

# transition

from Direct Provision to life in the community

The experiences of those who have been granted refugee status, subsidiary protection or leave to remain in Ireland



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# Foreword

The moment that an asylum seeker receives the news that they have been granted permission to stay in Ireland is one of very mixed emotions. On the positive side is the relief that the uncertainty is over after an average of more than three years in Direct Provision, the system of accommodation, support and dispersal for people seeking international protection. Added to that is the joy that they can finally take control of their lives. But it is soon tempered with the anxiety that comes from leaving the institutionalised life of Direct Provision, and the frustration that comes with the barriers that they, like many on the margins of society, face: lack of capital to get on their own two feet; difficulty in understanding and working highly bureaucratic systems; and, prominent amongst them, finding accommodation in a housing crisis whilst dependent upon an unpredictable and almost uncontrolled private rental market. As many asylum seekers would say, when you are in Direct Provision you are in, but not of, Ireland. Then all of a sudden you receive a ‘get out of jail free card’, yet you have but the barest of knowledge and experience about living in the wider community.

This report – *Transition: from direct provision to life in the community* – which was funded by the Irish Research Council and involved a collaboration between University College Dublin, Trinity College Dublin, the Irish Refugee Council (IRC) and asylum seekers, is a very timely reminder of the responsibility that Ireland has to people who have been infantilised for years. The experience of the IRC and others who work directly with asylum seekers is one of the state not acknowledging the impact of years in the Direct Provision system and therefore not putting in place the supports that are needed to make that transition.

The report, based upon interviews with 22 former asylum seekers, involving peer researchers who themselves knew the reality of Direct Provision, shows the precarious journey that asylum seekers make as they attempt to move on from Direct Provision. Many of its findings echo those in the IRC report, *Counting the Cost: Barriers to employment after Direct Provision* (Conlan, 2014) and of a pilot project run by the IRC with the National Learning Network (NLN). The IRC-NLN project particularly highlighted the centrality of access to housing as the first and most important step on the way to

independence. More than 500 people have received their documents granting them permission to remain in Ireland but cannot move out of Direct Provision because they cannot find accommodation. Unable to work whilst in the asylum system, they are forced to rely on rent supplement, which is not the preferred option of many landlords.

The report makes recommendations which need not just consideration but also implementation at the earliest opportunity. These include a comprehensive, interdepartmental resettlement system with co-ordinated support to asylum seekers both prior to and after making the transition from Direct Provision. The framework for that exists in the refugee resettlement programme, although the greater involvement of civil society and local communities is essential to make integration more effective. In addition, the right to work whilst in the asylum system, and the timely provision of documentation to enable access to services to those granted permission to stay, would greatly assist them in the transition.

Since the introduction of the Direct Provision system in April 2000, and despite widespread condemnation of the damage which the system does, successive governments have been determined to keep it in place. That therefore comes with a responsibility to address the needs of those who have been required to live in Direct Provision and who are now attempting to move on.

**Sue Conlan**, CEO, Irish Refugee Council

June 2016

## List of Acronyms

Acronym	Full form
<b>CEAS</b>	Common European Asylum System
<b>CIC</b>	Citizens' Information Centre
<b>DP</b>	Direct Provision
<b>EC</b>	European Commission
<b>ECDL</b>	European Computer Driving Licence
<b>EU</b>	European Union
<b>FETAC</b>	Further Education Training Awards Council
<b>FLAC</b>	Free Legal Advice Centre
<b>GNIB</b>	Garda National Immigration Bureau
<b>IHC</b>	Immigration Holding Center
<b>IRC</b>	Irish Refugee Council
<b>NGO</b>	Non-governmental Organisation
<b>OPMI</b>	Office for the Promotion of Migrant Integration
<b>PTSD</b>	Post-traumatic Stress Disorder
<b>RIA</b>	Reception and Integration Agency
<b>RCNI</b>	Rape Crisis Network of Ireland
<b>SH</b>	Stakeholder
<b>UK</b>	United Kingdom
<b>UNHCR</b>	United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees



