

# Refugee Transition Guide

Northern Ireland  

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2023 Update

A guide for people who have recently received refugee status, humanitarian protection or discretionary leave.



Supported by  
**Belfast**  
City Council



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This Refugee Transition Guide 2023 Update was  
commissioned by Belfast City Council and  
developed by Law Centre NI

# About this Guide

This guide is intended to help you understand the process of transitioning from being an asylum seeker to having leave to remain. It is not a substitute for advice, but it will explain some basic principles, such as:



# How to use this Guide

## Important action/info

This symbol indicates that there could be serious consequences if you do not complete a task or if you do not understand your responsibilities.



## QR codes

Scan the code with the camera on your phone. It will open a website that contains useful information.

## Interpreters available

This symbol tells you when you can request an interpreter. You should always use a professional interpreter when discussing rights and entitlements.



[www.nidirect.gov.uk](http://www.nidirect.gov.uk)

This symbol tells you that you can find more information on this topic on the government's **nidirect** website. You can auto-translate the website using this button at the bottom of the webpage.



[How to translate this page](#)





## Congratulations!

You have been granted refugee status , humanitarian protection or discretionary leave to remain. You can now:

- work
- study
- claim social security benefits

It is your job to make sure that you understand your entitlements and responsibilities while living in Northern Ireland/UK.

You must obey the law, and abide by any requirements placed upon you by the agencies you engage with, such as the Jobs & Benefits Office or the NI Housing Executive. It is your responsibility to update them of changes to your circumstances.



## Changes to the Asylum System

On 28 June 2022 the Nationality and Borders Act became law. This Act makes some big changes to the UK asylum system and it is important you understand how it affects you. The changes only apply to you if you claimed asylum on or after 28 June 2022. The Act has changed some of the entitlements associated with different immigration statuses - ask your solicitor what status you have been granted. Your entitlements might be different from other people's.

Refugee  
(Group 1)

Refugee  
(Group 2)



Humanitarian  
Protection

Discretionary  
Leave

While all immigration categories above allow you to work, claim benefits and study - there are some differences e.g. the length of leave granted, and whether you can apply for Family Reunion. You can find out more about these differences on page 25 - Status Entitlements.

# What happens now?

When a positive decision has been made on your asylum claim:

- You will receive a "*determination of asylum claim*" letter from the Home Office, telling you that your (refugee, humanitarian protection or discretionary leave) status has been granted.
- You will receive your Biometric Residence Permit (see page 8).
- You will receive a "*discontinuation of support*" letter from Home Office and you will be told that your asylum support (money & accommodation) will stop on "X" date.
- You will receive a letter from Mears telling you that you must leave your accommodation by "X" date.

You should register with Extern Refugee Floating Support Team (see page 9) as they are the specialist organisation to help people in your position.



# Biometric Residence Permit



You should receive your Biometric Residence Permit (sometimes abbreviated to “BRP”) from the Home Office within 2-4 weeks. This is your official ID card and it confirms your right to access services and to work. Keep it safe. Your BRP should have a National Insurance number on the back. If it does not, see more information on page 17.



You should check that all your details on the card are correct. If there is a problem with your BRP when it arrives, for example an incorrect spelling, report it within 10 days. Use this link to report a problem, or your solicitor might be able to help you.

[www.gov.uk/biometric-residence-permits/report-problem](https://www.gov.uk/biometric-residence-permits/report-problem)

If you lose your BRP, you must report it to the Police, (PSNI ☎ 101) and apply to the Home Office for a replacement.

[www.gov.uk/biometric-residence-permits/lost-stolen-damaged](https://www.gov.uk/biometric-residence-permits/lost-stolen-damaged)

# End of Support



You will receive a "*discontinuation of support*" letter advising you that your asylum support (Mears accommodation & Aspen payments) will stop - usually in **28 days**. Now you must:

- find accommodation
- secure an income
- open a bank account



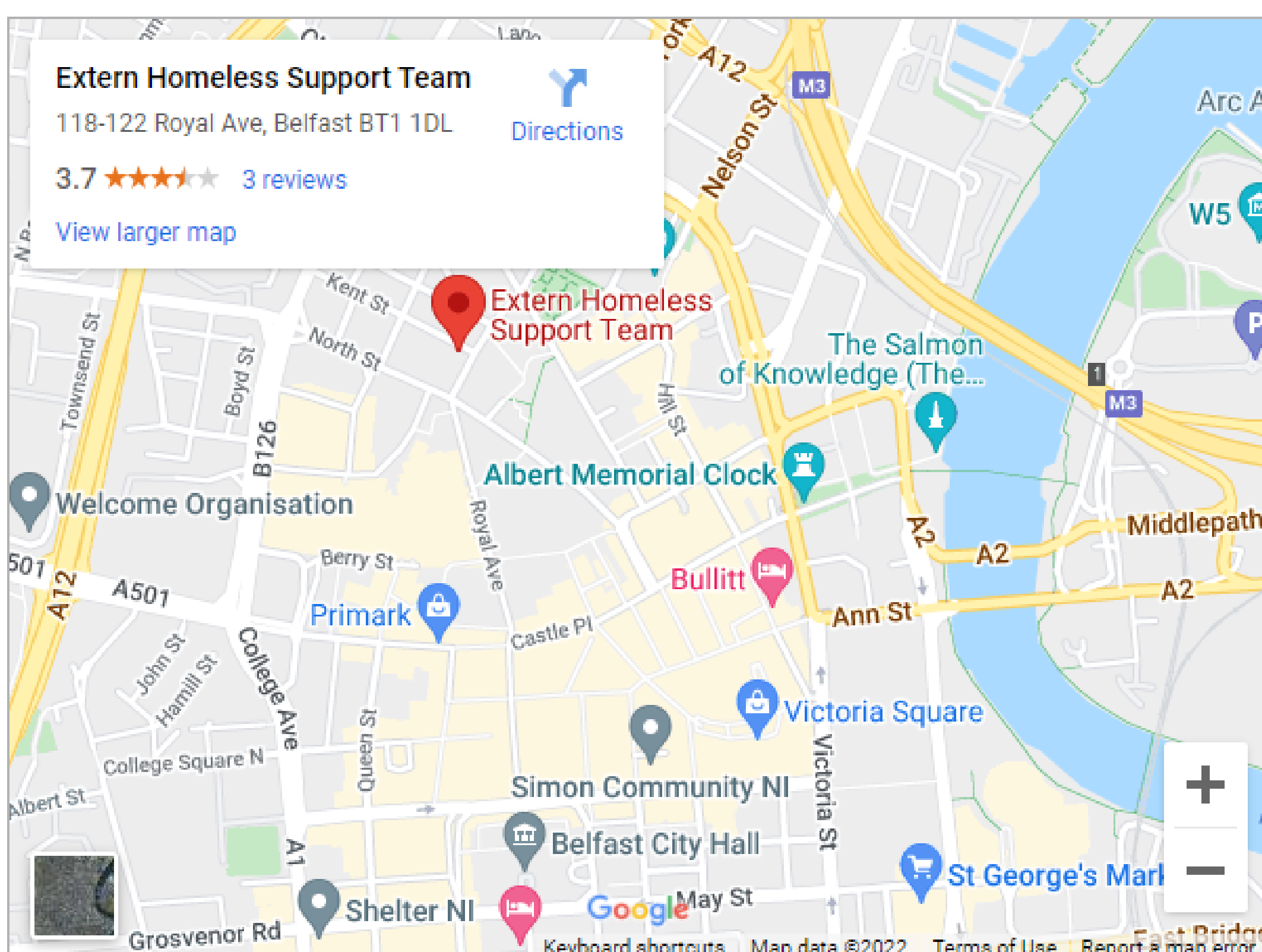
Extern have specialist staff who help people to transition out of the asylum system. You should register with Extern without delay.



