

Migrant Support Service

Trustee Annual Report 2023 – 24

The issue addressed by Migrant Support Service

Over 9% of the population of the Armagh City, Banbridge and Craigavon Borough Council were born outside of the British Isles. They include newcomers who are migrant workers, refugees, and increasingly asylum seekers from many continents as well as those who are well settled. There is a high concentration in the more deprived areas of Portadown.

The Migrant Support Service (MSS) is needed because newcomers want support to overcome the obstacles of navigating a new culture and language and of choosing the actions that will better their lives. MSS 'walks with' or accompanies them to learn what support they require. It involves them as agents of their own lives in the development, design, and delivery of the project 'Walking with Migrants'.

The project aimed during the past year to improve the lives of some 300 migrants living in the ABC and Mid Ulster Boroughs. By offering advice and support on a range of social issues, by advocating on behalf of individuals and their families, and by offering language and other training opportunities the project expected to: reduce isolation; to empower newcomers with improved knowledge of available services; to build their confidence in accessing them; to help them develop additional networks; to enable them to integrate better into the community; and to improve the mental wellbeing of individuals.

What MSS did to address the needs of newcomers

The activities we engaged in during the twelve months from 1st April 2023 to April 2024 can be categorised in groups to facilitate description. Under the category of immigration we dealt mostly with settlement status and carried out about 350 interviews that led to decisions and actions. Under the category of 'Settling In' we dealt with issues such as registrations and applications for example to obtain a GP, a bank account, school enrolments, national insurance number, child benefit and this involved 300 interviews. Employment issues included tax credits, tax payments, universal credit, workplace grievances etc and involved about 400 interviews; Training and learning includes ESOL, other languages and social and personal development courses that 90 people completed satisfactorily. The category of food poverty involved food vouchers, Christmas dinners and referrals and amounted to 150 cases.

We attempted to develop the capacity of Migrant Support Service by improving staff communication and skills through training and workshops involving about 80 person-hours. Staff development also saw the emergence of a CEO with responsibilities at the level of strategic oversight, financial management, project management, course development and legal leadership.

In all there were 3750 interactions. Interactions mean mostly problem-solving interviews, two-hour classes and other forms of meeting.

The results of these activities

In the past year we worked with about 385 individuals on a wide range of issues. Each issue that is resolved contributes a quantum of improvement in people's lives. Consider the analogy of tidying up your room: if you start somewhere and put away one thing after another one thing is tidied after another, a point will be reached where an improvement in mental well-being is experienced. Newcomers often report that they are so overwhelmed by the newness of their situation that they don't know where to turn or where to start. When together you resolve an issue they feel much better and gain in hope for the future. Some lives can be said to have been transformed by significant achievements such as finding employment, enrolling in college, or reuniting with families. M described his experience as follows:

"I was lost in the complex immigration system until I found your charity. Your guidance helped me reunite with my family after years apart. The immigration process was difficult for me to understand. Your patient advisors walked me through every step, explaining my options and helping me gather the right documentation. Thanks to your help, I was able to sponsor my wife and children. After four years of separation, we're finally together again, building our life in Northern Ireland. Words can't express how grateful I am for your support during this challenging time."

By working with people on procedure and by resolving issues related to Universal Credit, or other forms of social welfare we build up confidence in the system and in the individual's ability to interact with it. Showing how to use smart phones to deal with service agencies we have enabled many people to sort out their affairs. They achieve autonomy in keeping their situation up to date.

They become adept in dealing with immigration issues such as the right to reside and the right to work which are basic to building up lives.

English classes and other forms training provide, at least, an opportunity to come out of isolation and join with others in shared undertakings. In many cases relationships are formed and continue into daily living. At best, some discovered their capacity to take on further learning which opened doors to other networks and affiliations.

R reported that “learning English through your program opened so many opportunities. I'm now pursuing higher education, something I never thought possible before. When I started your classes, I could barely introduce myself in English. I'm doing my bachelor's degree in social science at the local university. Your teachers didn't just teach me grammar and vocabulary; they instilled in me the confidence to dream bigger. Thanks to your organisation I'm on track to become the first person in my family to graduate from university”.