# Introduction

*After years spent in the institutional environment of Direct Provision, there is a moral responsibility to support individuals, children and families who have received their status, to secure appropriate accommodation and to assist them with the challenges of transitioning to life in the community.*

Eugene Quinn, National Director, Jesuit Refugee Service, Ireland, June, 2014<sup>1</sup>

**T**his participative study was carried out in partnership with the Irish Refugee Council (IRC) between March and November 2015. It aims to develop a deeper understanding of the experiences of those who have been granted refugee status, or other forms of protection, as they transition from Direct Provision (DP) accommodation to life in the community. The project looks at people's hopes, fears, challenges and opportunities and how the existing structures support or hinder the transition process. We will consider how life in DP and a protracted decision-making process contributes to the immediate challenges of integration and a longer-term legacy of adjustment to everyday life in the community.

Transitions are usually precarious. The move from the familiar to the unknown often encompasses a mix of fear and joy as those poised on a life threshold can but anticipate the complex, often unpredictable dimensions of what is to come. In relation to transitioning from DP, after years of institutionalised living, many may feel a great sense of relief and satisfaction that their application for protection has been granted, and also a sense of freedom and excitement about the future. However, those leaving DP are also likely to experience anxiety as they face difficult social, economic and cultural challenges. Years spent with little autonomy or privacy may have a detrimental impact on individual

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1 <http://www.catholicireland.net/hundreds-asylum-seekers-entering-limbo/>

and family life, and on physical and mental wellbeing. With few economic resources, recent employment experience or qualifications, people must locate accommodation in an unfamiliar cultural context, where rented properties are in short supply. They must look for work with skills and capacities that may be unrecognised or obsolete and, often with limited social networks, they will need to navigate a complicated welfare system (Crosscare et al., 2014).

In the pages that follow we find evidence of how these significant challenges played out in the lives of 22 people awarded status in the Irish system. The focus is not on DP itself but rather on the transition from the dependency that characterises living in state-run institutions to the challenges of autonomously establishing one's life in the broader Irish community. The report is presented in five chapters:

**Chapter One** provides a background to the DP system in Ireland and explores relevant literature relating to the DP system and relating to transitions.

**Chapter Two** examines the research data by looking at how life in DP has an impact on what is to follow. It also looks at people's responses when the long awaited letter of acceptance is received.

**Chapter Three** looks at the journey that begins when status is achieved and as people try to make the move out of DP. In particular, it explores the challenges that people face as they attempt to make the transition out of DP.

**Chapter Four** focuses on the evidence in the data about education, employment and family reunification.

**Chapter Five** presents evidence-based recommendations about how the process of transition might be improved and strengthened by paying attention to the views and experiences of those who have undertaken this journey.

# 1

# Research Context: Literature and Methodology

## Introduction

This chapter firstly introduces the Irish system of accommodation for asylum seekers and places this within the Common European Asylum System (CEAS) context. It also examines some national and international literature about refugees and asylum seekers. While the broader literature is touched on, our focus is on literature that relates to the transition from accommodation centres into the wider community. This literature either looks directly at transitions and integration or explores factors that influence those transitions in some way. Finally, the chapter briefly outlines the methodology used in the research.

## Background to the Direct Provision System

The European Union (EU) through the CEAS has attempted to introduce uniformity in the treatment of those seeking protection<sup>2</sup>. Ireland participates in all of the directives introduced as part of CEAS, with the exception of Council Directive 2003/9/EC, known as the Reception Conditions Directive. This lays down minimum standards for the reception of asylum seekers. Ireland (alongside the UK and Denmark) is not bound by the directive but has the option to participate if it so chooses<sup>3</sup>. In practice Ireland has opted into some but not all of the CEAS instruments and unlike other EU partners, including the UK, does not give the right to work under any circumstances.

