



Northern Ireland  
Assembly

## Research and Information Service

### Newcomer Pupils in Northern Ireland Briefing paper

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The aim of this briefing is to provide an overview of newcomer pupils in Northern Ireland and the implications of the UK's exit from the European Union (EU) on the number and profile of newcomer pupils. It considers some of the issues for newcomer pupils in accessing education, with particular consideration of some of the challenges for asylum seeking and refugee children and young people. These challenges are presented in the context of an increased number of asylum seekers and refugees to Northern Ireland in recent years. Whilst this rise may not be solely attributable to Brexit, it has been noted as a contributory factor.

It should be noted that there is limited information about the specific effects of Brexit on newcomer pupils in Northern Ireland. The Assembly Research and Information Service (RaISe) requested information from the Department of Education NI with regards implications on educational policy, supports, services and funding. However, information is yet to be received.

This briefing specifically pertains to educational considerations for newcomer pupils in Northern Ireland; it does not refer to immigration legislation, policy or procedures more generally.

## 1 Impact of Brexit on the number and profile of pupils in Northern Ireland

The last number of years have seen continuous significant growth in the number and proportion of newcomer pupils in schools in Northern Ireland. In 2021/22, newcomer pupils accounted for 5.2% of the school population. This figure has risen by over 4,400 pupils since 2016/17<sup>1</sup>. In 2021/22, there are approximately 90 first languages spoken by pupils. Polish and Lithuanian continue to be the most commonly spoken languages behind English<sup>2</sup>; this has been the case for the last ten years<sup>3</sup>.

Furthermore, data reflects that the number of pupils arriving to and departing from Northern Ireland has remained relatively constant between 2015 and 2021<sup>4</sup>. However, it is not possible to derive specific trends related to the inflow and outflow rates of EU pupils only.

### 1.1 International migration statistics

International migration statistics reflect that the number of EU residents moving to Northern Ireland had fallen by December 2020, in some cases significantly. For instance, Poland has been one of the largest contributors to inward migration since 2004. In 2016, 1,370 Polish nationals arrived in Northern Ireland. However, by 2020, this figure had fallen to 371. Declines in the inflow rates for other EU countries are also apparent; for instance, in 2016, 1,262 Romanian and 553 Lithuanian nationals arrived in Northern Ireland. By 2020, this had fallen to 724 and 209 respectively. By contrast, inflows from non-EU countries appear to be on the rise. For example, there were 114 arrivals from Zimbabwe in 2020 compared with 22 in 2016<sup>5</sup>.

Whilst the data suggests a shift in the profile of immigrants to Northern Ireland, the implication on the composition and profile of newcomer pupils is not yet known. Furthermore, it is too early to derive definitive conclusions about the impact of EU exit on inward, international migration, as the latest available data pertains to 2020, when the transition period was in force and free movement rules continued to apply.

In addition, it has been noted that international travel patterns changed significantly throughout 2020 due to a combination of EU Exit and the coronavirus pandemic<sup>6</sup>. Although

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<sup>1</sup> Department of Education NI (2022) Annual enrolments at schools and in funded pre-school education in Northern Ireland 2021-22. Bangor: Department of Education Northern Ireland.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid

<sup>3</sup> NISRA Long-Term International Migration Statistics for Northern Ireland (2020) Administrative data relating to the international population in Northern Ireland: First Language of Primary and Post-Primary School Pupils with English as an Additional Language at Schools in Northern Ireland (October 2010 - October 2020). Note: 2021/22 data provided to RaISe by the Department of Education, 3<sup>rd</sup> March 2022

<sup>4</sup> NISRA Long-Term International Migration Statistics for Northern Ireland (2020) Administrative data relating to migration into Northern Ireland (Inflows): Number of Primary and Post-Primary School Pupils who Arrived in Northern Ireland (October 2010 - October 2020) and Administrative data relating to migration out of Northern Ireland (Outflows): Number of Primary and Post-Primary School Pupils who Left Northern Ireland (October 2010 - October 2020). Note 2021/22 data provided to RaISe by the Department of Education, 3<sup>rd</sup> March 2022

