



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Research and Information Service Briefing Note

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Issues Paper in respect of BAME communities and persons with a disability: Good Relations Action Plan.

NIAR 135 – 21

This Briefing Note has been requested by the Assembly and Executive Review Committee (AERC). The paper sets out some of the key issues and challenges facing BAME communities and those with a disability, particularly when engaging with the Assembly.

1. Introduction

As part of the development process for the upcoming Good Relations Action Plan, a series of stakeholder events are being proposed for the purpose of engaging with marginalised or hard-to-reach groups in Northern Ireland. These groups are likely to include representatives from Black and Minority Ethnic (BAME) communities, plus persons with a disability. While gender issues will also form part of the engagement process, it is likely that these important issues will be examined by other business areas, and will therefore not form part of this review.

This paper begins by outlining some of the general issues facing BAME communities in Northern Ireland, then looks at specific issues and barriers facing those communities when engaging with the Assembly. It then provides a list of possible questions which could be used in a focus group setting to illuminate these barriers, and find a way forward. The paper then proceeds to examine the barriers facing persons with a disability, before finishing with a list of questions to be used in any engagement sessions. But first some background on BAME communities here.

2. BAME groups in Northern Ireland

Demography

Recent estimates (June 2019) place the total population of Northern Ireland at around 1.894 million (NISRA, 2020a). Prior to the Millennium, Northern Ireland was the least ethnically diverse region of the United Kingdom (UK), with an overwhelmingly white population. However, the expansion of the EU in 2004, plus the signing of the Belfast/Good Friday agreement, led to a surge in international migration. Between mid-2000 and mid-2019, an estimated 240,000 long-term international migrants arrived in Northern Ireland, and 195,000 left, leaving a net total of 45,000 new residents, accounting for 2.4% of the overall population (NISRA, 2020b). The total Non-UK/ROI population, which includes both earlier migrants and newcomers, has been estimated at up to 112,000 (NISRA, 2020c).

The scale of inward migration can be seen in the School Census figures. In 2002, there were 1,366 'newcomer' BAME pupils; by 2020, this figure had risen to 17,400 (Department of Education, 2021). The School Census for 2019 also lists over 65 languages spoken by primary school pupils as their first language here (NISRA, 2020c), another indication of the growth in diversity across Northern Ireland.

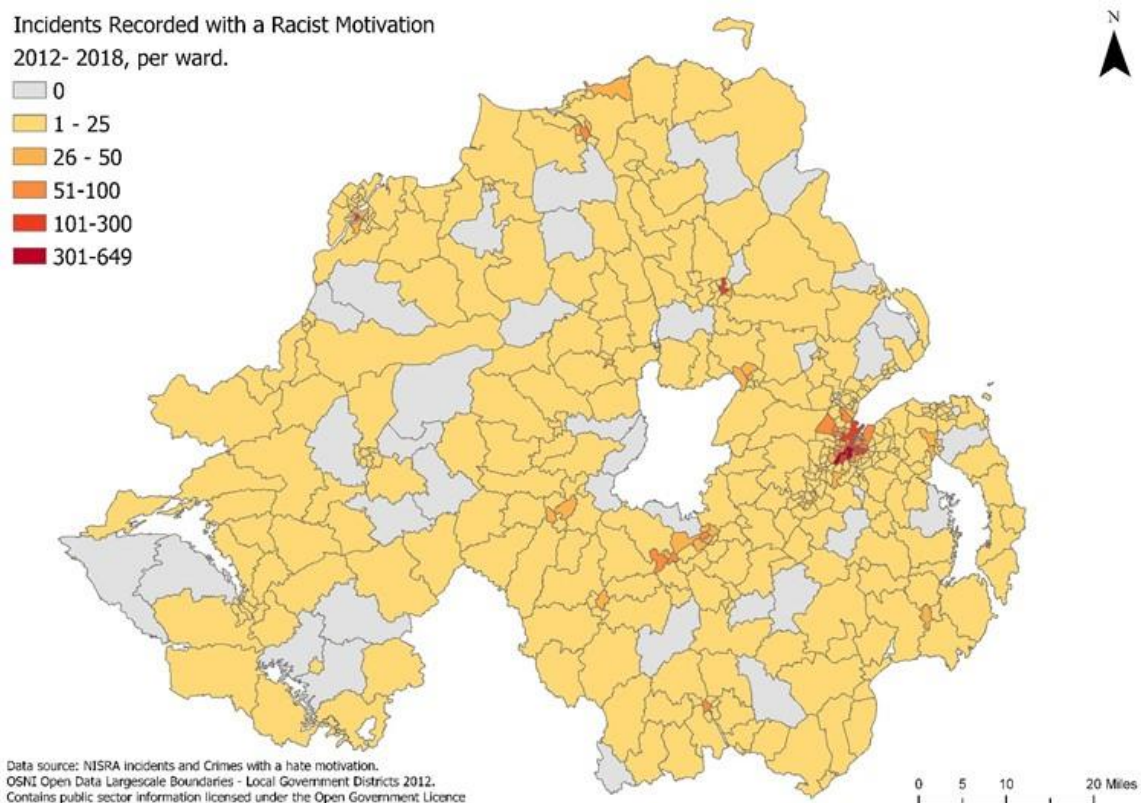
In Northern Ireland, there are currently no political representatives from a minority ethnic background, either in local councils or the Assembly. Similarly, the workforce in Parliament Buildings is overwhelmingly white.