[www.extern.org/  
refugee-floating-support-belfast](http://www.extern.org/refugee-floating-support-belfast)



Drop-in  
118-122 Royal Avenue,  
Belfast  
BT1 1DL  
028 9033 0433  
hst@extern.org





You are entitled to apply for "*social housing*" and homeless assistance from the Northern Ireland Housing Executive (*NIHE*). Social housing in Northern Ireland (NI) is allocated on the basis of need and your situation will be assessed by a Housing Officer. "Housing" means *a roof over your head*, and could include hostels and apartments. You will first be offered temporary accommodation. The type of accommodation depends on what is available on the day you leave Mears accommodation. This could be anywhere in NI, in a homeless hostel or a hotel. Mears and Extern can help you to apply to the Housing Executive.

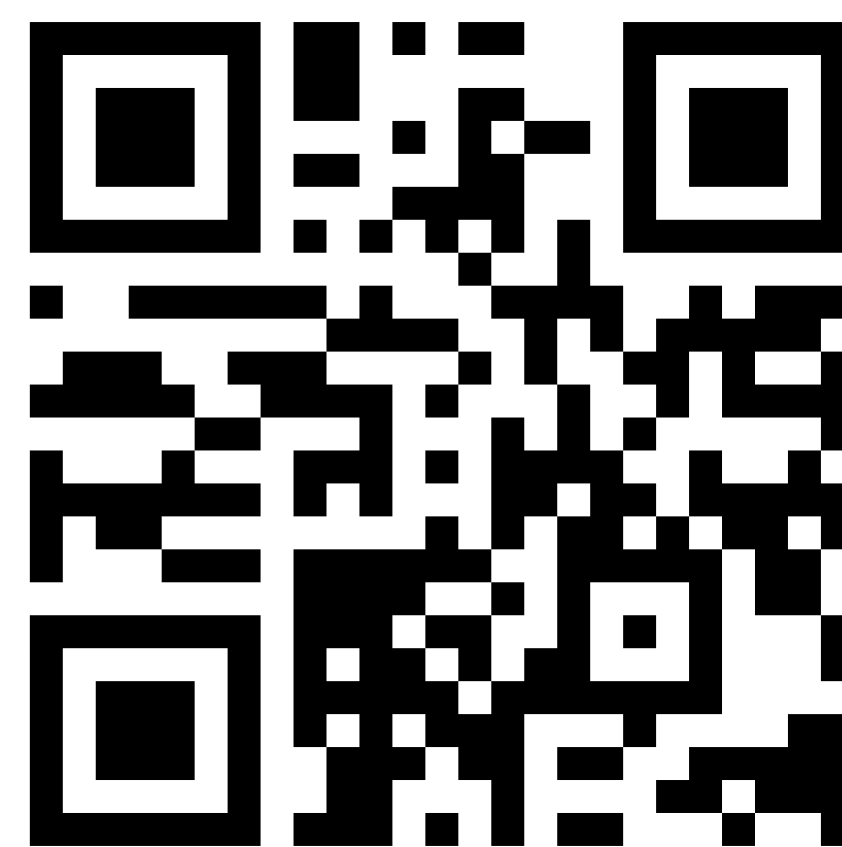
# Housing Executive

[www.nihe.gov.uk](http://www.nihe.gov.uk)



**nidirect**  
government services

**tédiréach**  
seirbhísí rialtais



2 Adelaide Street  
Belfast  
BT2 8PB  
03448 920 900



If you refuse an offer of temporary accommodation, NIHE may not make you another offer. You should not take housing advice from people who are not qualified as you could risk becoming homeless.



You can then apply for a permanent home through NIHE. Your needs will be assessed and whilst you can choose areas in which you would like to live, some areas have long waiting lists. You will be subject to the same rules and regulations as any other applicant.

## Private Rental

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government services

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seirbhísí rialtais

Most people in NI rent accommodation from private landlords, or eventually buy their own home. You might wish to speak to friends about finding a property to rent together. Depending on your employment situation, you could be entitled to claim UC Housing Costs which will help you to pay rent.

You can find more information about renting privately from [nidirect](https://www.nidirect.gov.uk) website.

If your family move to an area away from your child's school, it is likely they will need to find a new school as free school transport is only available in limited circumstances. See page 22.



## Tenant's Rights

A person who rents a property from a private landlord or NIHE is called a "tenant". As a tenant you have certain rights and responsibilities. You can find out more about Landlord and Tenant obligations on [nidirect](http://nidirect). You should also receive a copy of your signed tenancy agreement which tells you more about your rights and responsibilities.

[www.nidirect.gov.uk/articles/landlord-and-tenant-obligations](http://www.nidirect.gov.uk/articles/landlord-and-tenant-obligations)

# Housing Rights



[www.housingrights.org.uk](http://www.housingrights.org.uk)

Housing Rights is a charity that provides free, specialist support and advice on housing & debt issues. If you have a problem, you can phone their helpline at any time. You can also find useful information on their website.

# Social Security



**nidirect**  
government services

**tédiréach**  
seirbhísí rialtais

You are entitled to apply for social security (benefits) like Universal Credit (UC) – this is money from the government to support you while you look for work, or because you cannot work. You can apply online ([www.gov.uk/universal-credit/how-to-claim](http://www.gov.uk/universal-credit/how-to-claim)), or Extern can help you. UC is managed by an online account. You should keep your account login details safe. If you have difficulty using your online account you should tell your Universal Credit "Work Coach".