There are two types of protection status: refugee status deriving from the Geneva Convention and subsidiary protection afforded under European law to those who do not qualify as refugees, but are nonetheless prevented from returning home because of the risk of ill treatment. Both groups may be accommodated in Direct Provision (DP) while awaiting confirmation or rejection of refugee

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2 <http://www.inis.gov.ie/en/INIS/Pages/asylum>

3 <http://eur-lex.europa.eu/LexUriServ/LexUriServ.do?uri=OJ:C:2004:310:0353:0355:EN:PDF>

## 1 Research Context: Literature and Methodology

or subsidiary protection status or failing that, leave to remain in Ireland on humanitarian grounds. Unlike other EU countries that have a single application process, Ireland has, up until 2015, operated a two-stage sequential procedure that first explores eligibility for refugee status and only thereafter begins to determine whether subsidiary protection or leave to remain will be offered. In December 2015 the International Protection Act was signed into law and introduced the promise of a single stage application procedure.

DP was created in April 2000 in response to a rise in the number of those seeking protection and a shortage of accommodation. DP refers to a system of minimum support for those applying for refugee status, subsidiary protection or leave to remain. Applicants are generally dispersed around the country, provided with accommodation - usually in the form of a shared room in a designated centre - as well as meals and an allowance of €19.10 per week for adults and, until recently, €9.60 for dependent children. This payment is not index-linked and remained the same between 2000 and early January 2016 when the allowance for children increased to €15.60 per child. The recommendations in the recently published Working Group Report to Government on Improvements to the Protection Process, including Direct Provision and Supports to Asylum Seekers - henceforth, McMahon Report (McMahon, 2015) - had proposed more substantial increases to the allowances for both adults and children, but at the time of writing, these had not been implemented. Asylum seekers are not entitled to any other social welfare payments (including child benefit) (Thornton, 2014a). Those in DP usually have no facility to cook, are not allowed to work and generally cannot attend third level education<sup>4</sup>.

Since its inception, there have been consistent calls for the closure of DP and its replacement with a more humane and efficient form of reception and integration for those seeking refuge and protection in Ireland (Aikidwa, 2012; Fanning et al., 2001; FLAC, 2009; Irish Refugee Council, 2013; O'Reilly, 2013). The Department of Justice and Equality administer the DP system through the Reception and

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<sup>4</sup> Since Sept 2015 young people who have lived in DP for more than five years, and have spent five years in the Irish School system are now eligible to apply for third level education grants.

Integration Agency (RIA). The RIA further delegates responsibility for day-to-day management of DP facilities to private companies that are subject to inspection and regulation. Despite its name, the RIA does not appear to take any responsibility for integration of asylum seekers. This function was assigned to the Integration Unit of the Office of the Minister for Integration. However, the post of Minister for Integration has not existed since March 2011 (Irish Refugee Council, 2016). The Office for the Promotion of Migrant Integration (OPMI) is charged with the promotion and coordination of integration measures for legally resident immigrants but the remit of OPMI does not extend to those in DP, as integration policy in Ireland applies only to those to whom status has already been granted.<sup>5</sup> Linkages with local communities are patchy, left very much to staff in individual centres and are not part of any strategy governing DP (McMahon, 2015). Following consultations, the McMahon report (2015) asked that the government ‘give consideration’ to including protection for applicants in their integration strategy and that they make funding available for local integration initiatives.

### Living in Direct Provision

From 2000 to 2015, there were 70,648 applications for asylum, with 55,091 of these applicants being accommodated in DP. With an overall capacity of 5429, there are 35 centres in all, including a reception centre. Only two of the centres are self catering. Over 90 nationalities are represented in DP, with the largest groups (52% in total) coming from Nigeria, Pakistan, DR Congo and Zimbabwe. Of 4811 people who were accommodated by RIA in September 2015, almost a quarter, 23%, were children, and 32% of them had been in the system for over five years (RIA, 2016). The McMahon Report (2015) found that the length of time applicants remained in DP while decisions were made was excessively protracted. At its inception, it was estimated that those seeking protection would spend a maximum of six months in DP while their application was being processed. The excessive amount of time now spent, in what

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<sup>5</sup> See <http://www.integration.ie/website/omi/omiwebv6.nsf/page/aboutus-roleofofficepromotionmigrantintegration-overview-en>

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is essentially temporary accommodation, creates significant problems for individuals and families in both the immediate situation and longer-term process of integration (McMahon, 2015). The McMahon Report recommended that all those awaiting a determination for five years or more should be granted leave to remain, as should those awaiting implementation of a deportation order for five years or more. This suggests the likelihood – if these recommendations are implemented – that more people will make the transition out of DP into the community in the foreseeable future (McMahon, 2015).