By supporting people in negotiating the whole range of problems we empowered them to build the substratum of arrangements that underpin a flourishing life.

How MSS knows it made a difference

We maintain a database that records the issues encountered by newcomers and whether or not they resolve their issues. We ask for feedback and accounts of experience. We report regularly to stakeholders on the progress, or not, of the project.

We knew we had achieved success when other organizations began seeking our expertise and assistance. This recognition not only affirmed the value of our work but also demonstrated the trust and respect we've earned within the community. Their requests for our guidance reinforced our impact and inspired us to continue striving for excellence and good practice.

How MSS will change its work for the better

We had previously worked on the assumption that what was relevant to newcomers was 'settling in'. In the current three year project we are guided by the idea of accompanying migrants, or, as we named the project - 'Walking with Migrants' . We wanted to learn from the migrants what they want rather than assume that we already know. We arrived at a model that looks at the migrant's transition as journey through phases of settling in, building relations, participating in the local community, and flourishing. An appropriate response on our part is to journey alongside and enable them to feel welcome and safe, making progress, belonging, and contributing to and receiving from a community.

We have come to understand that a comprehensive approach is called for. It includes legal assistance, language training, employment support, and access to healthcare. Holistic support is necessary if migrants are to make the transition and flourish in their new surroundings.

Projects that engage residents, employers, and local organisations create a more supportive environment for migrants. Community involvement is key to successful integration.

Projects that encourage the sharing of traditions, languages, and experiences foster mutual respect and understanding. Integration is a two-way process where both migrants and host communities benefit from cultural exchange. Cultural exchange enriches everyone.

Creating safe spaces where migrants feel secure and valued is crucial. Trust is built through consistent, reliable support and by protecting migrants' rights and dignity. Building trust and safety is fundamental.

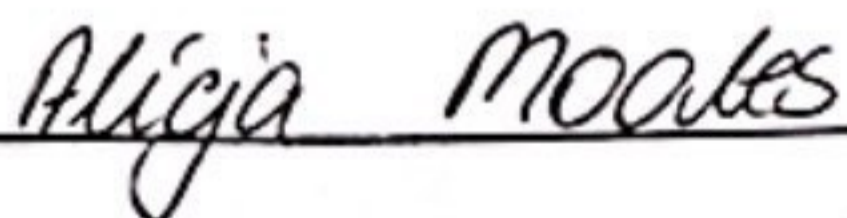
Integration is not a quick process; it requires ongoing effort and resources. Projects must be designed with sustainability in mind, ensuring continuous support for both migrants and the local community. Long-term commitment is required.

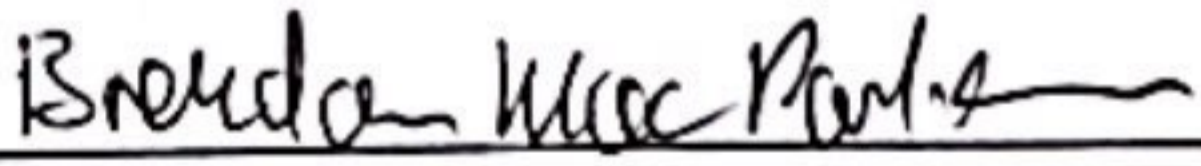
Overall, a well-coordinated, empathetic approach that benefits both migrants and the communities that welcome them is necessary.

Our experience has been that the volume and complexity of the issues that problems are dealt with one at a time and as efficiently as possible. This can lead to a transactional relationship with clients. We also need to spend time building relationships and community. English classes and training events lend themselves more to this approach. Our next project should emphasise community building and integration.

This emphasis is also indicated by the violent expression of anti-migrant sentiment in England and Belfast in the Summer of 2024 which suggests that the emphasis on pluralism and diversity needs to be balanced with emphasis on the commons – shared experience, shared understanding, and co-responsibility for a shared community. A new challenge is beginning to emerge, namely, the arrival of asylum seekers who have experienced refusal, are awaiting a decision about appeal. They are destitute and often without somewhere to sleep. This requires a new response.

Signed on behalf of the Trustees


Alicja Moates, Trustee, Chairperson
Date: 18/11/2024


Brendan MacPartlin, Trustee, Secretary
Date: 18/11/2024