<sup>5</sup> NISRA Long-Term International Migration Official Migration Estimates (2020) Administrative data relating to migration into Northern Ireland (Inflows): International Inflows to Northern Ireland by Country of Last Residence (January 2010 - December 2020)

<sup>6</sup> NISRA Long-Term International Migration Official Migration Estimates (2020) Administrative data relating to migration into Northern Ireland (Inflows): Notes on data.

the extent of the impact is unknown, it is expected that a combination of the two will impact migration levels in 2020 and beyond<sup>7</sup>.

## 1.2 Applications to the EU Settlement Scheme (EUSS)

Consideration of applications to the EUSS provides further insight to the proportion of EU citizens applying to remain in Northern Ireland following the UK's departure from the EU.

Just under 105,000 applications were made to the EUSS in Northern Ireland by 31 December 2021<sup>8</sup>. Polish and Lithuanian nationals accounted for the largest number of applications. This is in contrast to England, Scotland and Wales where Polish and Romanian nationals were consistently among the highest application numbers.

Notably, Northern Ireland had a higher proportion (20%) of applications from people under 18 compared to the rest of the UK (average of 17% for each nation)<sup>9</sup>. Whilst a more detailed age breakdown is not available, it is reasonable to assume that the applications comprise a number of children and young people of compulsory school age, which may have a bearing on the newcomer population in schools.

## 1.3 A rise in asylum seekers and refugees to Northern Ireland

Data reflects that the number of asylum seekers in receipt of support has steadily risen since 2017, with a particularly marked rise evident throughout 2021. Whilst the recent rise in asylum seeking cases in Northern Ireland may not be solely attributable to Brexit, it has been noted as a contributory factor.

As depicted at Figure 1 overleaf, 1,437 asylum seekers were in receipt of support in Northern Ireland by 31<sup>st</sup> December 2021<sup>10</sup>. The numbers reported represent the total population at period end and do not represent all individuals who have been in receipt of support during the period<sup>11</sup>.

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid

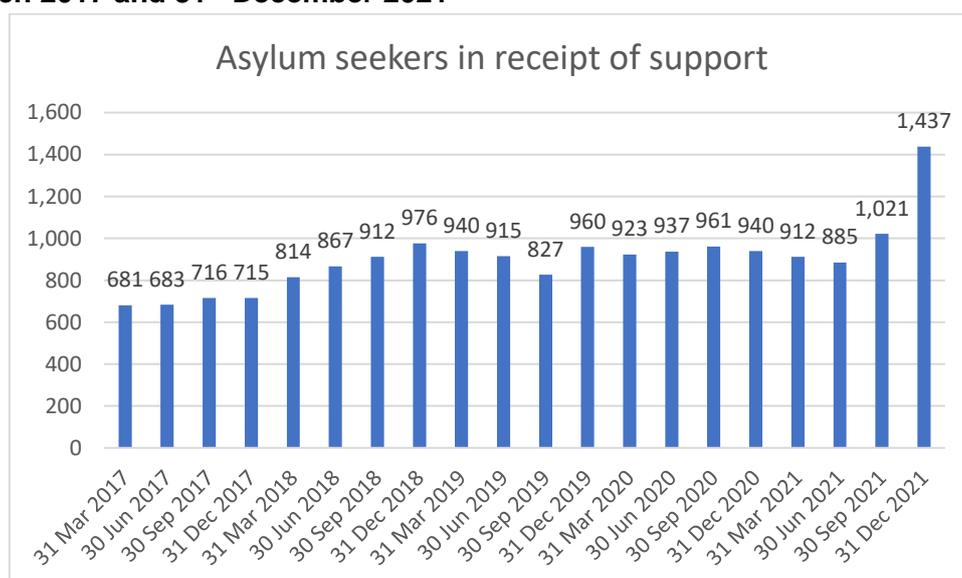
<sup>8</sup> Home Office [EU Settlement Scheme quarterly statistics, December 2021 - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/eu-settlement-scheme-quarterly-statistics-december-2021), Published 24 February 2022

<sup>9</sup> Ibid. Analysis by RaiSe.