Having fled an array of turbulent and traumatising conditions in their countries of origin, individuals and families seeking asylum in Ireland have numerous emotional, physical and mental health challenges that are not necessarily all caused by living in DP but are certainly not helped by it. Notwithstanding the resilience of asylum seekers and refugees, as evidenced in the literature, (Rape Crisis Network Ireland (RCNI), 2014) people have an immediate need to deal with these past traumas as well as sizeable current economic, social and cultural adjustments and integration challenges. People are often unequally treated in the asylum process depending on their location. Rather than there being structured, regulated services, it is left to luck whether or not people receive the level of care and supports they and their children need to survive and flourish in their new life.

The negative impact of DP has been highlighted in numerous studies and the system has been criticised by key actors and organisations including the Ombudsman (O'Reilly, 2013) the government's Special Rapporteur for Child Protection (Shannon, 2012; 2014) and by international bodies such as the United Nations Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination (UNCERD, 2011). Attention has been drawn to the negative impact of DP on physical and mental health (Conlan, 2014; Foreman, 2009; Nwachukwu et al., 2009), which is in keeping with international literature, particularly in relation to the impact of awaiting application outcomes for protracted periods. The international evidence suggests that lengthy waiting times have implications for physical and mental health, both during the period of waiting and in the aftermath when individuals are attempting to integrate (e.g. Bathily, 2014; Gerritsen et al., 2006; Fliges et al., 2015). For example the Danish study by Fliges et al. (2015) found that depression, anxiety and PTSD issues that were present in those awaiting decisions about

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their status, extended well beyond the point of transition into the community. The study concluded that deterioration in mental health was a direct consequence of the ‘detention’ process for an already vulnerable population (Filges et al., 2015). While DP is not a form of immigration detention, the findings may still be of relevance, particularly given that many DP residents experience DP as a form of prison, as will be outlined below. In addition, research recently conducted by Aisling Hearn of SPIRASI<sup>6</sup> suggests that for people who have suffered trauma, DP is often not a safe enough place to begin recovering<sup>7</sup>. This means that their recovery – like much of their life – is on hold until after they leave DP. This again suggests that for some, mental health and psychosocial difficulties may surface when the transition has been made, rather than while in DP. This is in keeping with the international literature which suggests that exile-related stressors may adversely affect an individual’s trauma recovery process (Miller et al., 2002).

The negative impact of DP on children and on family life has been highlighted consistently. It has been argued that the DP system violates the rights of the child and that Ireland is not in compliance with its obligations under the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (Thornton, 2015). Concerns have been raised about child development, child welfare and child protection within the DP context (Shannon 2012, 2014; Arnold, 2014; Foreman & Ní Raghallaigh, 2015), and a number of pieces of research have shown the detrimental effect that DP has on family life (Foreman & Ní Raghallaigh, 2015; Uchechukwu Ogbu et al., 2014). For example, in the study by Uchechukwu Ogbu et al. (2014), parents living in DP described how their capacity to parent was undermined in a range of ways, by the system. Lack of economic resources, cramped conditions, lack of privacy and autonomy all conspired to create additional stress and impede parents in providing a safe, caring and nurturing environment for their children (Uchechukwu Ogbu et al., 2014). The existing evidence raises concerns about a long-

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6 Spirasi is an Irish based organisation working with asylum seekers, refugees and other disadvantaged migrant groups, with special concern for survivors of torture. <http://spirasi.ie/>

7 At the time of writing this research had not yet been published. The information is based on personal communication between the IRC and Aisling Hearn

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term, multi-generational impact of living in DP, where the model of family life and relationships is constrained by the institutionalised environment. Children miss out on ‘normal’ family life in that they never see their parents cook a meal or work outside the home and the lack of privacy affects all aspects of family relationships (Foreman & Ní Raghallaigh, 2015).

