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Welcoming and supporting newcomer children

People come to Northern Ireland for many reasons – to start a new life, to join family, to escape war and persecution. This reality has been brought into stark focus unaccompanied children from Eritrea who have somehow found their way to Northern Ireland last week

While rarely in the headlines, Northern Ireland becomes home to many children each year who do not have English language proficiency, who may never have been to school, and who may be living with trauma experienced in their origin country or due to their journey from it. The education system works hard to accommodate newcomer children and this is important if these children are to flourish – not only to allow them gain language skills and other academic knowledge but allow them to feel a part of our community.

The Department of Education is currently reviewing its Supporting Newcomer Pupils policy to better ensure that these pupils are welcomed into their school community, to assist them to acquire the necessary language skills and to take a full part in every aspect of school life. Here are some of the recommendations we've made to the Department on how current policy could be improved.

- We recommend that funding and support for early years education (pre-primary school) is included in the policy. Research has shown that children who attend pre-school have better cognitive and behavioural outcomes than those who do not.
- Special educational needs among Newcomer pupils should be identified and acted upon, as with any child.
- We recommend the Executive and the Department of Education work with the Intercultural Education Service to identify and address the complex emotional, educational and social needs of refugee and asylum seeking children.
- Parents should be involved as much as possible in their children's education, for example, by ensuring they understand how the education system here works and addressing language issues with school to home contact. Parents' inability to take a full part in their children's education has been identified as a significant barrier to Newcomer pupils achieving their potential.
- We think that effective use of dual language resources would help Newcomer learners access the curriculum. A formal mechanism for sharing good practice and what works such as after school clubs, translated newsletters and more

use of technology to communicate with parents would also be of benefit to all schools.

We have recommended that how the additional funding schools receive for Newcomer children should be monitored to assess how it improves outcomes for children. Funding should also be available throughout the year, as the current system provides funding only for those children counted on the annual school census day. All funding should be at a level to meet the needs of Newcomer pupils, and should be available for the duration of the period that a pupil meets the definition of a Newcomer, that is, until they are fully founded and competent in the language used in their school.

The Equality Commission wants Northern Ireland not only to be a safe and welcoming place for everyone who comes to live here, but to become a home where they can contribute to and be part of the community. While the education system can by no means do this by itself, it has an important part to play.