

Barnardo's Northern Ireland (NI)

Northern Ireland Affairs Committee
***Inquiry into 'The experience of minority ethnic
and migrant people in Northern Ireland'***

June 2021

Barnardo's NI is the largest children's charity in Northern Ireland. We work with approximately 12,000 children, young people and families annually across more than 40 different services and programmes. We deliver a wide range of services, from providing family support and early intervention, to working directly with children and families who have experienced adversity and need our support. Our goal is to achieve better outcomes for more children. To achieve this, we work with partners to build stronger families, safer childhoods and positive futures.

Barnardo's NI welcomes the Committee's inquiry and the opportunity to provide written evidence sharing our learning and the experience of the children and families we work with. We would welcome the opportunity to provide oral evidence to the Committee to provide further details and answer any questions that Committee Members may have. We would also like to offer the Committee a closed-session virtual service visit with our Refugee Support Service to give Committee Members the opportunity to hear directly from the children and families we support.

Summary

Barnardo's NI has over 25 years' experience supporting minority ethnic and newcomer children, young people and families. Our evidence is informed by our service experience supporting refugee and newcomer families, separated and unaccompanied children, and children and families in the Irish Traveller community. In our evidence we speak to the knowledge and understanding we have gained through our service delivery experience. The services highlighted in our evidence are those that work specifically with minority ethnic and migrant children and families: Barnardo's NI Refugee Support Service (NIRSS), Family Learning and Integration Project (FLIP), Independent Guardian Service, Early Years Traveller Service and Traveller Transition Service. We highlight successful initiatives delivered by Barnardo's NI including supporting community integration, early years education with a whole-family approach, and specialist services for unaccompanied and separated children. Barnardo's NI recommends that the UK government works to promote integration and community cohesion through funding and prioritising these issues, with a need for specialised mental health provision.

Our evidence shares the stories and experience of the children and families we support, and we highlight case studies from our services throughout this evidence. In some instances, personal details have been changed to protect the identity of the people involved.

1. Context and Barnardo's NI services

- 1.1. In 2015, Barnardo's NI published '[Feels Like Home: Exploring the experiences of newcomer pupils in primary schools in Northern Ireland](#)'. In this report we noted that the proportion of NI residents who were born outside the United Kingdom (UK) and Republic of Ireland (ROI) increased from 1.6% in the 2001 census to 4.5% in the 2011 census. The data from the most recent census held in March 2021 will provide more up to date figures on how international travel and global migration has further changed the demographics of Northern Ireland over the last decade.
- 1.2. As this report highlighted "this unprecedented shift has increased the ethnic and cultural diversity of the population" which, in turn, changed the profile of children and young people in Northern Ireland. For example, there has been an increase in the number of children admitted to Northern Ireland schools with little or no English language.
- 1.3. Barnardo's NI services have evolved and adapted to meet the needs of the children and families from ethnic minority and newcomer communities that we support. Our Family Learning and Integration Project (FLIP) was the evolution of a previous Barnardo's NI service 'Tuar Ceatha' (1993-2015). FLIP, launched in 2015, builds on the learning from Tuar Ceatha to focus on supporting a culture of learning and resilience within Black, Asian, and Minority Ethnic families in South Belfast. FLIP uses holistic approaches to build the capacity of families to gain skills and become more confident members of their communities, whilst celebrating their own language and cultural heritage. FLIP works with two primary schools in South Belfast to support minority ethnic and newcomer families integrate with the community through individual work and group-based programmes.
- 1.4. In 2015, the Barnardo's NI Refugee Support Service (NIRSS) was established to support refugee families arriving through the Syrian Vulnerable Persons Resettlement Scheme with their arrival in Northern Ireland. The service is provided in partnership with Extern, the British Red Cross and Bryson Intercultural¹. NIRSS provides intensive support to refugees placed in Northern Ireland, supporting families and children both to cope with past trauma and to integrate successfully into Northern Ireland. In just over five years, our work in this area has grown significantly, with our expertise in children's social care readily applicable to the experiences of these children.
- 1.5. A key component of NIRSS work involves linking families with local services, including health, education, and welfare, as well as supporting them with their integration in local communities. The central focus of the Barnardo's NIRSS approach to working with Syrian refugees is to support families in

¹ <https://www.nidirect.gov.uk/articles/syrian-refugee-crisis>

understanding the support they are entitled to and how to access it, ultimately being able to do so independently. This guides our interaction with families and ensures their needs and ambitions are the driver of interactions with the key worker and outside agencies. Families are offered advice and support that focuses on empowering the family, encouraging them to take the lead on identifying their resettlement priorities.

