



Belfast
City Council



Global
Exchange
on Migration & Diversity
at COMPAS



Inclusive Cities

INTEGRATION POLICY AND PRACTICE DURING COVID-19

Belfast City Council briefing

April 2021

About this briefing

Belfast is a participant in the Inclusive Cities programme – a city-led knowledge exchange programme, facilitated by the Global Exchange on Migration and Diversity at the University of Oxford.

The programme aims to support local authorities to create a step change in their approach to the inclusion of newcomers at the local level. In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, local authorities and their partners have had to adapt their inclusion programmes, often at speed, to support their newcomer and longer-standing communities. The briefings capture the learnings from these adaptations as well as ongoing work to promote inclusion and integration undertaken between March 2020 and October 2020 (unless otherwise specified), against the five thematic areas set out in the Inclusive Cities Framework.

- Briefings from the other Inclusive Cities are available [here](#)
- The Inclusive Cities Framework is available [here](#)
- A series of policy and research briefings on COVID-19 and inclusion, arising from the programme is available [here](#).

1. Leading in the development of a shared local story of inclusion

Growth in inward migration is a relatively recent trend for Belfast. The Council and its partners are using their existing expertise from their work on promoting [Good Relations](#) to develop a wider story of inclusion which encompasses newer communities.

One example of this is the Diversecity programme, which has run for four years. It aims to encourage an increased awareness of issues around diversity and provide participants with opportunities to meet and engage with representatives from other faith, ethnic and political backgrounds.

It also gives participants the opportunity to visit places and spaces where they would not traditionally go. Initiatives include facilitated workshops at the Belfast Islamic Centre, the Jewish Synagogue, the Hindu Temple and the Chinese Resource Centre; Arabic Awareness courses; training on issues faced by refugees and Roma and Travellers communities; and opportunities to listen to the stories of refugees and asylum seekers. The programme has been very well received and is oversubscribed.

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the Diversecity programme had to be moved online. This presented challenges as it reduced the level of in-person contact between communities and the enhanced impact of people physically visiting places that they would not traditionally visit. However, having virtual tours has also enabled a wider section of the population to access the service.

2. Supporting and driving inclusive economic growth

Belfast City Council is in the early stages of developing an Inclusive Growth City Charter that aims to support businesses and organisations to adopt practices that promote inclusive growth. It will focus on fair employment, progressive procurement and service delivery, and corporate and civic responsibility.

Several programmes aimed at developing inclusive economic growth are currently being delivered. To ensure that the city's economic planning actively pursues inclusive growth and development, Council staff from the Economic Development Unit have become permanent members of the Council's Migrant Forum, and questions of economic planning are a recurring agenda item at the forum's meetings. This has been critical in facilitating integrated

policy planning and developing stronger relations with the minority ethnic sector. It has resulted in a greater uptake of vocational training opportunities by people with Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic backgrounds. It has also helped to inform initiatives which aim to reduce the barriers newcomers face when accessing the labour market.

[Employment Academies](#) are a Council-led programme that aims to streamline participants into training and employment through contact with employers. The Council has engaged with community stakeholders to ensure that as wide an audience as possible is aware of and effectively matched to Employment Academies. Strategies for outreach have included targeted engagement through local community infrastructure the organisation of 'roadshows' and meeting with key organisations that support newcomers.

Emphasis is placed on ensuring that individual barriers to accessing employment academies are removed by:

- Having interpreters at engagement roadshows
- Producing information in the five most-spoken languages

- Providing childcare for those attending academies
- Offering flexible training hours
- Working through the Migrant Forum and other partnerships to ensure that opportunities are communicated to newcomers

As of 20th January 2020, Belfast Employment Academies have helped 350 people into employment.

In partnership with the Department for Communities, Belfast City Council is currently delivering a Pathway to Enterprise programme which provides intensive wrap-around and bespoke support to people who are out of work, on Universal Credit or who face barriers moving into self-employment. While activities depend on the specific needs of individuals, examples of how the programme delivers value for participants include providing:

- Financial support to those on universal credit and who do not have access to the resources needed to become self-employed or start their own business
- Counselling to those who are experiencing trauma and other health problems
- Onsite childcare
- Intensive and specialist mentoring in addition to what is available through other mainstream enterprise programmes

3. Connecting communities

The integration and inclusion of new communities has been a strong focus of Belfast City Council's Good Relations and Inclusion programme. The Council launched its new Good Relations Strategy in September 2019, which outlines a vision for building a 'shared Belfast'. At the heart of this strategy is a commitment to promote the integration and inclusion of all communities within Belfast and to support contact between new and longer-standing communities.