Elsewhere, repeated concern has been expressed about the marginalisation and social exclusion experienced by asylum seekers in the DP system (Arnold, 2012; Fanning & Veale, 2004; Nwagwuagwu, 2009) resulting in limited social networks and a sense of isolation, which in turn, affects mental health. The dependency engendered by the DP system (UNHCR, 2014), where people have little control, choice, or autonomy, is likely to also impact on emotional well being and mental health. Szczepanikova (2013:130), writing in the context of the Czech Republic, found that the combined impact of control and assistance produces “an oppressive environment that engenders asylum seekers’ dependency.” The literature suggests that this could equally be said of the DP system, something which is likely to lead to significant challenges for some people when suddenly, on receipt of legal status, independent action is required and choices need to be made.

The material hardship caused by life in the DP system has been highlighted frequently. For example, Fanning and Veale (2004), writing from a child poverty perspective and drawing on evidence from a number of locations, argue that as a result of living in DP, asylum seeker children experience extreme poverty, material and housing deprivation and social exclusion. Breen (2008) asserts that Ireland’s policy of DP is in contravention of international and European legislation and violates asylum seekers’ right to an adequate standard of housing. Indeed, Thornton (2014b:23) has argued that, overall, “there has been a tendency to exclude asylum seekers from supports that are seen as essential to allowing citizens and legal residents to live with a basic degree of dignity”. Related to the poverty experienced by those in DP, the Rape Crisis Network Ireland has noted that the DP system increases vulnerability to sexual violence and exploitation, including the risk of trafficking and prostitution, sexual harrassment, and sexual abuse (RCNI, 2014). For those who had sought support from Rape Crisis Centres, instability in living conditions and frequent change of location often interrupted counselling relationships. This has implications also for the transition process, where established therapeutic relationships may be



disrupted by the challenges of integration into the community.

While the focus of this report is not on life within DP centres, the living conditions and circumstances that exist while in DP, as outlined above, are likely to impact on people as they attempt to move out, particularly in the case of poverty, mental health difficulties, and weak social networks. As the Irish Refugee Council points out in its recent submission to the Oireachtas Housing Committee, after years in DP, which allowed for little self-determination or independence, transitioning out is a very daunting task (IRCb, 2016)

### Challenges of Transition

Within the literature, little is known about how protection applicants manage the process of leaving DP. Some information is available from broader research on integration of asylum seekers and refugees (e.g. Conlan, 2014; Feldman et al., 2008; Portley, 2015; UNHCR, 2014), although the focus of these studies has not been on the actual transition process. Conlan's (2014) research examined the experiences of 20 people living in different parts of Ireland, whose application for protection had been successful. The research focused on their experiences of leaving DP and looking for work. Findings illustrate the damaging, deskilling impact of long periods spent in DP without access to work, education or social networks. Initially, people struggled to make the transition, not knowing how to access services and finding it difficult to find places to live. People found it difficult to fend for themselves, having lived as dependents within the DP system. No preparation for this new life was provided and little information was forthcoming. Participants described loss of confidence and anxiety about the future. Many described the detrimental impact of DP on their mental health, with some reporting that they engaged in self-harm or attempted to take their own lives. At the time of the study, only one person out of the 20 interviewed had found work. To some extent this was explained by the generally poor employment climate but also participants attributed it to lack of work experience and subsequent gaps in their CVs while in DP, the need to improve their language and other skills, and a

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loss of confidence and ‘dynamism’ (Conlan, 2014).

The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees’ (UNHCR) (2014) study of refugee integration in Ireland highlights a number of ways in which the system of DP negatively impacts on the process of integration. Research with 71 people about their experiences of integration into Irish society revealed that the social stigma associated with having been in DP was difficult to overcome and hindered prospects of integration. Participants felt that time waiting for asylum applications to be processed could be better spent improving language skills, building social networks and volunteering in new communities. Lack of economic resources, poor information, discrimination and racism were impediments to social inclusion that left people without opportunities to gain valuable local knowledge and to make social connections (UNHCR, 2014). In their study, UNHCR also found that long stays in DP centres led to a certain level of dependency and disempowerment which impacted on the ability of people to access housing upon transition. These circumstances were exacerbated by previous experiences of trauma. Problems accessing credit and a lack of practical supports in transitioning from DP were also highlighted by the UNHCR research.