- 1.6. Since April 2018, Barnardo's NI has supported 121 children who are unaccompanied or separated from a legal guardian through our Independent Guardian Service², including some who were victims of suspected human trafficking. To date, 23% of children supported by the Independent Guardians have been referred within the National Referral Mechanism as they have been identified as a potential victim of human trafficking or modern slavery. The role of the Guardians is to ensure that the welfare and asylum rights of children are upheld, and to hold those responsible for meeting children's needs accountable for their responsibilities. The Guardians guide and support children through the complex asylum process, ensuring they have a legal representative with extensive experience in immigration and asylum work. A key element of the Guardian's role is to ensure that the child's voice, wishes, and feelings are heard and represented with all professionals involved in their case and to advocate for the best interests of the child.
- 1.7. Finally, it is crucial that any inquiry into the experience of minority ethnic people, includes the experience of the Irish Traveller community in Northern Ireland. While it is difficult to obtain data on outcomes for the Traveller community in Northern Ireland, the Equality Commission for Northern Ireland has [highlighted](#) that Travellers face consistent inequalities in areas such as education and employment, as well as discrimination and prejudice based on their race. The Barnardo's NI Early Years Traveller Service provides home-based sessions for parents, carers and children aged 0-6 from the Traveller community. Barnardo's NI also provides links and access to other support services in the local area. The Equality Commission's report on '[Education Inequalities in Northern Ireland](#)' notes that there is a high drop-out rate of Traveller pupils from primary to post-primary school. Our Traveller Transition Service prepares Primary 7 and Year 8 pupils (aged between 10-12 years old) moving to post-primary school and supports them through the initial years, including both group and individual work. Through this work we hope to support children from the Traveller community to continue with their education.

² The role of an Independent Guardian is defined in Article 21 of the Human Trafficking and Exploitation (Criminal Justice and Support for Victims) Act (Northern Ireland) 2015. Independent Guardians are required to undertake their role "*in the best interests of the child*" and have a responsibility to listen to, and represent, the voice of the child in all aspects of their life.

2. Experiences and challenges of minority ethnic and migrant people living in Northern Ireland.

- 2.1. In 2020, Barnardo's NI published '[A New Life for Me: Integration Experiences of Syrian Refugee Children and their Families](#)'. Prior to this report, the integration experiences of Syrian refugee children in the UK had not been well documented. This report outlines how family dynamics and experiences in school influence refugee children's integration processes, and the support provided to families by the Barnardo's Northern Ireland Refugee Support Service. The findings highlight many positive experiences of resettlement, but also the multiple challenges faced by refugee children and their families as they adapt to a life in a new culture and society.
- 2.2. The report identified four key themes in its findings: social connections, education, family, and health. This section will look at the social connections and education, while the next section will cover the health-related findings.

Key Findings: Social Connections

- 2.3. Family separation was a source of emotional distress for some resettled family members, both children and parents, and can undermine wellbeing during the resettlement process.
- 2.4. NIRSS plays a key role in facilitating bonding connections with other resettled families. Such connections are an important source of emotional, practical and informational support, and help new arrivals to feel settled. They are also important for children's friendships during early resettlement, a period when they are particularly vulnerable to isolation.

"We were living in a bad situation and since we arrived to the airport, Barnardo's, the Red Cross, all the people, we felt very welcome. And we stayed at the Welcome Centre for seven days. We wished it was longer, we met a lot of people there and made friendships." [Nura – mum of four children]

- 2.5. Young people identified language barriers, shyness and perceived racism as barriers to the formation of cross-cultural friendships. Developing cross-cultural friendships was perceived as easier for younger children than for adolescents.