Your Home Office letter is not proof that you are entitled to claim social security benefits. Only your BRP proves your entitlement. You may make a UC claim while you wait for your BRP, but it could be rejected if you cannot provide the BRP within a specified time period.

Your Work Coach will explain any conditions of your benefits payments and your responsibilities. Your Work Coach can also advise you on Housing Costs, Child Benefit, and applying for a National Insurance Number if you need one.



## Advance Payments

There is normally a 5-week wait for your first UC payment so you should apply as soon as possible to avoid being left with no income. Once you have made a UC application, and completed all of the "To Dos" on your account, you can apply for an Advance Payment. Advance Payments will be deducted from future payments - this means you will receive a reduced amount until you have repaid the debt. Your Work Coach can help you to apply for an Advance Payment.

## Discretionary Support

You may also be entitled to apply for a one-off Universal Credit Discretionary Support Contingency Fund payment, or a Discretionary Support Loan for help with living expenses or household items. Speak to your Work Coach about this, or apply on nidirect. If you have difficulty applying online, contact Finance Support on 08005872750.

[www.nidirect.gov.uk/services/claim-discretionary-support](http://www.nidirect.gov.uk/services/claim-discretionary-support)

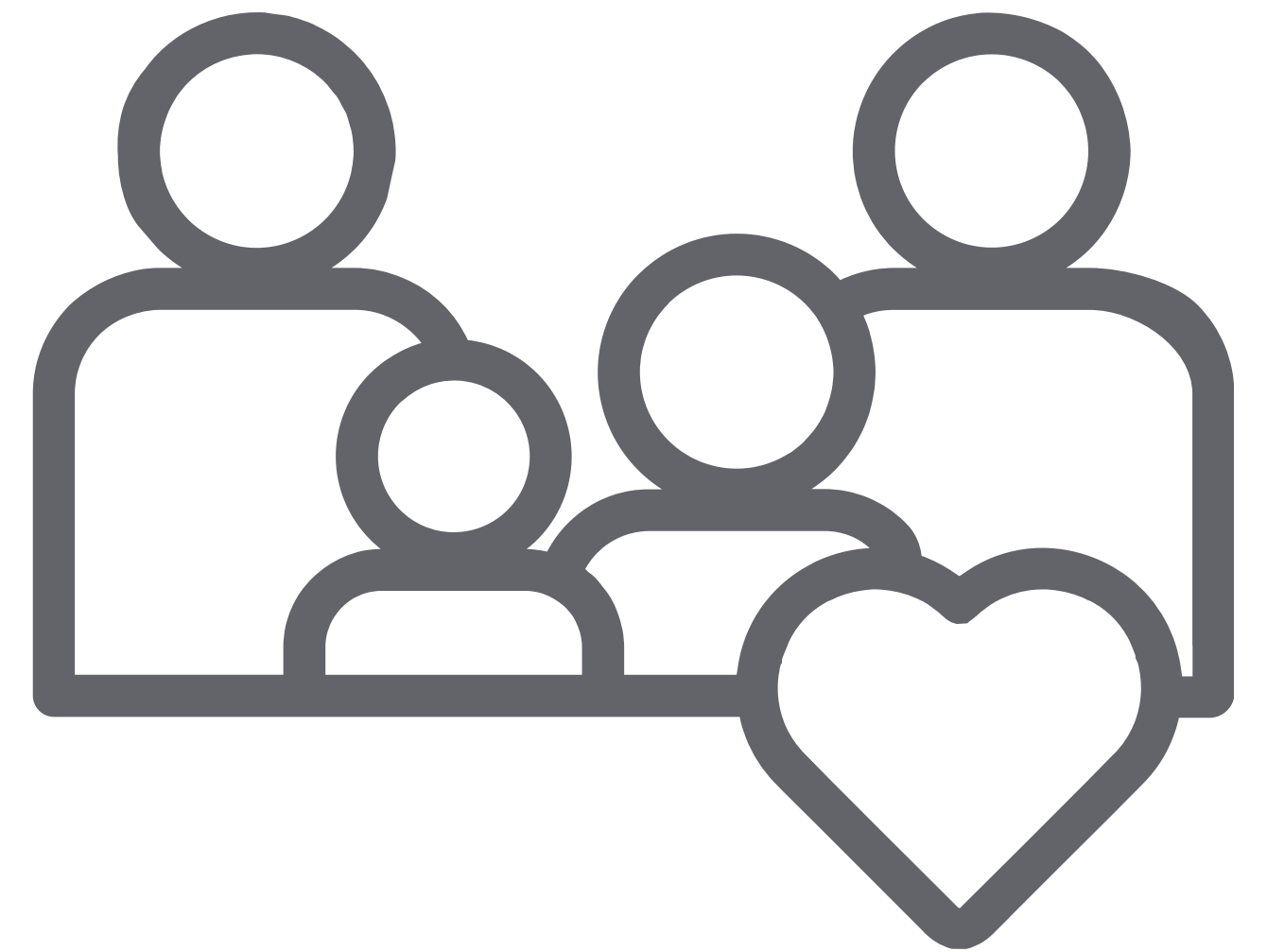
For enquiries about UC or support with your claim call the Universal Credit Service Centre on 0800 012 1331.

To arrange an urgent appointment at your local Jobs and Benefits Office telephone 0300 200 7822. If you require an interpreter at your appointment you should request it in advance.

# Child Benefit - Backdating

## (Refugees Only).

If you are a refugee, you can apply for your Child Benefit to be backdated to the date of your asylum claim.



## More information:

<https://revenuebenefits.org.uk/child-benefit/guidance/how-do-child-benefit-and-guardians-allowance-work/making-a-claim/>

If you have children you should request that HMRC backdates your Child Benefit claim. You must request this within 3 months of getting your refugee status.

You can contact HMRC here:

[www.gov.uk/government/organisations/hm-revenue-customs/contact/child-benefit](http://www.gov.uk/government/organisations/hm-revenue-customs/contact/child-benefit)

If you claimed asylum before September 2017, you may also be able to claim Child Tax Credit. You must make a claim within 1 month of receiving refugee status. Seek social security advice if you think this applies to you.



