



Northern Ireland Community of Refugees and Asylum Seekers

Background

NICRAS is the only refugee and asylum seeker led organisation in Northern Ireland and was established in 2002. It works for the benefit of refugees and asylum seekers by providing advice, support, and a community for people in situations of extreme vulnerability.

NICRAS is a membership-based charity, and there are now around 710 adult members, as well as around 465 young people and children, from 43 different countries.

Over the years NICRAS has developed expert knowledge on the issues affecting refugee and asylum seekers. As a result we sit on several different forums and boards, including the Joseph Rowntree Poverty and Ethnicity Advisory Board, the Syrian Operational Planning Group, the All-Party Group on BME Issues at Stormont and the Racial Equality Sub-group of The Executive Office.

In 2013 NICRAS organised a comprehensive membership consultation. It found that members wanted NICRAS to focus not only on providing support, but also on empowering its members, seeking recognition for their skills and experiences, and creating opportunities to integrate and participate in community life.

Our mission is therefore to inspire and enable refugees and asylum seekers to break through injustice, deprivation and inequality, so they can achieve their full potential. Our vision is of a vibrant, welcoming, just and inclusive society, which promotes diversity and equality, and effectively respects the human rights and dignity of refugees and asylum seekers.

The stated objects of the charity are 'to support and represent asylum seekers and refugees in Northern Ireland by:

- (a) Providing services, activities and advocacy to relieve poverty and improve life;
- (b) Furthering the educational opportunities for asylum seekers and refugees through the provision of information and the organisation of educational programmes and events;
- (c) Supporting the process of integration through the provision of services and activities;
- (d) Developing and assisting the community of asylum seekers and refugees;
- (e) Supporting and enabling refugees and asylum seekers to achieve their full potential;
- (f) Addressing poverty, isolation and the impact of traumatic experiences through enabling social opportunities.'

NICRAS organises many different activities to achieve these aims

Activities

NICRAS focuses on the well being of its members and leads activities aimed at tackling the challenges they have experienced.



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Identifying and addressing gaps on accessing further education:

- Furthering opportunities for asylum seekers and refugees through the provision of information and the organisation of educational programmes and events. NICRAS also carried out a search for funding to reimburse books, fees and travel related to education, as well as funding for course fees.
- NICRAS also offers twice-weekly free English classes on its premises, run by volunteers.
- NICRAS identified a situation of differential treatment in the provision of free English Language Classes between those who had been granted 5 years Humanitarian Protection under the Syrian Vulnerable person resettlement programme, and others who have been granted Refugee status. Following successful policy submissions and representations from NICRAS and other concerned organisation in 2016, Dr Stephen Farry the then Minister for the Department for Employment and Learning announced that he will be bringing the entitlement for free English Classes for those who have been granted Refugee status, into line with those Syrians programme refugees granted humanitarian protection.

Community Engagement and Mental Wellbeing

- NICRAS, in partnership with the Belfast Trust, has provided for the training of 4 NICRAS members as mental health facilitators, and trained another 2 NICRAS members as mental health first aiders.
- NICRAS has facilitated art therapy sessions for women.
- NICRAS creates care plans for members with mental health issues, to ensure they receive the help and support they need.

Destitution Support

- NICRAS provides advice and advocacy for people who find themselves destitute.
- NICRAS is providing food-bank vouchers, food bags, toiletries and clothing for those who don't receive any benefits and are destitute, in partnership with the South-Belfast Food Bank, the SOS Bus and Storehouse.
- NICRAS has researched and published a very powerful report on the effect and underlying reasons for forced destitution among refugees in Northern Ireland. Launched in 2016, the report shows a change can be made and calls on the then Department of Social Development, the Home Office, HMRC and the then Office of the First and Deputy First Minister to recognise the problems and implement changes to prevent any refugee from being forced into destitution.

Support and Advice:

- NICRAS has a drop-in service staffed by qualified Advisers to give advice on all issues, including poverty and homelessness.
- NICRAS is addressing isolation by giving information to asylum seekers and refugees in need and helping them find social opportunities.