"I still can't talk to people [in school] like I can in Arabic. Because, in Arabic, it's easy for me because it's my language." [Boy, 13]

- 2.6. Adolescent girls highlighted cultural barriers, as well as not feeling a sense of acceptance (as a visible minority) in their local communities, as obstacles to social participation, and consequently their social integration.

Key Findings: Education

- 2.7. With the support of NIRSS and the Education Authority, most children were able to take up placements fairly quickly after arrival. Delays to school enrolment are isolating for children and can impact on caregivers who feel unable to focus on their own integration needs.
- 2.8. Positive peer relationships are very important for young people's sense of belonging in school. Experiences of bullying (including name calling of a racist nature) and perceived exclusion by peers negatively impacted young people's emotional wellbeing.
- 2.9. Refugee children are not a homogenous group in terms of educational backgrounds, and key workers in NIRSS seek to ensure that the needs of each individual child are catered for. Schools, both primary and secondary, adopt different approaches to year group placement of refugee students. Some place children in classes with their peer group, while in others they are taught alongside younger students, to allow children with interrupted education to 'catch up' with peers. From the perspective of young people,

"It's better education wise, but in a friendship way it's made it difficult because they are younger than me" [Amal, 17]

being placed with younger peers was helpful academically but detrimental to peer relationships.

- 2.10. Parents' involvement in their children's education is limited by language barriers. Schools, both primary and secondary, do not consistently avail of the resources available to support home-school communication.
- 2.11. Young people expressed a need for additional learning and language support to enable educational catch up. Some were able to access this in their local communities, but resources differed between localities.
- 2.12. The case study below looks at the experience of a six-year-old Syrian boy, Zakir, who arrived in Northern Ireland with his mum and dad. This case study highlights the importance of understanding children's educational experiences prior to resettlement. This assists with the provision of appropriate support to children and their parents, to ensure that the transition into school is a positive experience for resettled children.

Zakir was born in Lebanon. His experience at school in Lebanon was 'not good' according to his mother, Salma. His teacher was not kind to him and sometimes shouted at him. He was also excluded by classmates who, according to Salma, refused to play with him or would hit him because he is Syrian. Because of his experiences, Zakir didn't enjoy school and thought all schools were 'bad' according to his mother.

As part of the Barnardo's NI playroom programme at the Welcome Centre, Zakir participated in various activities designed to help prepare children for school, which he appeared to enjoy. As he prepared to start school, the family's key worker encouraged Zakir's parents to reassure him that his new school in Northern Ireland would be very different to his experience of school in Lebanon. She also suggested that they teach him simple ways of communicating his needs to his teacher, such as pointing or drawing pictures.

Once in their new home, Zakir's mother stated that he was very excited about starting school along with his two young cousins. He settled in quickly, saying excitedly after his first day 'my friends are good, they hug me and kiss me.' He enjoys drawing pictures and using the iPad during lessons.

Barnardo's NI Family Learning and Integration Project

- 2.13. Our recent report on the Barnardo's NI [Family Learning and Integration Project](#) (FLIP) examines the approaches adopted by this service, what has worked well, the lessons learned and how these can be adapted and used by other services to improve the lives of minority ethnic and newcomer children and families in Northern Ireland. This report also captures the experience of the people who FLIP supports and how the service has impacted their life.
- 2.14. FLIP is made up of a number of different capacity building programmes which aim to support parents and children to confidently engage with their local communities and to achieve better educational outcomes for children. One of the key learnings from FLIP is that services must be flexible and adapted to meet the specific needs of minority ethnic children and families. A good example of this is the English classes that FLIP provides.
- 2.15. Throughout the first and second years of FLIP, it became clear that there were a number of parents attending one session of parenting programmes, but were then dropping out as they did not have the level of English needed to participate. One of the schools that FLIP works with already provided English classes to parents; however, they found that many parents were not attending due to a lack of childcare. As a result, a crèche was funded by The National Lottery Community Fund at the end of the second year, allowing

parents to attend the classes. Although this is a resource intensive service, by creating the opportunity for parents to attend English classes, it becomes a pathway to availing of other FLIP interventions.