Recent doctoral research by Finn (2015) highlighted many of the challenges faced by those leaving DP as they search for housing, in a context where no formal supports were available. These included considerable financial limitations, limited social connections to assist with house searches, and discrimination based on colour. “Networks of ethnicity” (Finn, 2015: 134), as well as chance encounters with benevolent volunteers or advocates often proved helpful, as did, on occasion, specific members of the Department of Social Protection who were happy to use their discretion to provide financial assistance.

A report by Crosscare et al. (2014) on issues faced by immigrants in accessing social protection, is also of relevance. This report found that the quality of first instance decision making is not up to standard, with a high rate of refusals as a result. It also found that there were many customer service issues of a worrying nature, including rudeness and racism, and that misinformation and omission of information were problems. In addition, interpreters were not always provided when needed. These

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issues would suggest that those leaving the DP system, who would generally have very little knowledge of the social protection system, might face barriers in accessing their entitlements and in navigating the system, thus making the transition more difficult.

In 2015 the IRC set up a Transition and Employment programme to provide advocacy and assistance to people who, having received their papers, have to move out of DP centres. According to their annual report (IRC, 2016a), over 50 people have been assisted with transition issues since the start of the programme. While the main issue highlighted so far is access to housing, other problems cited include accessing and navigating the Department of Social Protection, access to information on processes, access to employment, access to education, family reunification, integration and acquiring valid identification documents (IRC, 2016a:18).

The difficulties people have leaving DP is starkly evidenced by the fact that as of February 2015, 679 people who had been granted status some several months previously, were still living in DP (McMahon, 2015). A major factor in the transition process is the shortage of rental accommodation, especially in Dublin and other cities. The IRC emphasises that it is the marginalised and vulnerable – including asylum seekers / refugees – who “bear the brunt of the problem” (IRC, 2016b:4). The fact that there are few targeted supports to assist them, exacerbates the difficulties faced by those in transition. The lack of strategic planning, information and support from the state or their agents, means that those who have been unsupported in terms of community linkages are then faced with becoming part of a community about which they often have little awareness or cultural understanding. In addition, the challenges to actively integrate into a new culture and community are exacerbated after long periods of enforced passivity. As the McMahon Report states:

*“...those who have been in Direct Provision for lengthy periods of time experience an erosion of personal autonomy over the most basic aspects of their daily lives, and the development of a dependency mentality which is difficult to overcome. As a result of a loss of skills and becoming institutionalised, mental health issues also arise”*  
(McMahon, 2015:237).

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In light of the complexities of transition, an interdepartmental task force on transition issues was established in July 2015 and due to report in September 2015. At the time of writing, the task force report has yet to be published, although the group has produced an information booklet: ‘Your Guide to Living Independently’, which provides information for people transitioning out of DP.

### The Approach to Study: Methodology and Participants

The research was funded by the Irish Research Council, under its New Foundations – Engaging Civil Society strand, and was conducted as a partnership between the Irish Refugee Council, University College Dublin and Trinity College Dublin.

Throughout the research process attention was paid to ensuring that the research was conducted in an ethical manner. This was particularly important given that, notwithstanding their resilience in the face of adversity, asylum seekers and refugees are considered to be vulnerable. Ethical approval was obtained from University College Dublin’s Human Research Ethics Committee (Humanities). Key research ethics principles such as informed consent, voluntary participation, anonymity and the commitment to doing no harm were adhered to throughout.

Training in qualitative research, interviewing techniques and research ethics was provided to asylum seekers who were involved with the IRC in various capacities. Two of those who were trained – Siphathisiwe Moyo and Gabriel Wenyi Mendes – were subsequently invited to join the research team as peer researchers.

People who had received refugee status, subsidiary protection or leave to remain and who had lived in DP were invited to take part in the study. The peer researchers assisted with recruitment of participants by informing people in their networks about the study. Stakeholders also assisted with recruitment. As such, the sample is not a representative one. A selection of stakeholders who worked with asylum seekers was also invited to take part.