A Migrant Forum with 40 different community groups supports this work. The forum provides a place for inclusive debate and discussion around issues faced by new and longer-standing communities. It serves as a way to build bridges between these different community groups themselves and facilitates two-way communication between the Council and city residents.

The Forum is also used by various Council departments to link with communities in the design and delivery of sector-specific policies and services. During the pandemic, it expanded into a multilingual virtual platform for disseminating accurate information quickly.

Through the Good Relations Plan and the EU funded Peace IV Programme, the Council has supported several initiatives which focus on promoting good relations between communities through grants of up to £10,000 for short-term projects. Significant work has been undertaken through the Migrant Forum to ensure that organisations supporting newcomers are able to access the fund. Longer-standing communities have likewise been encouraged to apply. Initiatives supported by the fund include:

- Orientation sessions for newcomers
- Public celebrations, festivals and other cultural events that reflect the diversity of Belfast
- Community arts-based programmes and story-telling workshops
- The 4 Shared School Partnerships programme, which works with young people and school staff to understand diversity and to challenge racist and sectarian behaviour. Its activities are being moved online.
- The Roma Information Hub which helps the Roma Community access statutory and voluntary support services (see Case Study 2 for further information on the response to the pandemic supporting the Roma community)

Case Study 1: Bilingual telephone check in service for asylum seekers and refugees

A local community group was funded to provide a multilingual helpline to check in on vulnerable refugees and asylum seekers and link them to support services that are available in their own neighbourhoods or in Belfast more widely. The purpose of the service is to attempt to reduce the sense of isolation and exclusion that many within refugee and asylum communities encounter in the absence of family ties and wider social networks.

Many asylum seekers, in particular those who arrived just before or during lockdown, are cut off from family support and are more likely to face digital exclusion. The telephone check in service has been essential in reducing the sense of isolation felt by refugees and asylum seekers. It has also served to communicate public health messaging and advertise available support services. The service also helped to design culturally appropriate food parcels when it was noted that some food parcels, which were intended for elderly residents, were not suitable for refugees and asylum seekers.

In the longer term, through the Peace IV programme, the Council is funding a three- year project that aims to use everyday encounters to promote familiarity and meaningful relationships between members of new and longer-standing communities in four Belfast neighbourhoods. As with the 4 Shared School Partnerships programme, this project has moved many of its activities online due to COVID-19.

Aspects of the project that do not translate to an online context have been temporarily suspended and the related funds redirected to support urgent COVID-19 recovery initiatives. For example, enabling community groups to move their services online by funding the purchase of devices, conferencing licenses and improving Wi-Fi access.

The Council has been working with partners across Belfast on initiatives to prevent hate speech and hate crime. Recently, the Council commissioned a report on the experiences of Muslims in Belfast. Building on this report, the Council developed a number of initiatives to specifically promote better relationships between Muslim and non-Muslim communities as well as a framework to monitor tensions. Since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, there have been concerns that hate speech and Islamophobia are rising, particularly on social media platforms. The Council has established a virtual partnership with civil society organisations to monitor discriminatory and hateful language online, understand why certain hateful comments gain traction online and design early interventions.

4. Mainstreaming and building inclusive public services

As part of the Northern Ireland Act 1998, which implemented the Good Friday agreement, legislation was brought in to ensure that equality of opportunity and good relations became central to policy making, policy implementation, policy review and public service delivery. The act requires designated public authorities to have due regard to the need to promote equality of opportunity and good relations between persons of different religious beliefs, political opinions and racial groups when carrying out their functions.