- 2.16. Another example is the development of the 'drop-in' service, which is held in the school. While delivering the programmes rolled out in Year 1, Project Workers identified a clear need among minority ethnic and newcomer families for ad-hoc support with questions or issues that arose as families settled into a new community and environment. Parents tell us they find the service useful, and the drop-in often provides a pathway to other FLIP interventions. Feedback from the school principals indicates that the drop-in service has facilitated engagement with minority ethnic and newcomer parents on the school's strategic plan, and feedback on consultations from the Education Authority.
- 2.17. The case study below shows how one parent went on the FLIP journey from programme participant, to volunteering, to employment and the positive impact this has had on her life in Belfast, and also the lives of her children.

Anna came to Belfast from Poland and had two children born in Northern Ireland; however, she found that language was a big barrier to integrating into the local community. When Anna's eldest child began primary school, she was introduced to FLIP. Through FLIP, Anna felt safe and encouraged to learn, and as a result she became more confident and more involved in school life. Anna subsequently attended another FLIP programme for two years and significantly improved her English skills.

Anna began volunteering with FLIP, helping the team recruit parents to FLIP programmes and events in the school. Anna also received Individual Support which helped her navigate the job market in Belfast. Anna began working in a local shop where she was quickly promoted to supervisor, and she has since opened her own business. Before meeting the FLIP team, Anna was planning on moving back to Poland, however Anna now feels that Belfast is her home and has bought a house where she has made friends with her neighbours and her children play outside with their new friends.

The Irish Traveller Community

- 2.18. As highlighted at the outset, the Irish Traveller community are a distinct minority ethnic group in Northern Ireland and are often overlooked in these discussions. Through our experience working with children and families in the Traveller community, we know that Travellers continue to face prejudice and discrimination.
- 2.19. In terms of education, many of the Traveller children we work with tell us about being bullied in school, including being called racially offensive names by their peers. Parents have reported that schools do not consider parental literacy levels when communicating with them or provide adjustments to ensure parents can access the information. For example, for some Traveller parents it would be better to communicate the information in a phone call rather than sending a letter which the parent cannot read. In addition, Barnardo's NI service managers have struggled to identify services that would support Traveller parents to improve their literacy levels.

3. Health outcomes of minority ethnic and migrant people in Northern Ireland.

- 3.1. The 'New Life for Me' report explored how the past experiences of refugees impacted not only on their physical health, but also their mental health.

Key Findings: Health

- 3.2. The unique experiences of refugee children, including witnessing and/or suffering trauma, as well as multiple other forms of adversity, present significant risks to their health and emotional wellbeing.
- 3.3. Refugee children with complex health needs are a particularly vulnerable group. Distinct obstacles such as delayed school enrolment, physical or environmental barriers, and difficulties learning English, affect their opportunities to develop friendships, engage in play and interact with peers.
- 3.4. The case study below shares the story of Aqila (15-year-old girl) and Ajmal (13-year-old boy). Their story highlights the cumulative trauma and adversity that many refugee children experience, including violence, family bereavement, interrupted education and racism, experienced at each stage of their journey.

Aqila and Ajmal witnessed and experienced a high level of violence and trauma in Syria. When she was 8, Aquila witnessed the army taking away local people. On another occasion, Aqila and Ajmal were with their family when they witnessed shootings. The whole family were shaking with fear. Shortly after, their baby brother, who had stopped feeding, suddenly died.

The following year, Aqila and Ajmal's youngest sister was killed as a result of bombing. She was five years old. Aqila witnessed her sister dying. Aqila and Ajmal miss their sister and brother a lot. Their mum worries about them because of the immense trauma they have suffered.

It is with these memories and experiences that Aqila and Ajmal have been trying to adjust to their new life in Northern Ireland. Both have embraced the opportunity to attend school and have been studying hard. They each received excellent first reports, despite Aqila having missed six years of education while living in Lebanon. Ajmal excelled on sports day, taking home gold and silver medals. More recently he has been the target of racist bullying by other students. This has been very distressing for Ajmal and he no longer wants to go to school.