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In all, a total of 22 individuals with experience of living in DP were interviewed; 14 men and eight women, ranging in age from 20 to 45 years of age. They came from Algeria, Angola, Cameroon, DR Congo, Guinea, Iran, Nigeria, Somalia, Sudan, Uganda and Zimbabwe.

The majority, 12, had already moved out and 10 were in the process of trying to make the transition. The shortest time a participant had lived in DP was 11 months; the longest was 11 years. Six stakeholder interviews were also conducted, representing a range of non-governmental organisations (NGOs) from Dublin, Monaghan and Waterford. The peer researchers conducted some of the interviews, with Muireann, Maeve and Clíodhna also conducting interviews.

Interviews were transcribed and the data was then analysed thematically, using Nvivo software.

## Conclusions

The DP system has been the focus of much criticism since its inception. The evidence suggests that the system has a detrimental impact, on multiple levels, on those who have sought protection from the Irish state. While concern has often been expressed about the long term implications of DP even after people leave the system, little is known about the experiences of people as they move beyond DP. There is a dearth of research in relation to the transition from DP to life in the wider community. It is therefore this gap in the literature that this piece of research seeks to address, focusing primarily on the voices of those who have made the transition or who are attempting to make it.

# 2

## From Direct Provision to Status

*“It has been one of the most dreadful periods I have ever had in life... because it’s very hard to wake up and you sit .... not allowed to do this, you’re not allowed to do that. You are not sick or you’re not ill but you are there. Mentally it is tormenting, so tormenting. It’s dehumanising actually.”*

### Introduction

**I**n the light of the evidence in the literature reviewed in Chapter One, we now turn to the data from the study participants, about the impact of life in Direct Provision (DP) on their readiness for transition. We focus on the manner in which people’s capacities to move on with their lives are influenced by the physical, emotional and psychological legacy accrued while living in DP. This chapter looks at the experiences of DP up to the point of receiving papers affirming status. As in the other findings chapters, the words of the research participants form the backbone of the evidence offered.

### The Impact of Direct Provision

#### *Eating and Sleeping*

Comments on the nature of life in DP were predominantly negative. Whilst there was an initial recognition that DP provided shelter and basic requirements in terms of food and safety, for many, the monotony and the long delays in receiving an outcome to an application soon changed that initial relief to disappointment and depression.

*“It’s taking all your time. I know you need to be protected, the only thing is just you have a bed to sleep. Just a bed.”*

A stakeholder spoke of the DP regime “breeding a cycle of apathy or inability to function” that had a long-term detrimental impact that stretched beyond the time spent in the facilities. In keeping with the literature, concerns about the impact of delayed determinations of asylum claims were repeatedly in evidence in the testimonies of those seeking protection.

*“How you can keep somebody for eight years, for 10 years and how you going to start the new life if you give me the paper? He can give you refugee or he can give you humanitarian, or he can give you deportation. How are you going to start this new life after five, eight years, 10 years is stressful in the Direct Provision?”*

There was a sense of futility for many about life being on hold and devoid of purposeful activity. One man, who had studied law in his country of origin, was frustrated to find his daily routine reduced to “eating and sleeping, eating and sleeping”. Similar sentiments were expressed by many other participants:

*“It’s just like wasting of life, wasting of years. You wake up in the morning. All you have to do is go for your breakfast. Go back to your room, sleep or watch TV. Come for your lunch. Same thing everyday.”*

Those hoping to start a new and better life were eager to be meaningfully engaged in work, education and social connection. Although many made concerted efforts to keep busy by undertaking voluntary work or partaking in whatever limited educational opportunities were available, people often became gradually disaffected by the delayed outcome of their application and the interim inactivity. These made the demands involved in embracing the opportunity of transition and integration more daunting and complex, when their papers finally came through.

### *Loss of Autonomy*

Many research participants compared DP to ‘prison’ or ‘living in hell’. The prison references were supported with examples of over-regulation, disempowerment, surveillance and loss of freedom. In some facilities, there were ‘guards’ and ‘cameras’ and a pervading sense of institutionalisation.