# Bank Account

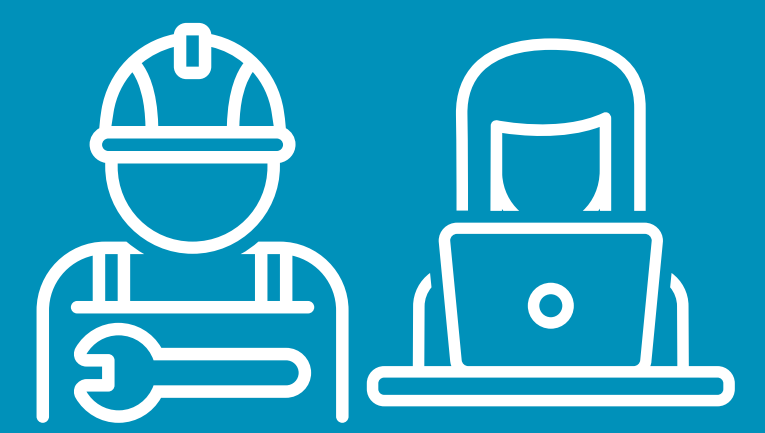


To receive payments from an employer, or social security benefits, you must have a UK bank account. Some banks allow you to open an account online, then visit them to verify your identity. You should do this as soon as possible, otherwise, you cannot receive Universal Credit. To open an account, you must prove your identity (Biometric Residence Permit) and your address (letter from Housing Executive, Home Office, Mears or Universal Credit). Extern can guide you.

You will receive an account number, a sort code, and a bank card that you can use in shops, online, and at ATMs. Most banks have Mobile Banking Apps where you can monitor your account, view your balance, or cancel your card if it is lost.



You should avoid signing up for credit cards or loans unless you are certain you can avoid getting into bad debt. You should not sign up for loans for other people- this is fraud. Debt advice is available for free. You can find more information on nidirect.



If you start work you must report this "change of circumstances" online in your UC account, or by Telephoning the UC Telephone helpline if you have a phone claim for UC.



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government services

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## National Insurance Number

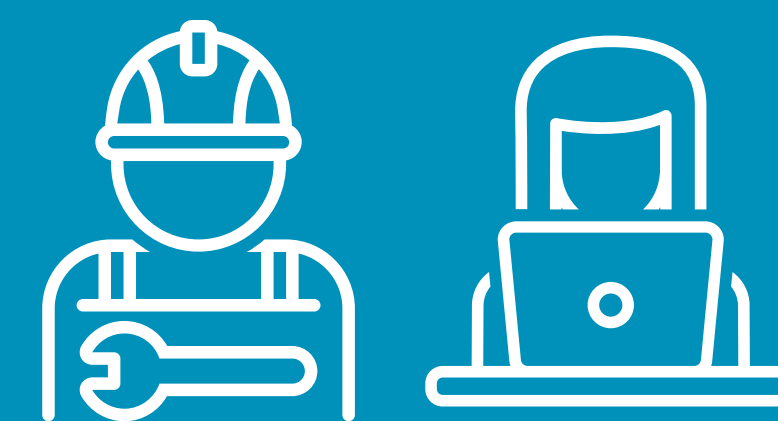
Everybody needs a National Insurance Number (NINo) to start work or apply for social security benefits.

You might have a NINo on the back of your BRP. If not you can apply for a National Insurance Number with your Work Coach or online at:

[www.nidirect.gov.uk/services/apply-national-insurance-number](http://www.nidirect.gov.uk/services/apply-national-insurance-number)

Your National Insurance Number is unique to you and cannot be changed or transferred. You must not use someone else's NINo, or allow anyone to use yours. You should keep your NINo safe and not share it with anyone who does not need to see it.

National Insurance is a type of tax. You pay National Insurance contributions to qualify for certain benefits and the State Pension.



## Work

You are allowed to work and you have full employment rights. You should learn about your rights as an employee. Employers must provide you with at least:

- a minimum wage
- payslips
- written terms & conditions

Your employer is responsible for deducting tax from your payments, this will be detailed in a payslip which you should receive at least monthly.

More information is available on nidirect. You are also entitled to join a union.

[www.nidirect.gov.uk/articles/employment-status](http://www.nidirect.gov.uk/articles/employment-status)

Minimum hourly wage at April 2022	23 and over	21 to 22	18 to 20	Under 18	Apprentice
	£9.50	£9.18	£6.83	£4.81	£4.81

## Employee Rights

[www.lawcentreni.org/how-we-help/about-our-service-1](http://www.lawcentreni.org/how-we-help/about-our-service-1)



Law Centre NI is a charity that provides free, specialist support and advice on employment issues. See their website for details of the Employment Rights Project.





## Finding Work

Your UC Work Coach can help you to find work or support you to register with courses to improve your skills and training. . They may also be able to help get your previous qualifications recognised in the UK.

Your local Council website also has information on employment opportunities in your area. For example, Belfast Employment Academies are run by Belfast City Council.

### **Belfast Employment Academies**



**Belfast**  
City Council



[www.belfastcity.gov.uk/employmentacademies](http://www.belfastcity.gov.uk/employmentacademies)

 [economicdevelopment@belfastcity.gov.uk](mailto:economicdevelopment@belfastcity.gov.uk)

There are also many recruitment agencies in NI that can help you to find a job.

Most jobs will require at least a basic level of English - speaking English will improve your opportunities. You should learn & try to practice every day.