- 3.5. Children's emotional wellbeing and integration processes can also be affected by the ill health (mental or physical) of their parents and vice versa. A need for holistic and ongoing family support was identified in families with complex health needs.
- 3.6. Signposting individuals for trauma informed mental health care is difficult due to gaps in specialist mental health services in Northern Ireland for refugee children and adults.

The Irish Traveller Community

- 3.7. From our experience working with the Traveller community, our families have shared experiences of not being able to register at GP surgery, and even when they have been able to register with a GP, our families report difficulties accessing GP services. This will impact not only on parental health but also the health of children in the family. Furthermore, numerous reports throughout [NI](#), [UK](#), and [Ireland](#) have highlighted the high suicide rates in the Traveller community, including amongst young people.

Unaccompanied and Separated Children

- 3.8. The children that we support through our Independent Guardian Service have experience significant trauma, including some who have been the victims of torture, sexual violence and exploitation. Many of these children experience

barriers when trying to access health services, such as interpreters. This is of particular concern when it comes to mental health provision, considering the acute needs of unaccompanied and separated children. Furthermore, due to the pressures and lack of resources in mental health provision for children and young people in Northern Ireland, many of the children we support experience delays when trying to access mental health services, despite their urgent need for support.

- 3.9. The example below looks at the story of Ali, a 17-year-old boy supported through the Independent Guardian Service.

When Ali arrived in Northern Ireland, he was a victim of human trafficking. On his journey here from Libya, he witnessed violence and murder and experienced the death of his dad and sibling. Ali asked his Guardian for mental health support as soon as he arrived in Northern Ireland and he was quickly referred to the Family Trauma Centre. However, despite his urgent need for support, Ali was put on a waiting list where he stayed until he 'aged-out' of the service on his 18th birthday without one appointment.

Ali has now been referred to Adult Psychological Services and is again on a waiting list. Ali has told his Guardian about the impact the trauma has had on him, including night terrors and feeling angry and scared. He is still waiting to be seen by a mental health professional.

4. Recommendations for the UK Government

- 4.1. Barnardo's recently submitted a response to the Home Office's 'New Plan for Immigration'. These proposals impact on many of the children and families we support through the services we have mentioned above. While we welcome some proposals in the New Plan, we are concerned that without the amendments highlighted throughout our response, the proposals could result in children and families who are fleeing persecution not receiving the support and protection they need to rebuild their lives, or even being turned away. Barnardo's is concerned that the proposals in the New Plan for Immigration may not be in the best interests of refugee and asylum-seeking children, and the proposals do not outline specifically how changes would be applied to children and families. We are concerned that without amendment, these proposals risk placing vulnerable children and families at greater risk of exploitation and harm and could have a detrimental impact on community cohesion.
- 4.2. Of particular relevance to the Committee's inquiry, Barnardo's is concerned about the proposals in the New Plan regarding the application of 'temporary protection' status to refugees and asylum seekers. The New Plan does not

outline how these proposals will be applied to children, and what children with temporary protection status will be entitled to – including whether they will be able to access statutory services such as education. We recommended that the UK Government ensures that a child’s immigration status does not affect their ability to access education and other vital services.

4.3. Our ‘New Life for Me’ report makes a series of recommendations, most of which fall under the remit of the Northern Ireland Assembly and devolved institutions. However, a number of these recommendations could be supported by funding and priority focus from the UK Government:

- **Integration is a two-way process:** A fully understood and resourced strategy aimed at supporting the integration of refugee children and their families by all agencies who have responsibility to meet their needs will have limited success without the acceptance and participation of the local community. The community in Northern Ireland must be encouraged and supported to better understand the nature and trauma of seeking asylum and resettlement in another country, and understand the benefits, responsibility and pride Northern Ireland should have in offering this sanctuary to some of the most vulnerable children and families in the world.
- **Refugee children should be a particular focus when considering integration.** All integration strategies and support services should be discussed and designed to reflect the role, challenges and needs of refugee children, and the impact of these on integration outcomes of the entire family.
- **Additional resources and programmes to support refugee children’s educational integration:** After-school programmes that combine English language and academic tuition are needed to support the specific and individual learning needs of refugee children with interrupted or no formal education. Parental involvement in refugee children’s education requires adequately resourced translation and interpreting services, which schools must be strongly encouraged to utilise.

