugees and asylum seekers from day one of their arrival here.

Please use the opportunity of Refugee Week to take action to call for this through the PfG or through engaging directly with departments, on their PfG delivery plans or otherwise, and please feel free to use our policy recommendations which are online at the addresses below.

- [Five Key Actions for Asylum Seekers in NI](#): Refugee & Asylum Forum, 2015.
- [Racial Equality Policy Position](#) (pdf): Equality Commission NI, 2014.