This legislation has provided a strong framework for the Council to mainstream and build inclusive public services. All policies and services are subject to an equality impact assessment to determine any adverse impacts that they may have. During the COVID-19 pandemic, the Council has used this framework to adapt its services in the following ways:

- When the Council established a virtual community hub to support residents during the COVID-19 lockdown, a dedicated effort was made to ensure that the hub was accessible for and inclusive of the needs of all communities. A telephone helpline was set up as part of the hub, and contact staff were trained to use telephonic interpretation services in order to deal effectively with the queries of people whose first language is not English.
- Strong relations with Muslim community leaders played an integral role in ensuring the dissemination and observance of COVID-19 related guidelines amongst members of the community. For instance, in the run up to Ramadan, the Council worked closely with health practitioners in Muslim communities to develop guidelines on celebrating Eid while following public health advice.

5. Encouraging civic participation and representation

The Council actively encourages participation and representation of newcomers in civic activities and, via the Migrant Forum, develops policies and new services with the input of newcomers. New community festivals are encouraged and supported, with City Hall regularly being used as a venue to celebrate various community and cultural events. Communities that do not have centres of their own are offered spaces in Council-owned community centres to use for their activities. Key events such as Refugee Week, Good Relations Week and Hate Crime Conferences are hosted in the City Hall and supported by the Lord Mayor's Office.

Welcome signs in the top 10 languages spoken in Belfast have been erected in key Council facilities and the Council provides translation services on request.

As an employer, the Council actively promotes workforce diversity, including through accessible recruitment procedures, inclusive workforce planning, workforce monitoring, the creation of new employment pathways (such as apprenticeships), career progression support, and inter-cultural competence training for staff.

Case Study 2: Roma Support and Helpline

With the COVID-19 crisis came the potential for uneven impacts on several of Belfast's communities, particularly those at risk of not understanding or accessing emerging public health messaging and other government guidance (e.g., economic support).

In the early stages of the pandemic, Belfast City Council identified the need for targeted interventions for vulnerable communities including the Roma.

The Roma community in Belfast have specific language and cultural needs. Many are not able to communicate proficiently in English while others are illiterate in their mother tongue. This makes it challenging to access accurate public health advice and information as well as involve themselves in government support schemes and the City's broader integration and good relations related activities. Prior to the COVID-19 lockdown, Belfast City Council and other partner agencies had been trying to ensure that the Roma community was able to access mainstream services participate in good relations-related activities, with limited success.



At the start of the pandemic, the Council recognised the need to establish an advice and advocacy resource that would build trust amongst the Roma community vis-à-vis public authorities and communicate relevant information and advice. Accordingly, the Council approached a local voluntary group, Forward South Partnership, with the idea of funding a telephone helpline to support the Romanian-speaking Roma community across Belfast.

This bilingual service has provided a trusted and accessible resource for one of the most vulnerable communities in Belfast. The bilingual outreach workers have been critical in establishing contact with the Roma community and have helped Council better understand the challenges faced by the Roma Community on a daily basis in and outside of the context of COVID-19. The helpline has enabled callers to source support for food and housing as well as benefit advice via referral system that connects members of the community to wider support and advice services. Engagement with the Roma community has been greatly boosted because of this initiative.

With funding from the Council's Peace IV Programme, the helpline will eventually transition into a Roma Community Hub.

“In the early stages of the pandemic, Belfast City Council identified the need for targeted interventions for vulnerable communities including the Roma.

”

INCLUSIVE CITIES

Inclusive Cities is a knowledge exchange initiative supporting UK cities and their local partners to achieve a step-change in their approach towards the inclusion of newcomers.

Drawing on innovative ideas and practices from Europe and the United States, Inclusive Cities aims to support the development of an approach to inclusion which is strategic across the city administration. This approach consistently uses positive messaging to develop an inclusive narrative for the city which informs and drives practice and is local authority led, working in close partnership with business, public and voluntary sector organisations to achieve shared goals.

www.compas.ox.ac.uk/project/inclusive-cities

THE GLOBAL EXCHANGE ON MIGRATION AND DIVERSITY

The Global Exchange on Migration and Diversity is an ambitious initiative at the Centre on Migration, Policy and Society (COMPAS) opening up opportunities for knowledge exchange and longer term collaboration between those working in the migration field.

www.compas.ox.ac.uk/global-exchange

ABOUT

This briefing was authored by Leish Dolan (Belfast City Council), Jacqui Broadhead (COMPAS) and Denis Kierans (COMPAS).

Thanks to Ragini Khurana for her assistance.

CONTACT

For more information contact
Denis Kierans (COMPAS)
denis.kierans@compas.ox.ac.uk