Hate Crime

The PSNI began recording hate-motivated incidents and crimes in 2004. The categories include sectarian, racist, homophobic, transphobic and disability-related criminality. Traditionally, Northern Ireland has been perceived as a society dominated by sectarianism, a view reflected in official police figures, which consistently showed sectarian incidents to be the most prevalent form of hate crime. That all changed in 2016.

In 2016/17 the number of racist incidents exceeded the number of sectarian incidents for the first time, and has remained the case since then (PSNI, 2021). In 2020/21, for example, **993 racist incidents** were recorded by the police, compared with **934 sectarian incidents**¹. Map 1 (below) shows just how widespread these incidents are across Northern Ireland, with very few electoral wards incident-free (shown in grey). In brief, racist hate crime is more prevalent in Northern Ireland than generally assumed, particularly when the relatively small size of the BAME community is taken into account.

Map 1: Location of Racist Incidents in Northern Ireland: 2012 – 2018



¹ According to the PSNI (2021), "Not all hate motivated incidents will result in the recording of a crime, as what has occurred in the incident may not be of the level of severity that would result in a crime being recorded." (p. 2)

Diversity

The BAME population is very diverse. It includes seasonal agricultural workers from Bulgaria and Romania; skilled tradesmen from Poland; doctors, GPs, accountants and other professionals from Africa/Asia; nurses from the Philippines, PhD students from Iran and India; plus asylum seekers and refugees² from Syria, Algeria, Iran, Iraq, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Nigeria, Somalia, Sudan and Kenya. While precise figures are not available, anecdotal evidence suggests that a significant proportion of BAME residents have degree-level qualifications, a working knowledge of English, and speak at least one or more languages.

3. General Issues of Concern to BAME individuals in Northern Ireland

On 19 April 2021, the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee at Westminster issued a call for evidence in respect of a newly-announced Inquiry into the “experiences of minority ethnic and migrant people in Northern Ireland.” (NI Affairs Committee, 2021). In response, a consortium of local BAME groups and asylum seekers, led by the North West Migrants Forum (NWMF), convened a series of focus groups (29 April 2021) and one-to-one interviews (1 May 2021) in Derry-Londonderry with a wide range of individuals from 20 countries. The purpose of these engagements was to identify and discuss the key issues of concern currently facing minority communities in Northern Ireland, and relay these concerns to the Committee. A selection of some of the key issues raised by participants in the focus groups and interviews is presented below:

Asylum Seekers

- denial of the right to work during the asylum process;
- inadequate benefit payments (cash allowance of £39.63 per week);
- long delays in processing asylum applications (up to 5 – 7 years);
- mental health concerns³; and

² There are no definitive figures for the number of asylum seekers in Northern Ireland, as the Home Office only release national counts, but the number is believed to be in the low thousands.