## HC1

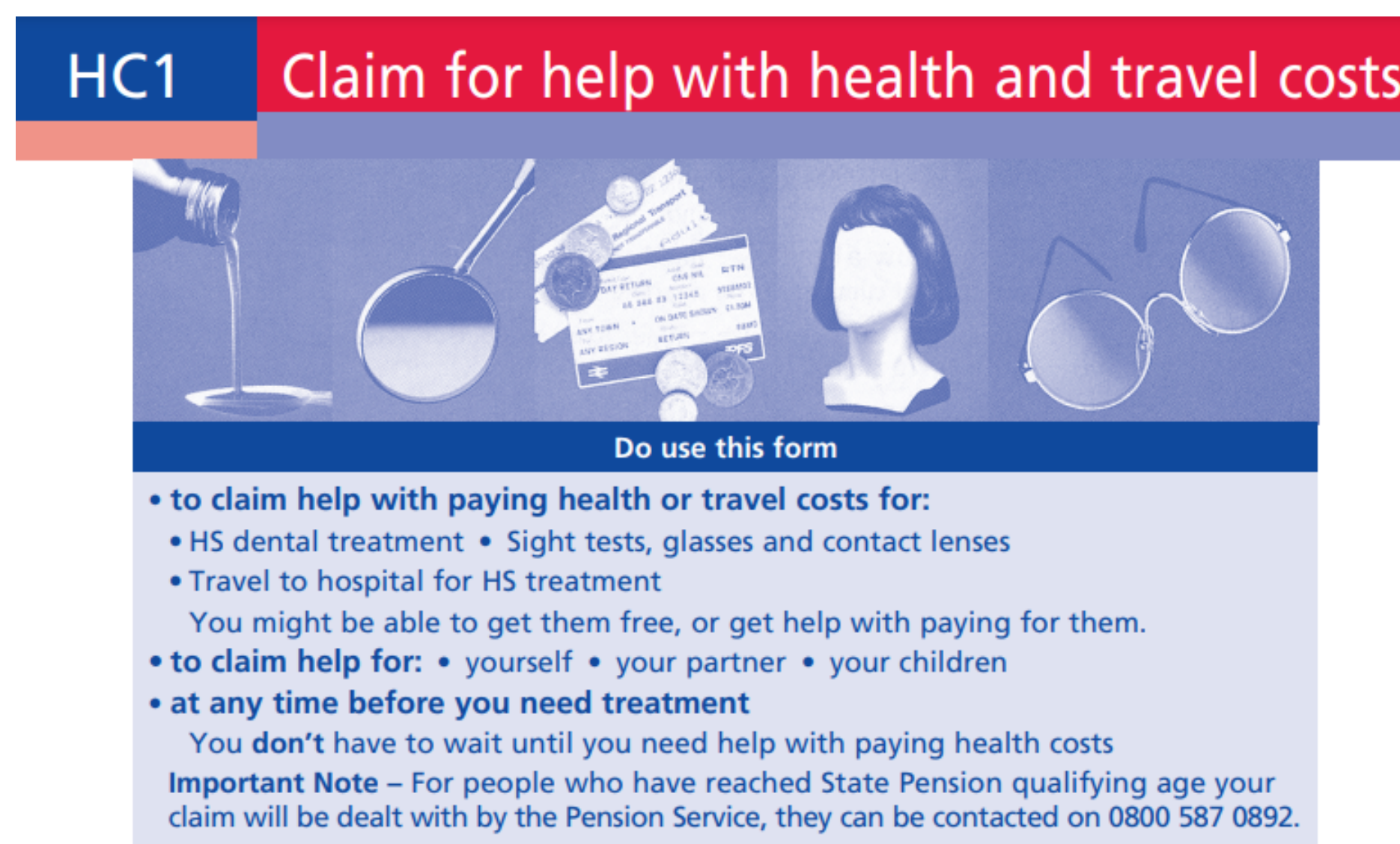
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government services

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If you are in receipt of Universal Credit, you can get help to cover your dental treatment and optician services. Complete a HC1 application and you will receive a 12-month HC2 certificate. You should bring the HC2 certificate to your dentist/optician to prove that you are eligible for free treatment.

HC1 applications can be found at Jobs & Benefits Offices and some GP/Dental Practices. Your HC2 certificate is normally valid for 12 months, then you must apply again. This is your responsibility.

[www.nidirect.gov.uk/publications/claim-help-health-and-travel-costs](http://www.nidirect.gov.uk/publications/claim-help-health-and-travel-costs)



HC1 Claim for help with health and travel costs

Do use this form

- to claim help with paying health or travel costs for:
  - HS dental treatment
  - Sight tests, glasses and contact lenses
  - Travel to hospital for HS treatmentYou might be able to get them free, or get help with paying for them.
- to claim help for: • yourself • your partner • your children
- at any time before you need treatment

You don't have to wait until you need help with paying health costs

**Important Note** – For people who have reached State Pension qualifying age your claim will be dealt with by the Pension Service, they can be contacted on 0800 587 0892.

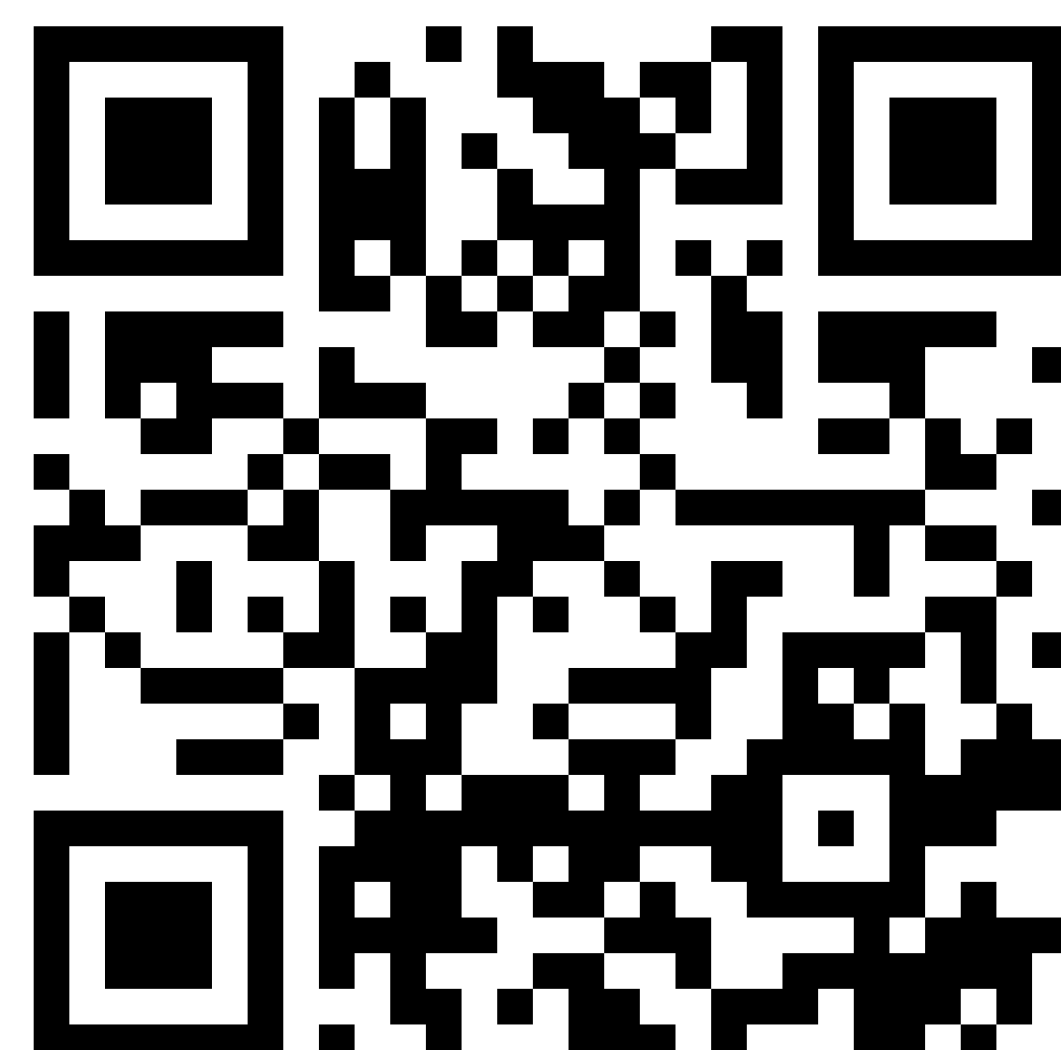
Children do not need a HC2 as their treatment is always free.