<sup>10</sup> Home Office Immigration Statistics Year Ending December 2021. Asylum and Protection - Asylum seekers in receipt of support by Local Authority. Published 24th February 2022

<sup>11</sup> Data reflects those in receipt of dispersed accommodation (i.e. in receipt of accommodation only, or both accommodation and subsistence) and those in receipt of subsistence only - whereby the applicant receives cash to support themselves but who have found their own accommodation. Accompanying information notes that the number of people in receipt of support changes daily.

**Figure 1: Number of asylum seekers in receipt of support in Northern Ireland between 31<sup>st</sup> March 2017 and 31<sup>st</sup> December 2021**



It should be noted that the available data pertains to those receiving asylum support, not the number of applicants. Furthermore, the data excludes those in receipt of Section 98 support (that is initial temporary support provided to asylum seekers who appear to be destitute and who are awaiting a decision on their application for asylum support)<sup>12</sup> and unaccompanied asylum seeking children in receipt of support<sup>13</sup>.

Data from the Health and Social Care Board (HSCB) suggests a recent rise in the number of separated and unaccompanied asylum seeking children to Northern Ireland. Between 1st April 2019 and 31st March 2020, 39 separated children were identified and referred to health and social care<sup>14</sup>. This compares with 25 referrals in 2018/19 and 15 referrals in 2017/18<sup>15</sup>. The HSCB has cautioned of the increased challenge in ensuring the capacity to provide immediate and subsequent care placements as the number of separated / unaccompanied asylum seeking children arriving in Northern Ireland grows<sup>16</sup>.

Barnardo's NI is commissioned by the HSCB to deliver the Independent Guardian Service which advocates on behalf of separated, unaccompanied and trafficked children. When the service was originally designed and commissioned by the HSCB, it was anticipated that it would support approximately 12 children per year. However, in the first three years of

<sup>12</sup> Asylum Support Appeals Project (2017) Factsheet 17 – Section 98 Support [Online] Available at: [http://www.asaproject.org/uploads/Factsheet\\_17\\_-\\_Section\\_98\\_support1.pdf#:~:text=Section%2098%20%28s98%29%20support%20is%20a%20form%20of,decision%20on%20their%20application%20for%20s95%20asylum%20support.](http://www.asaproject.org/uploads/Factsheet_17_-_Section_98_support1.pdf#:~:text=Section%2098%20%28s98%29%20support%20is%20a%20form%20of,decision%20on%20their%20application%20for%20s95%20asylum%20support.)

<sup>13</sup> Home Office Immigration Statistics Year Ending December 2021. Asylum and Protection - Asylum seekers in receipt of support by Local Authority. Published 24<sup>th</sup> February 2022 - Notes on Data.

<sup>14</sup> HSCB (2020) Delegated Statutory Functions Composite Report: 1 April 2019 – 31 March 2020. Available at: [http://www.hscboard.hscni.net/download/PUBLIC-MEETINGS/HSC%20BOARD/board\\_meetings\\_2020/ITEM-9-02-DSF-Overview-Report-March-2020.pdf](http://www.hscboard.hscni.net/download/PUBLIC-MEETINGS/HSC%20BOARD/board_meetings_2020/ITEM-9-02-DSF-Overview-Report-March-2020.pdf)

<sup>15</sup> HSCB (2019) Delegated Statutory Functions Composite Report: 1 April 2018 – 31 March 2019. Available at: [http://www.hscboard.hscni.net/download/PUBLIC-MEETINGS/HSC%20BOARD/board\\_meetings\\_2019/September\\_2019/Item-08-02-DSF-Overview-Report-March-2019.pdf](http://www.hscboard.hscni.net/download/PUBLIC-MEETINGS/HSC%20BOARD/board_meetings_2019/September_2019/Item-08-02-DSF-Overview-Report-March-2019.pdf)

<sup>16</sup> As cited at footnote 14

delivery, Barnardo's NI supported over 121 children; more than triple the number originally anticipated<sup>17</sup>.