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- NICRAS organizes several programmes to develop access to education, employment and healthcare. NICRAS also gives references for accommodation, schools, and jobs, and refers members for volunteer placements.
- NICRAS helps people with administrative tasks, such as filling in application forms, for example for Job Seekers Allowance, travel papers, child benefits and child tax credits. NICRAS also helps its members through proofreading CVs and arranging crisis and integration loans.

Policy and Advocacy work:

- NICRAS holds campaigns that aim to change government policies that negatively affect refugees and asylum seekers, often with success
- NICRAS's most recent research and report published is entitled 'Home Sweet Home', and is an overview of the housing conditions of asylum seekers in Northern Ireland. Launched also in 2016, by the MLA Mike Nesbitt the leader of the official opposition in the Northern Ireland assembly it exposed the poor conditions of much of the accommodation and as a result NICRAS was asked to give evidence to the Housing Committee of the Northern Ireland Assembly.
- In addition to the research completed on destitution, and the overview of housing conditions, NICRAS is conducting research on several other issues that affect asylum seekers and refugees, such as mental health provision and funding for further education.

Refugees Awareness Trainings:

- Providing refugee awareness trainings for civil servants, community groups, and others outlining the challenges faced by asylum seekers and refugees in the asylum process.

Capacity-building

- Through promoting best practice, equality and efficiency, NICRAS is engaging with its volunteers and members to constantly improve the services it provides
- NICRAS has developed good relationships with the wider community and other organisations through participation on strategic panels and in social events.

Community's empowerment

- To engage our younger members, our youth group is running in partnership with the Inclusion and Diversity Team. Art and crafts activities, drumming, swimming, and cinema outings all encourage the young people to enjoy themselves and make friends.
- NICRAS has been successful in securing funds for a Refugee and Asylum Seeker women's project for April 16- March 17 aimed at empowerment and confidence-building through several activities, and programmes as a single group and together with the wider community.
- The Homework club is one of the oldest activities of NICRAS and is still running once a week to assist children for whom English is not their first language and might struggle with some of their homework.

Achievements

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NICRAS has been successful in many of its campaigns, gaining some significant achievements.

- 2010: NICRAS was able to have English for Speakers of Other Languages classes made free of charge for asylum seekers.
- 2010: NICRAS obtained access to leisure centres in Belfast for refugees and asylum seekers at the same concession rate as for people on benefits.
- 2015: NICRAS successfully campaigned for free access to healthcare for all asylum seekers, including destitute asylum seekers whose asylum claims had been refused.
- In July 2015, NICRAS was able to get the NI Assembly to recognise the migrant crisis in a debate in the Assembly.
- In 2015, NICRAS convinced the Driver and Vehicle Licensing Agency to change their application procedure to allow refugee I.D. cards to be accepted as a primary form of identification.
- In 2015, NICRAS has partnered with UNISON to provide free IELTS classes refugees and asylum seekers with medical qualifications who are seeking to work in the medical professions. The union also allows our members to avail of their immigration clinics and to access training courses.
- Family Reunification: NICRAS successfully campaigned with other organisations to ensure the Legal Aid for Family Reunification was not cut. We demonstrated that the total cost to the government was small, but it would have a big impact on people's lives.
- In December 2015 and January 2016: NICRAS successfully lobbied the Minister of the Department of Education and Learning on behalf of its members to extend free ESOL classes to all refugees.
- In 2015 NICRAS published a report on The Effects of Destitution on Asylum Seekers, and this report together with the second policy focused report 'Home Sweet Home', enabled NICRAS to develop links with senior politicians and were given the opportunity to give evidence on both housing and destitution to a committee of MLAs from the Northern Ireland Assembly and hope this will influence further decisions in relation to policy development.
- In 2016, NICRAS presented evidence to The Executive Committee of the finding of the living conditions of asylum seekers in NASS accommodations in Northern Ireland.

In conclusion, NICRAS is recognised as an expert on asylum and refugee issues and processes in Northern Ireland. This is the main organisation with primary and secondary data that can defend the rights of the community of asylum seekers and refugees. NICRAS has been engaged in the promotion of diversity and solidarity for the refugee and asylum seeker community, and on the promotion of good community relations and cohesion in order to foster integration.