If you are working, you will have to pay towards your dental treatment and optician services.

## ESOL NI



You are still entitled to attend free ESOL classes. The ESOL website can be translated and has information on classes in your area, including those with childcare.



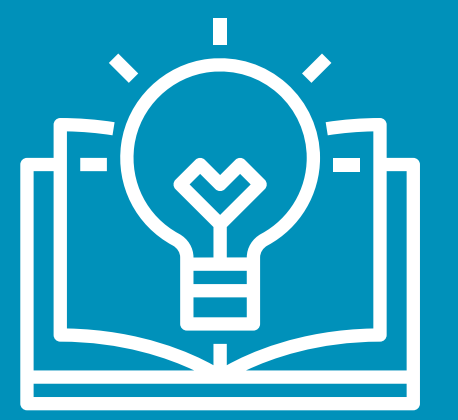
<https://esolwebapp.azurewebsites.net/>

English is the key to unlocking your future independence. You should try to study and practice English as much as possible. In addition to formal classes, you can find many casual conversational classes in your area. ESOL teachers can help you find them.

## Further Education (F.E.)

You may wish to study a particular subject at an FE College like Belfast Met. FE Colleges provide a Careers Advice Service. You should contact your local College and book an appointment to discuss your options.





## Schools



**ea** Education Authority

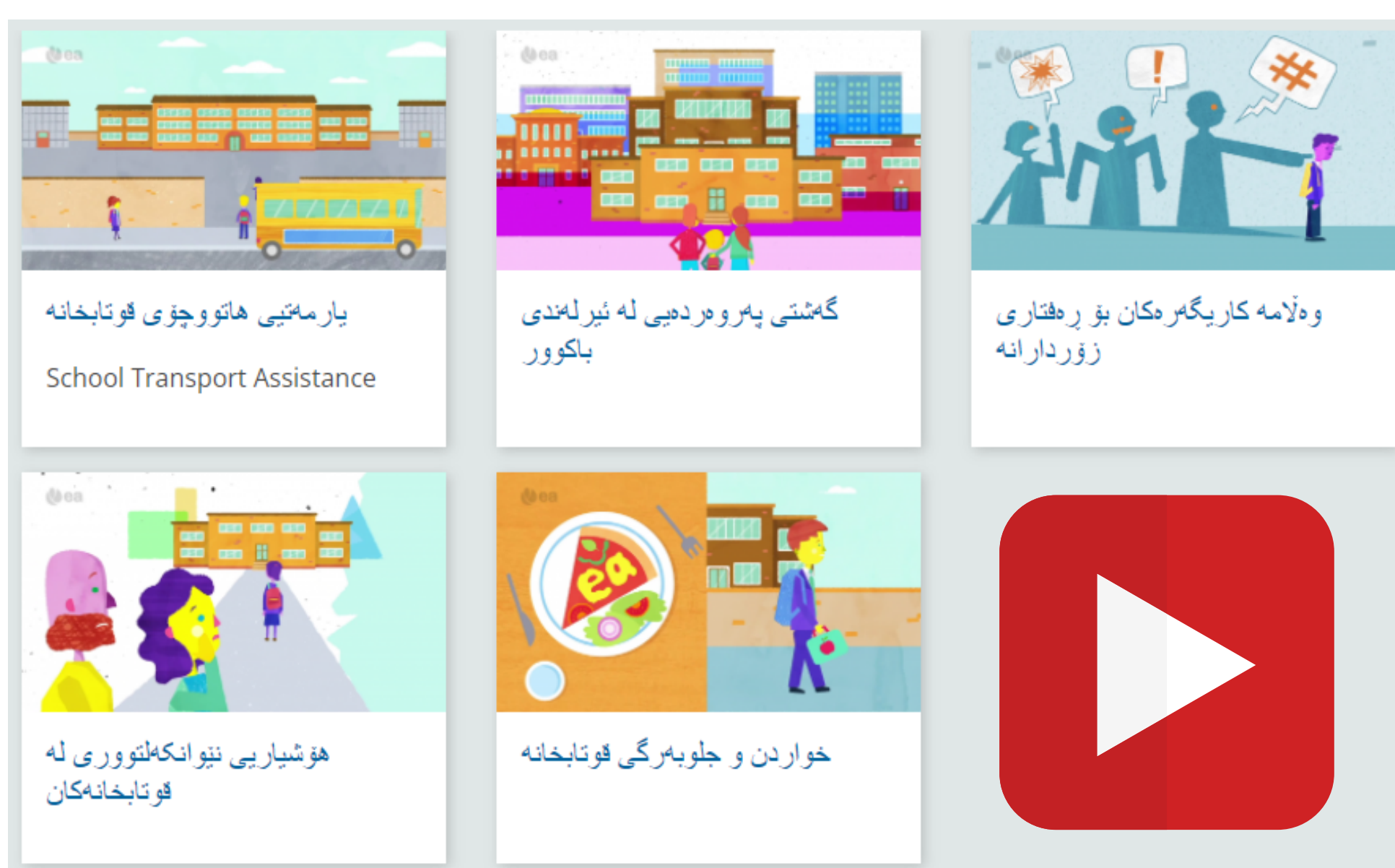
[www.eani.org.uk](http://www.eani.org.uk)

If you have children, they may need to change schools depending on where your new accommodation is. The Education Authority (EANI) can provide advice and support relating to schools. You can translate their website by clicking this symbol at the top of the page.



The Intercultural Education Service (IES) at EANI supports refugee children. They have produced a number of translated "*Education in Northern Ireland Videos*" which can be found on their website.

[www.eani.org.uk/school-management/intercultural-education-service-ies/education-in-northern-ireland-videos](http://www.eani.org.uk/school-management/intercultural-education-service-ies/education-in-northern-ireland-videos)



- School Meals & Uniforms
- School Transport Assistance
- Intercultural Awareness
- Responses to Bullying
- The Education Journey

Schools can use interpreting facilities and it is your right to request an interpreter to discuss your child's education. Contact IES if you have any problems.





