

## 5 Key Actions: ensuring Northern Ireland responds to the needs of refugees

*The **Refugee and Asylum Forum** is an informal network of organisations with direct experience of providing support and services to asylum seekers and refugees in Belfast. Our collective expertise is wide and spans health and social care, accommodation, integration and participation, legal rights, welfare as well as policy development. Organisations involved in the Forum have been working in support of these communities for many years.*

We express full support for Northern Ireland offering refuge to Syrian refugees through the Syrian Vulnerable Persons Relocation Scheme (“VPR”). This is an essential humanitarian gesture in the context of unprecedented displacement and mass suffering.

Running parallel to the urgent need to offer a safe place to Syrian refugees is the need to ensure that Northern Ireland’s existing asylum seeker and refugees are treated with humanity and dignity. Asylum policy is a reserved matter for Westminster. However, Northern Ireland does have powers in respect to many issues experienced by asylum seekers and refugees living here.

We have identified **five key actions** that can be delivered by the Northern Ireland Executive that would considerably improve the situation for existing asylum seekers and refugees; help smooth the process of integration for VPR Syrian refugees and ease demand on refugee support organisations:

1. A **Refugee Integration Strategy** for Northern Ireland that will co-ordinate and monitor all interventions. We are currently the only region in the UK that does not have a Refugee Integration Strategy. A Strategy will help ensure that children have access to education, that there is a co-ordinated response to hate crime, and that refugees have access to a tailored pathway to economic and social inclusion.
2. A **long-term commitment to funding refugee settlement**. We understand that the UK government will provide funding for a one year period for Syrian refugee resettlement. The Executive must ensure that future funding is guaranteed beyond that – either from Westminster, Europe or from a different source. In addition, the OFMDFM Minority Ethnic Development Fund and other funds should ring-fence some money for organisations directly supporting asylum seekers and refugees so as to ensure that the sector can properly meet needs and plan ahead. OFMDFM should also make the Crisis Fund permanent.
3. A mechanism is in place to ensure that **no person experiences destitution on being granted refugee status**. The reality for many people is that they become destitute for weeks or months due to lengthy delays in the benefit system. Despite having a clear entitlement to statutory support, many refugees become completely reliant on charitable support precisely at the time that they wish to move on with their lives. This is something that must be avoided for Syrians arriving in the VPR programme and needs to be addressed for existing refugees.
4. All **refugees have access to free, accredited English language classes**. Not being able to speak English is a huge obstacle to employment, integration and full civil participation and yet Northern Ireland does not currently provide refugees with free classes. Investing in English language skills is likely to reap financial and social dividends for Northern Ireland in the long-term. Designating ESOL as an Essential Skill might be one way of delivering this action.

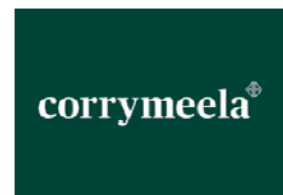
## Welcoming Syrian refugees to Northern Ireland

5. **Work with the refugee support sector** in designing a Syrian VPR resettlement scheme. We would ask the Northern Ireland Executive and government officials to build on the positive engagement with the voluntary and community sector on refugee issues when designing a safe and sustainable programme for Syrians. This would draw on our wide and practical expertise in supporting refugees in their integration and would include preparatory work with neighbourhoods, frontline services and statutory agencies prior to the arrival of VPR refugees.

A commitment to delivering these five actions would make Northern Ireland much better equipped to respond effectively to the needs of the existing refugee population and the new Syrian VPR refugee community.

### This paper has been endorsed by the following members of the Refugee and Asylum Forum:

Barnardo's NI, Belfast City Mission, Corrymeela, EMBRACE NI, Equality Commission NI, Extern, Falls Women's Centre, Homeplus, Horn of Africa People's Aid, Law Centre (NI), Lower Ormeau Residents Association Group / Shaftesbury Recreation Centre, NICRAS, Red Cross, Welcome Organisation, Whiterock Children's Centre.



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