³ The increased vulnerability to mental health problems that refugees and asylum seekers face is linked to both **pre-migration** experiences (such as war trauma and terror) and **post-migration** conditions, including separation from family, prolonged asylum procedures, poverty and poor housing (Mental Health Foundation, 2017). The ever-present fear of being returned to the country where they were persecuted can trigger extreme distress in asylum seekers, with tragic consequences. A torture survivor in England recently committed suicide because he believed, when contacted by the Home Office, that he was going to be removed from the country. It turned out, the man was due to be informed that his asylum claim had been successful. But it was too late, the fear of return to persecution had been too much to bear. Last year, (2020) 29 asylum seekers died in Home Office custody (see Freedom from Torture, 2021, Available at: <https://www.freedomfromtorture.org/news/everything-you-need-to-know-about-priti-patels-new-plan-for-immigration>)

- the Home Secretary's 'New Plan' for Immigration⁴.

All BAME individuals

- Personal safety is a major issue, and many participants cited hate crime, including street harassment and racial micro-aggressions⁵, as concerning. Based on PSNI data and population size, the likelihood of a BAME individual experiencing a racist incident is around 17 times higher than the likelihood of a member of the majority (Protestant/Catholic) community being the victim of a sectarian incident.
 - Many racially-motivated incidents go unreported, and there is concern that the PSNI lack the powers to deal with hate crime.
- A failure to recognise educational and professional qualifications acquired outside Northern Ireland. This sometimes results in migrants being employed in lower status occupations than what they are trained for.
- Structuring of the education system along mostly sectarian lines exacerbates feelings of exclusion, making it harder to integrate.
- Racial bullying in schools is a common issue, particularly from Year 8 onwards.
- Difficulty in obtaining a tenancy in the private rental sector, even when the BAME applicant is in full employment. Discrimination in housing can often be covert, and hard to prove.
- Common Travel Area (CTA). Non-CTA nationals born outside the EU and living in Northern Ireland do not have freedom of movement across the border between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland. Can sometimes lead to detention and deportation.
- Racial profiling, intrusive questioning, even at border check-points within the UK.
- Absence of monitoring information. With some exceptions, Northern Ireland is the only part of the UK which does not routinely collect monitoring data on race and ethnicity. Some participants suggested that, without explicit statistical

⁴ The 'New Plan' will establish a two-tier asylum system, with someone's means of arrival in the UK determining how they will be treated. Asylum seekers arriving through anything other than 'resettlement' (legal route) will receive a lesser form of protection, including temporary status, no access to financial support, and limited rights to family reunion. But some participants in the focus group made the point that people fleeing terror or persecution often have to travel without permission, as there is no visa to enable them to do so legally.

⁵ **Racial micro-aggressions** include verbal and nonverbal communications that subtly convey rudeness and insensitivity, and demean a person's racial heritage. An example is an employee who asks a colleague of color how she got her job, implying she may have landed it through an affirmative action or quota system, rather than merit (American Psychological Association, 2020). See: <https://www.apa.org/monitor/2009/02/microaggression>

evidence to bring to bear on allegations of unfair treatment, or inequalities in employment, health, education, and the criminal justice system, such issues will continue to be either hidden or ignored.

- Lack of political representation and engagement. It was suggested that, if Northern Ireland is to be truly representative, public bodies must reflect the make-up and cultural diversity of society as a whole. It was argued that, to improve the situation, funded programmes on political and civic engagement should be offered to minority ethnic groups, in order to build capacity and confidence.
- One focus group participant felt that: “In Northern Ireland political parties shy away from engaging with minority ethnic people because I think they believe they will lose support from their core supporters, if they were to demonstrate their support and solidarity with ethnic minority people.”

4. Engagement by the Assembly with BAME groups

Broadly speaking, there are two aspects of engagement linked to the Assembly, namely: **civic engagement** with the institution itself (e.g. visits to Parliament Buildings, or the website, and seminars on how the Assembly and its various constituent elements work etc.) and **political engagement** (i.e. capacity building, to enable BAME residents to enter the political process and become elected Members). Both civic and political engagement may be connected, in that BAME residents in Northern Ireland may be more likely to participate in local politics if they already have a working knowledge of how the Assembly works.