You have Leave to Remain in the UK - this means *permission to stay*. Your BRP will show a start date and a '*valid until*' date. The 'valid until' date marks the end of your Leave to Remain in the UK, OR the expiry of your ID. If your BRP expires on **31/12/2024** - this might be because the Government plans to move proof of immigration status online - check with your solicitor if you are unsure about the duration of your leave.

If you wish to stay in the UK after your grant of leave – you must speak to a solicitor before it expires and apply for further leave. Indefinite Leave to Remain (ILR) allows you to live permanently in the UK. After this you may be eligible to apply for British citizenship if you wish.

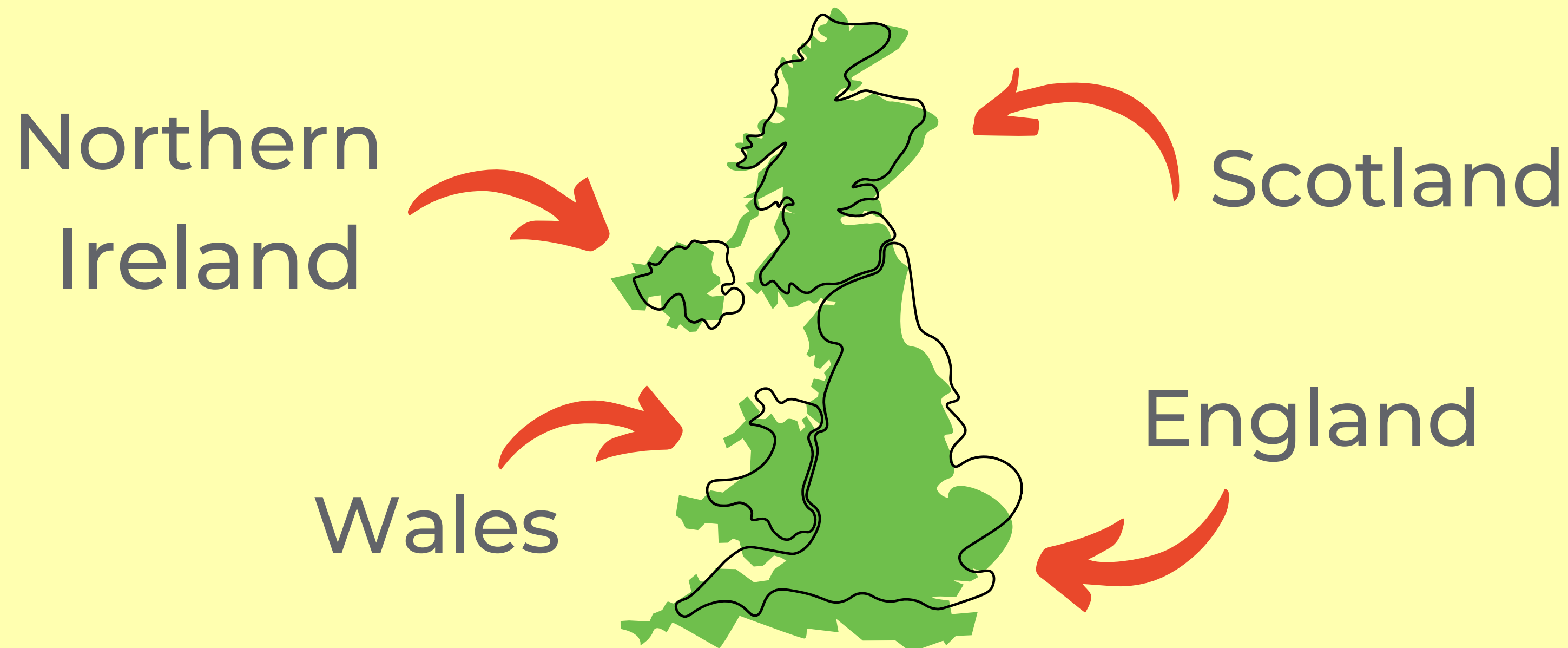
## Travel

You are free to travel within the UK using your BRP, that is NI, Scotland, Wales and England. If you wish to travel outside of the UK (including to the Republic of Ireland) you must check the visa requirements of that country and ensure you have the correct travel documents.





## The United Kingdom of Great Britain & Northern Ireland



## Travel Documents

### Refugee Status:

You must not use your old national passport to travel, as this could risk your refugee status. You can apply for a Travel Document through your solicitor.

### Discretionary Leave or Humanitarian Protection:

You may still travel on your national passport if it is valid. However, you may be eligible to apply for a Certificate of Travel if you can show that you have been refused a passport by your national authorities. Consult with your solicitor.

## Find a solicitor

[www.lawsoc-ni.org/solicitors](http://www.lawsoc-ni.org/solicitors)

The Law Society NI is the regulatory body for solicitors in NI. You can search their website to find a solicitor.

# Status Entitlements



The Nationality & Borders Act (2022) made changes to entitlements depending on your status, and when you made your asylum claim. Your solicitor should explain your status to you. Below is an overview of the differences.

## If you claimed asylum before 28th June 2022

Status	Length of Leave	Eligible for Indefinite Leave to Remain after	Family Reunion
Refugee - "Leave to Remain"	5 Years	5 Years	Yes
Humanitarian Protection	5 Years	5 Years	Yes
Discretionary Leave to Remain	Variable - usually no more than 30 months	10 Years	No

## If you claimed asylum after 28th June 2022

Status	Length of Leave	Eligible for Indefinite Leave to Remain after	Family Reunion
Group 1 - Refugee	5 Years	5 Years	Yes
Group 2 - "Temporary Refugee Protection"	30 Months	10 Years	Restricted
Humanitarian Protection - "Temporary Permission to stay"	30 Months	10 Years	Restricted
Discretionary Leave to Remain	Variable - usually no more than 30 months	10 Years	No

# Family Reunion



If you qualify for Family Reunion, your family members may be able to get visas to join you in the UK. This applies to:

- a family that existed before you left your home
- a spouse or partner
- children under 18

Your solicitor can help you to make an application. There is no fee for a Family Reunion Visa, and you can claim Legal Aid to cover the legal costs. If your family member does not meet the criteria, a solicitor will tell you if you can make an application "outside the rules". Family Reunion can sometimes be a long process.

## British Red Cross



If your family are granted Family Reunion visas you should contact the Red Cross as soon as possible to ask what support they can offer to help you prepare for your family's arrival.