4.4. Many of the refugees and asylum-seeking children and families we support have experienced significant trauma, including torture, physical and sexual violence and exploitation. In Northern Ireland there are no specialist services for victims of trauma or torture akin to the Helen Bamber Foundation (London), Freedom from Torture (GB) or Spirasi (Dublin). Without specialist treatment, it is inevitable that it will take longer for victims and survivors in Northern Ireland to make full disclosure. As the UK Government continues to support and promote the integration of refugee and asylum seeking children and families through programmes such as the Vulnerable Persons Resettlement Scheme, we would welcome a commitment to ensure that

specialist services are available to victims of trauma and torture. These services should be focused on supporting children and families that have experienced significant trauma before their arrival in the UK, including the children and families we support through the Barnardo's NIRSS and the Independent Guardian Service.

5. Successful initiatives

- 5.1. Through our delivery of the Barnardo's Northern Ireland Refugee Support Service (NIRSS) we have seen how community acceptance and attitude can play a significant role in the successful integration of minority ethnic and newcomer children and families in Northern Ireland. The Barnardo's NIRSS has supported 239 families since December 2015. NIRSS continued supporting children and families throughout the pandemic and throughout 2020/21, NIRSS key workers supported families with approximately 2,400 issues in areas such as housing (535), benefits (563), education (292) and bespoke issues (1,017).
- 5.2. NIRSS also provides tailored support to children and families who would benefit from specific engagements. This includes mental health and wellbeing packs for vulnerable families, support groups for teenagers, and 'Cash for Kids' toys to families spending their first Christmas in Northern Ireland.
- 5.3. The feedback from the children and families that we support demonstrates the impact that NIRSS has on their lives.

"Barnardo's involvement in my first year really prepared me to navigate Northern Ireland on my own. The children love school and have learned English really well. I think it is good that everyone in Northern Ireland is equal. This is a great quality of Northern Ireland."

"The service at Barnardo's is a good service, we never imagined such a good service, but we could not have done without it."

"I feel safe, it is the first time my family, my children, have felt safe"

- 5.4. Northern Ireland was the first jurisdiction in UK and Ireland to develop a statutory system of independent guardianship for all separated children. The children Barnardo's NI supports through the Independent Guardian Service tell us that they often feel powerless in many aspects of their welfare and asylum needs before they are assigned a Guardian. Some children felt that it was particularly difficult dealing with these challenges during the Covid-19 pandemic and had lost any hope for their future. The support provided by the

Guardians has given children a feeling of strength and support, and they feel like their voices are being heard. One child recently told their Guardian that they have gained hope again through ongoing emotional support and receiving regular updates on the status of their Home Office application.

"I have hope in you, I believe in you, you have done everything for me"

- 5.5. Furthermore, the agencies that engage with the Independent Guardian Service have also highlighted the value of the service and the support and expertise the Guardians provide. The [Northern Ireland Guardian Ad Litem Agency](#) (NIGALA) have expressed their gratitude for the expertise of the Guardians, in particular NIGALA have recognised that the Guardians have already developed trusting relationships with the children they support and therefore are in the best position to continue supporting those children when they are meeting with NIGALA. Staff working with NIGALA have told us that they believe children are more open and will ask more questions of them and their role when the Guardians are there to support the children.

"[The Barnardo's Independent Guardian] in her expertise, understands the emotional strain on [the young person] as an unaccompanied minor exposed to extremely complex court proceedings and processes. I continue to value this expert social work service from the Independent Guardian, a specialist in working with unaccompanied minors." [NIGALA representative]

Conclusion

Barnardo's NI welcomes the Committee's inquiry and the opportunity to provide written evidence sharing our learning and experience, and the stories of the minority ethnic and migrant children and families we work with. The children and families that we work with through our services have benefitted from the support that Barnardo's delivers and have made a home for themselves in Northern Ireland. We would welcome the opportunity to provide oral evidence to the Committee to share further details and answer any questions that Committee Members may have. Barnardo's NI would also like to offer the Committee a closed-session virtual service visit with our Refugee Support Service to give Committee Members the opportunity to hear directly from the children and families we support.

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