As noted earlier, both the Assembly Secretariat and the elected Assembly are overwhelmingly white institutions ⁶, and this was raised by a number of participants in the focus groups cited above. As a result, there was a general view that things were unlikely to change substantially until, “... there were more people who looked like me in positions of authority.”

The level of engagement between the BAME community and the Assembly is currently very low. A recent analysis of data relating to external events staged by the Engagement Office between September 2020 – March 2021, found that only five of the 209 attendees were from a minority ethnic background ⁷. This compares with 23 attendees with a declared disability, the next smallest marginalised group.

⁶ Six of the 129 MSPs in the Scottish Parliament are from a BAME background. See: <https://www.pressandjournal.co.uk/fp/news/politics/scottish-politics/3116914/scottish-election-2021-how-representative-is-our-new-parliament/>

⁷ Northern Ireland Assembly (2021) NIAR 90-21, **Analysis of surveys conducted by Engagement Office, September 2020 – March 2021**. Research and Information Service, 28 April 2021.

While the focus groups did not specifically address the issue of Assembly engagement, a number of factors emerged which may have contributed to the low level of BAME engagement with the Assembly. These are:

- **The binary nature of politics in Northern Ireland:** It was suggested that ethnic and religious minorities are unable to exercise their political and civic rights due to the binary nature (PUL/CNR) of the two dominant communities in Northern Ireland politics – “They only talk about issues that affect the two tribes here, and we do not fit into the narrative of the two tribes”, remarked one participant.
- **The Use of Gate-Keepers:** Most public authorities rely on a small number of funded ‘gate-keeper’ organisations to pass on information to grassroots BAME groups, of whom there are many in Northern Ireland. It appears, however, that information may not be getting through in all cases. In the context of the Assembly, for example, it is not widely known in BAME circles that the Engagement Office run tours of Parliament Buildings, and hold a range of training seminars on how the Assembly works.

It was suggested that a possible way forward would be to conduct a mapping exercise to establish a list of local BAME groups in Northern Ireland and their contact details. Information on Assembly engagement events and initiatives could then be sent directly to these groups.

- While language is an issue, it may not be as significant as sometimes thought, as many BAME individuals, particularly those from Africa and Asia, have a working knowledge of English. This is largely confirmed by an analysis of interpreter requests made by HSC Trusts over the decade, 2009 – 2019, which showed that Polish, Lithuanian, and Portuguese were the most requested languages ⁸.
- Other barriers to engagement include **childcare, work patterns, and location issues**. Childcare is an issue for some BAME communities, as events are usually scheduled for the working week, making it difficult to arrange cover. Similarly, many BAME individuals work on fixed shifts, Monday – Friday, and may not be able to afford time-off to attend seminars etc. The fact that most training programmes take place in Parliament Buildings, compounds these issues further, as a large proportion of the BAME community live and work outside Belfast.

⁸ NISRA (2020) Long-term international migration 2019 – admin data relating to the international population in Northern Ireland. Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency, 27 August 2020. Available at: <https://www.nisra.gov.uk/sites/nisra.gov.uk/files/publications/Miq1819-Stock.xlsx>

- One possible solution would be to hold training sessions on Saturdays in venues outside Belfast, when BAME individuals are off- work and childcare would not be an issue.
- An Assembly Disability Advisory Group was established in 2009. The members include Assembly staff and representatives from nine disability organisations. Among other functions, the group provides input into policy issues which are relevant to the sector. A similar group – a **BAME Advisory Group** – might have some merit. This would create a forum, which does not currently exist, for the discussion and resolution of issues affecting BAME communities in relation to the Assembly.
- Overall, the complete absence of BAME individuals, both in the Chamber and in the Secretariat, suggests that the development of some form of Action Plan, perhaps on the same lines as the statutory **Disability Action Plan** may have some merit.