 02890323055

 [rsnorthernireland@redcross.org.uk](mailto:rsnorthernireland@redcross.org.uk)



You may apply for British Citizenship when you have completed:

- at least 5 years Leave to Remain; and
- 1 year Indefinite Leave to Remain

You must also:

- be over 18
- prove your knowledge of English
- have passed the "Life in the UK" test
- intend to continue living in the UK
- be of good character (this means not having a criminal record)

[www.gov.uk/apply-citizenship-indefinite-leave-to-remain](https://www.gov.uk/apply-citizenship-indefinite-leave-to-remain)

You should read the Citizenship guidance carefully, including sections of eligibility, fees and time spent outside of the UK.

Criminal convictions can have long-term implications for you and your family members. A serious offence, including a driving offence or domestic abuse, could risk your future immigration status in the UK.



# Refugee Integration Loan

A Refugee Integration Loan is a small interest-free loan from the government. It may only be used for things which are essential to help you settle into UK society. Things like:

- a housing deposit, rent payment or moving costs
- essential items for your home
- training or education
- basic living costs (such as food or household bills)
- work clothing and equipment

When applying you must provide details of exactly how you will spend the money, and agree a repayment plan.

You must be over 18 to be eligible to apply and be one of the following:

- a refugee
- a person with humanitarian protection
- a dependant of a refugee or someone with humanitarian protection

More information:

[www.gov.uk/refugee-integration-loan](http://www.gov.uk/refugee-integration-loan)

[www.gov.uk/apply-refugee-integration-loan](http://www.gov.uk/apply-refugee-integration-loan)

# Useful Contacts - Belfast

Below is a list of organisations that offer services to refugees in Belfast. It is based upon responses to the 2022 Belfast Migrant Forum Mapping Document and is not an exhaustive list.

Organisation	Address and Email	Services
<u>ACSONI</u>	9 Lower Crescent 028 90 434090 www.acsoni.org admin@acsoni.org	Front line services & drop in support to alleviate the pressures of being socially and economically disadvantaged.
<u>Africa House NI</u>	1-5 Botanic Avenue www.africahouseni.org 028 90 315778 info@africahouseni.org	Cultural, social, and economic support to individuals and groups from the African Diaspora.
<u>Belfast and Lisburn Women's Aid</u>	www.belfastwomensaid.org.uk 028 90 666049 admin@belfastwomensaid.org.uk	Support for women and children who have been subjected to domestic violence or human trafficking.
Belfast Islamic Centre	38 Wellington Park 028 90 664465 info@belfastislamiccentre.org.uk	Charity faith based organisation providing educational, social, cultural and economic support to Muslims in NI.
Belfast Multi-Cultural Association	bmcabelfastmulticultural@gmail.com	Crisis support, signposting and pastoral care.

# Useful Contacts - Belfast

Organisation	Address and Email	Services
<u>Belfast Unemployed Resource Centre</u>	4-6 Donegall Street Place www.burc.org 028 90 961111 info@burc.org	Support, education, training and facilities to the unemployed and other groups suffering from social and economic disadvantage.
<u>Chinese Welfare Association NI</u>	1 Stranmillis Embankment www.cwa-ni.org 028 90 288277 office@cwa-ni.org	Help with health and cultural issues for the Chinese community and other BME communities in NI.
<u>Extern</u>	118-122 Royal Avenue 028 90 330433 hst@extern.org	Help for those moving from asylum status to refugee status. Help with homelessness.
<u>Housing Rights</u>	Skainos Building, 239 Newtownards Road www.housingrights.org.uk 028 90 245640 info@housingrights.org.uk	Tackles homelessness through housing advice, advocacy and referral to housing caseworkers.
<u>Law Centre NI</u>	Westgate House, 2-4 Queen Street www.lawcentreni.org 028 90 244401 info@lawcentreni.org	Legal charity providing advice, representation, and policy advocacy on employment, immigration and social security.
<u>Law Society of Northern Ireland</u>	96 Victoria St, Belfast, BT1 3GN www.lawsoc-ni.org/	The professional body for solicitors in Northern Ireland with the aim of protecting the public. Maintains the competence and quality of legal services in NI. Solicitor directory available.

# Useful Contacts - Belfast



Organisation	Address and Email	Services
<u>Lower Ormeau Residents Action Group</u> (LORAG)	97 Balfour Avenue, BT7 2EW www.lorag.org 028 90 312377 info@lorag.org	Intercultural women's and men's groups, basic casework and signposting for individuals from BME communities in Inner South Belfast.
<u>NIACRO</u>	Amelia House, 4 Amelia Street www.niacro.co.uk 028 90 320157 niacro@niacro.co.uk	Protection against harassment, help finding new accommodation and access to crisis fund/ food parcels.
NICRAS	143a University St Belfast 028 90 246699 info@nicras.org.uk	The only refugee-led organisation in Northern Ireland. Raising awareness of the issues, problems and difficulties faced by refugees and asylum seekers,
BOMOKO (NI Refugee and Asylum Seekers Women's Association)	CRI Building, 165-169 Donegal Pass, BT7 1DT info@bomokoni.org.uk	Advice services, education, employment opportunities, mental health awareness and community integration to female refugees and asylum seekers in NI.
NI Somali Association	185a Ormeau Road info@nisomaliassociation.org.uk	Education, advocacy, information and support to Somali people and other new arrivals in NI.
<u>Red Cross</u>	Botanic House, 1-5 Botanic Avenue 028 90 232055 rsnorthernireland@redcross.org.uk	Support for asylum seekers and refugees, International family tracing, tackling destitution and supporting integration.



# Useful Contacts - Belfast

Organisation	Address and Email	Services
<u>Migrant Centre NI</u>	Ballynafeigh Community Development Association 283 Ormeau Road www.migrantcentreni.org management@migrantcentreni.org	Immigration advice, hate crime victim support, and other support for migrants and ethnic minority communities.
<u>Domestic &amp; Sexual Abuse Helpline</u>	0808 802 1414 help@dsahelpline.org www.dsahelpline.org	Free and confidential information and support to those affected by Domestic and Sexual Abuse across Northern Ireland. 24 hours a day, 7 days a week.
<u>Lifeline</u>	0808 808 8000 www.lifelinehelpline.info	Crisis response helpline, 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. Free & confidential support dealing with self-harm, depression, anxiety, suicide, trauma, sexual violence and abuse.
<u>Helplines NI</u>	www.helplinesni.com	Directory of helplines operating across Northern Ireland including: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Age NI</li> <li>• Cancer Focus</li> <li>• Barnardo's</li> <li>• Childline</li> <li>• Informing Choices NI</li> <li>• Eating disorders Assoc.</li> <li>• Make The Call</li> <li>• Parenting NI</li> <li>• Positive Life</li> <li>• Cara-Friend (LGBTQI+ Switchboard NI)</li> </ul>







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