### ***Issues in accessing education***

The increase in the number of asylum seekers has resulted in pressures on asylum accommodation which has led to the use of hotels as contingency accommodation until a housing allocation can be made. Resultant issues have emerged in accessing education due to the temporary nature of this provision. Whilst the most recent statistics are not readily available, as of the week beginning 6 December 2021, 75 children and young people of school age were housed in temporary hotel accommodation. Fourteen of these were enrolled in schools by families. It was noted by the Education Authority that some families may not have enrolled their child in school at that time as they wished to wait until they had permanent accommodation<sup>18</sup>.

Research reinforces some of the difficulties faced by refugee and asylum seeking children and their families in temporary accommodation, and the subsequent challenges in accessing their education. Research undertaken by Queen's University Belfast found that frequently moving house is an issue for asylum seekers and refugees, and that this can compound an already substantial educational lag<sup>19</sup>.

Interim educational provision has been established for families in contingency accommodation in order to enable children to access education until they are housed and have a school place.<sup>20</sup> The Education Authority's Intercultural Education Service (IES) has developed two temporary Welcome Centres in the greater Belfast area; one to provide primary, and the other post-primary, educational provision for all children and young people living in hotel accommodation. However, both provisions are at capacity<sup>21</sup>. Additional provisions have been made, such as teachers delivering educational activities within the hotels<sup>22</sup> and recent supports delivered through Libraries NI and Barnardo's NI. However, it is noted that provision may not be sufficient to meet the numbers of children who require it<sup>23</sup>.

Issues have also been raised in relation to the availability of school places for asylum seeking and refugee children and young people, particularly in post-primary settings. The last 5 – 6 years have seen an increasing number of post-primary aged asylum seeker and refugee pupils registered in a relatively small number of schools in the North, West and South of Belfast. Since 2020-21, finding places in these schools has become increasingly difficult predominantly due a lack of physical capacity, particularly at Key Stage 4. Schools have identified a lack of resources/funding/support to help meet the specific needs of these pupils, which include low levels of language proficiency, educational interruption and possible impact of trauma<sup>24</sup>.

<sup>17</sup> Barnardo's Northern Ireland (2022) Response to the draft Refugee Integration Strategy. Belfast: Barnardo's Northern Ireland.

<sup>18</sup> Meredith, R (2021) Two new schools for refugee children to open in new year. BBC News Website. [Online]. Available at: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-northern-ireland-59657993>

<sup>19</sup> Murphy, F., & Vieten, U. M. (2017). Asylum seekers' and refugee's experiences of Life in Northern Ireland: Report of the first study on the situation of asylum seekers and refugees in NI - 2016. Belfast: Queen's University Belfast

<sup>20</sup> <http://aims.niassembly.gov.uk/questions/printquestionssummary.aspx?docid=365822>

<sup>21</sup> Information provided by the Education Authority, 1<sup>st</sup> March 2022

<sup>22</sup> <https://questions-statements.parliament.uk/written-questions/detail/2021-12-14/93078>

<sup>23</sup> Through RaISe stakeholder engagement with groups representing asylum seekers and refugees, February and March 2022.

<sup>24</sup> Information provided by the Education Authority, 1<sup>st</sup> March 2022

The Minister of Education has stated that funding has been made available to support the delivery of online English Language lessons to fifty young people beyond compulsory school age, but not yet adults, who are not otherwise engaged in education. The Minister noted that these arrangements have been put in place to meet the immediate needs of these young people and to allow time for a more permanent solution to be put in place<sup>25</sup>. However, concerns have been expressed about an 'online only' approach to delivery. It has been recommended that learning from the proposed online English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) project should be used in conjunction with a joint-departmental approach between DE/DfE to provide a structured pathway for post-16 asylum seeking and refugee learners which primarily supports English language learning but encompasses vocational training pathways, and bespoke support where trauma may be identified as a barrier to learning and integration<sup>26</sup>.