5. Potential Questions to ask at BAME Consultation Events

Prior to delivering an external event, such as a training seminar on how the Assembly works, the Engagement Office uses a short questionnaire to gauge the level of knowledge attendees have of the institution before the session begins. A couple of these questions are pertinent in the present context, and are included below. A list of possible questions could include some or all of the following:

- Depending on the type of engagement (workshop, focus group, interview) it would be helpful at the outset to collect some basic profile information (i.e. age band, gender, disability, employment sector, home constituency, and country of birth). This information may be significant, as a seasonal agricultural worker from Romania, for example, may have a different perspective from that of a hospital pharmacist born in India).
- How would you rate your present knowledge of how the Assembly works?
 - very good / good / average / poor / very poor
- Present the participants with a list of possible ways in which engagement with the Assembly can occur, and ask them to identify which (if any) of these they have used in the past.
 - Guided tour of Parliament Buildings; visited the Assembly website; followed the Assembly on Facebook/Twitter; attended/watched a Committee meeting; attended/watched a Plenary Session; provided written/oral evidence to a Committee; received a presentation from the Education Service etc.

- Which specific areas of Assembly business would you be interested in learning about?
 - Passage of legislation; Assembly questions, how Committees work; role of PMMs, PMBs; other (write in or explain)
- Barriers to engagement – What prevents you from engaging with the Assembly?
 - Lack of information about available services (tours etc.);
 - Language difficulties
 - Problems getting time off work
 - Caring responsibilities
 - Other (please explain)
- How do you think these barriers can be overcome?
- What can the Assembly do to get more people from BAME groups to engage with us? (it may be helpful to present a couple of options, such as:)
 - appoint a Liaison Officer to work directly with BAME groups;
 - establish a BAME Advisory Group in the Assembly (similar to the Disability Advisory Group);
 - Outreach – hold some Assembly training sessions outside Belfast (already happens with Education Service).
 - Other (please write in)

6. Persons with a disability

Census 2011 revealed that around one-in-five (20.7%) of the population have a limiting long-term illness or disability which limits their daily activities a little or a lot (Table 1). The prevalence of disability increases with age: while only five percent of those aged under 15 years have a health problem which limits their daily activities (a little or a lot), this figure rises to almost 60 per cent of those aged 65 or over.

Table 1: Long-term Disability, Census 2011

Long-term Health Problem or Disability	Count	Per cent (%)
Day-to-day activities limited a lot	215,232	11.9
Day-to-day activities limited a little	159,414	8.8
Day-to-day activities not limited	1,436,217	79.3
All ages	1,810,863	100.0

Source: Table DC2308NI

People with disabilities are a diverse population. Census 2011 lists a large range of health issues, including deafness, blindness, communication disorders, chronic pain, learning disability, cancer, mental illness, and breathing difficulties, to name but a few. In relation to engagement with the Assembly, while many of these groups will have common needs, others may require special and tailored assistance.

7. Disability Issues and the Assembly

To recognise the *International Day of Persons with Disabilities* (IDPD), and the 25th anniversary of the Disability Discrimination Act 1995, the Engagement Office ran an online stakeholder event on 3 December 2020. The event, 'An Accessible Assembly?' was held in partnership with Disability Action, and took the form of a virtual workshop via Zoom. The 30 attendees were asked to consider how the Assembly and its Committees can better engage with disabled people, and ensure that legislation reflects their needs. The findings of the stakeholder event were compiled later and include the following:

- Those who had met with MLAs reported feeling they were listened to and heard. However, they felt that Members were limited in what they could achieve, or that any achievements and ongoing actions were not fed back to the enquirers. Feedback from MLAs was requested on an on-going basis, so that enquirers did not feel the interactions were unproductive.
- Participants commented upon the complexity of the website, which made sourcing appropriate information a challenge. If the site was not to be overhauled, a 'Guide to Participation', providing relevant links to elements discussed in the *Assembly Connect* sessions, was requested. While participants were happy to watch or support committee meetings, they felt it

was important to be aware of the meeting agenda prior to the meeting, to ensure they did not wait for a disability item that did not arise. How to source agendas before meetings could be included in the 'Guide'.

- While being able to enter by the front door of Parliament Buildings was appreciated, it was felt that signage could be improved further and be more specific, e.g. to *Changing Places* toilets.
- Making greater use of virtual meetings would make participation easier, as it removes much of the worry and stress of attending in person. Travel can be difficult for many, and much more exhausting than participating in events from home, where support aids, such as oxygen supplies, are to hand. Online meetings are also more accessible for those with mental health issues.
- Local meetings held outside Belfast would also be helpful, as travel would be easier, and discussions more relevant to their own community.
- Some disabled people do not have their own car, and rely on public transport to get to meetings (one participant was from Fermanagh, and was delighted by the virtual event, as it saved her hours of travelling). Even those living within a short distance of Parliament Building, such as the Ards Peninsula, found they needed multiple buses to reach the site, which was physically and mentally exhausting.
- Long meetings can present multiple difficulties. Subtitles and sign language interpreters were felt to be important, as was being able to attend just the relevant section of a meeting. In one case, it was reported that, in order to prevent disruption of the meeting by bringing in wheelchairs, several individuals had to sit through a three-hour meeting before making their contribution.

Accessibility Issues in Parliament Buildings

There are at least two major, outstanding accessibility issues for persons with a disability in Parliament Buildings, namely: (i) accessibility of the Assembly Chamber itself; and (ii) the provision of automatic doors on the upper floors (2nd, 3rd and 4th). The current Disability Action Plan (2016 – 2021) refers to both these issues (actions 5i and 5j respectively). Given the significant expenditure and potential disruption to Assembly business that would be involved in making adaptations to the Chamber, it is likely that SMG will be asked to consider the most appropriate way to take this action forward into the new draft Action Plan (2021 – 2026).

During the course of the 2016 – 21 Action Plan, automatic door openings were provided in the basement, ground and first floors of Parliament Buildings. Again, as significant expenditure is involved in automating the remaining three floors, it is likely that Building Services will be asked to draw up a paper for SMG which will signal a way forward.

Finally, to mark the centenary of the creation of Northern Ireland, the Speaker hopes to preside over a number of Outreach Parliaments in the Assembly Chamber in 2021. These will focus on different sections of the community including those with a disability. Subject to public health considerations, a *Parliament for People with Disabilities* may take place later in 2021.

8. Potential Questions to ask at Disability Consultation Events

The questions to ask at a consultation event, such as a workshop or focus group, would be broadly similar to the type of questions formulated above for individuals from a BAME background. Essentially, the aim would be to identify (i) their current knowledge of the Assembly, and how it works; (ii) what barriers exist which prevent them from engaging with the Assembly; (iii) how these could be overcome; (iv) what the Assembly can do to help; and (v) which areas of the Assembly's work they would like information or training on (e.g. Plenary, AOs, how committees work, PMBs, PMMs etc.). Below are a few examples, which can easily be tweaked or developed to fit the engagement forum.

- Have you had an experience of engaging with the Assembly, its Committees, or MLAs?
- What barriers exist that would prevent you from engaging with the Assembly?
- How do you think these could be overcome?
- What can the Assembly do to encourage more people with disabilities to respond to Inquiries and get their voice heard?
- What subject areas would you be interested in hearing more about and getting involved in?

9. Summary

As part of the preparation for the forthcoming Good Relations Action Plan, the Assembly and Executive Review Committee (AERC) have decided to consider issues relating to marginalised groups. This paper refers to two of these groups – BAME communities and persons with a disability.

After presenting some background information on BAME communities in Northern Ireland, plus general issues facing these communities, the paper proceeded to outline some of the key barriers preventing them from engaging with the Assembly. Possible questions for use in a workshop/focus group setting were also listed. Given the complete absence of BAME individuals in the Assembly and Secretariat, and the overwhelmingly white workforce, an initiative, such as a BAME Advisory Group, which would act as a forum where Assembly staff / Members and BAME representatives could meet, may be worthy of consideration.

The paper also reviewed the barriers facing persons with a disability (this section was largely based on a stakeholder event held on 3 December 2020). In terms of disability access to Parliament Buildings, the key barriers were (i) accessibility of the Assembly Chamber itself; and (ii) the provision of automatic doors on the upper floors (2nd, 3rd and 4th). The paper concluded with a list of potential questions for a stakeholder event.

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