#### 1.4 Barriers for newcomer pupils in accessing education

To date, there is limited tangible evidence on the effects of EU exit on newcomer pupils. However, prior to Brexit, evidence suggested a range of issues for newcomer pupils in accessing education, including low school readiness; language barriers; issues accessing the curriculum, and the breadth of differentiation needed to support learning for newcomer and other pupils<sup>27</sup>. Amongst other issues, evidence identified particular challenges for schools in meeting the learning needs of pupils who have had protracted breaks in their education. Such pupils, who have experienced an interrupted education, are often entering schools at an educational baseline several years behind their peers in addition to any language related challenges<sup>28</sup>.

Refugee and asylum seeking children are especially likely to have experienced an interrupted education, in addition to other challenges in accessing education. These include language and communication issues, prejudice and racism, social exclusion, literacy issues, and limited or no resources to deal with or awareness of the specific challenges that asylum seekers and refugees face<sup>29</sup>. Refugees and asylum seeking children and young people have a more elevated risk for psychological difficulties than other 'newcomers'<sup>30</sup>. They are less likely to be prepared for migration and more likely to have limited or interrupted education prior to arriving in the host country<sup>31</sup>. Furthermore, many refugees and asylum seekers have experienced war and persecution, and a range of additional adversities during and post-migration<sup>32</sup>. Alongside language proficiency, 'trauma' has been the most common challenge

<sup>25</sup> <http://aims.niassembly.gov.uk/questions/printquestionssummary.aspx?docid=365822>

<sup>26</sup> Information provided by the Education Authority, 1<sup>st</sup> March 2022

<sup>27</sup> Kernaghan, D (2015) *Feels Like Home: Exploring the experiences of newcomer pupils in primary schools in Northern Ireland*. Belfast: Barnardo's Northern Ireland.

<sup>28</sup> Department of Education Northern Ireland (2019) *Newcomer Pupils Policy – Public Consultation Paper*. [Online]. Available at: <https://www.education-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/consultations/education/newcomer-pupils-policy-review-public-consultation-paper.pdf>

<sup>29</sup> Murphy, F., & Vieten, U. M. (2017). *Asylum seekers' and refugee's experiences of Life in Northern Ireland: Report of the first study on the situation of asylum seekers and refugees in NI - 2016*. Belfast: Queen's University Belfast

<sup>30</sup> Kim, S. Y., Schwartz, S. J., Perreira, K. M., & Juang, L. P. (2018). 'Culture's influence on stressors, parental socialization, and developmental processes in the mental health of children of immigrants.' *Annual review of clinical psychology*, 14:343-370.

<sup>31</sup> Taylor, S. & Sidhu, R. K. (2012). 'Supporting refugee students in schools: what constitutes inclusive education?', *International Journal of Inclusive Education*, 16(1):39-56.

<sup>32</sup> McMullen, J., Harris, J., Jones, S., McConnellogue, S. & Winter, F. (2021) *School-Based Support for Syrian Refugee Pupils in Northern Ireland. Vulnerable Persons Relocation Scheme Research and Evaluation Scoping Project*. Stranmillis University College: Centre for Research in Educational Underachievement.

reported by school staff to the EA's Intercultural Education Service<sup>33</sup>. Research suggests that, whilst some refugee children cope well when they arrive in Northern Ireland, others can present with challenges during resettlement including developmental delay and heightened fear and anxiety<sup>34</sup>.

As the number of asylum seekers and refugees to Northern Ireland increases, and is likely to rise further, including with the arrival of Afghan refugees through the resettlement scheme, it is possible that the aforementioned issues will be amplified. This may, in turn, have resultant impacts on school places and the capacity of schools, supports, and services to respond to and meet newcomer pupils' needs.

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<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

<sup>34</sup> Robertson, A (2020) 'A New Life for Me': Integration Experiences of Syrian Refugee Children and their Families. Belfast: Barnardo's Northern Ireland