*“It’s just like you’re under pressure, like, it’s just like an open jail, an open prison. It’s open. You can go out but the way it is, it’s just like a prison you know because morning to evening, there’s a camera. Everything you have to beg...”*

The loss of autonomy experienced by those in DP has been repeatedly referenced in the literature (Arnold, 2012; Breen, 2008; Conlan, 2014; Uchechukwu Ogbu, 2012). This loss was particularly evident in relation to food. The provision of meals to a strict timetable, the absence of choice about when and what to eat and the passivity imposed by the absence of cooking facilities, all stripped people of a sense of autonomy. Participants spoke of being infantilised, deprived of adult freedoms and punished, in the everyday way that food (and life in general) was controlled.

*“It’s just like they are giving the food, they are giving the Pampers, they are giving the baby food, they are giving everything.... People decide your life for you. They decide when you eat, when you go out.”*

Other participants also talked about the lack of control and the impact this had, with several of the participants referring to the fact that people then became lazy. For example, one man who spent eight and a half years in DP described his descent from hope, to a sense of imposed inaction.

*“You come here when you have a lot of things you plan to do, but when you are in the hostel, everything... you become a lazy man. You cannot do anything.”*

The data describe a loss of independence and self-reliance that results from a highly regulated environment. Adult responsibilities are suspended while others make decisions about the minutiae of day-to-day life and this makes it difficult to engage with new systems and cultural approaches and potentially causes problems when determinations are finally made. One female participant stated:

*“You have no say. You lose your self-esteem and this is the thing that is needed to build up again, to feel that you belong. I think that is where the problem is, because after so long when you’re being controlled, when you’re being told to do this way. You can’t cook for yourself. You can’t go and buy food. These are all challenges. What do I buy? Where do I buy? What do I need?”*



People also had little or no choice regarding who they lived with. The enforced communal living in the accommodation centres evoked varied reactions. Sharing a bedroom and bathroom with strangers was sometimes a source of stress and occasionally, conflict. In the wider environment the sheer numbers of cohabitants was a challenge, and added to an already stressful environment. One participant stated:

*“People fight. Small thing make people fight.”*

Another said:

*“It’s too many people. You have too many people.”*

### *Impact on Mental Health*

In keeping with the national and international literature (e.g. Conlan, 2014; Bathily, 2014; Fliges et al., 2015; Gerritsen et al., 2006; Nwachukwu et al., 2009), there was evidence in the data of poor physical and mental health, resulting from the isolation, uncertainty and powerlessness experienced in DP. Stress and anxiety were commonplace:

*“To me it was so difficult just to wake up without knowing what I can plan for tomorrow so for me it was so, so bad to the extent that it was stressing me every second.”*

There were fears expressed too, about the mental health of children and the vulnerabilities of young and older women who are isolated in DP facilities.

*“There’s a huge apathy; there’s going to be huge mental health issues and basically nothing to get up for. There is absolutely nothing [for children] they’ve been playing in the corridors. They’ve been playing on the stairs. They’ve got a big huge field right beside them that they’re not allowed into. DP has a detrimental effect on long term children’s mental health. And there are women we are not seeing...”*

*“The women are very vulnerable to trafficking and prostitution because of income poverty.”*

Issues of mental health, suicidal ideation and self-harm also arose for men in the study, as they too, waited in unfamiliar and isolating circumstances for a determination about their future. Some felt emasculated in front of their families by not being responsible for the family environment, whilst others were sidelined by age and ethnicity.

*“It was hard for me as a man. There were just three men in that hostel, with family. Most of them were single men from Africa. Very lovely people and all, very warm and friendly. After two, three years I tried to go out. I got frustrated about the situation. I feel I am going to be mad. Depression.”*

Stakeholders were particularly concerned about the length of time young people were spending in DP at a point when their lives should be filled with hope and opportunity, and about the longer term impact of this on their future mental health and integration. Overall, concern was expressed that people with mental health problems would face particular challenges transitioning out of DP and integrating into the broader Irish society.

## Resilience and Coping

Residents of DP coped in different ways with the challenges of waiting and living in an institutionalised setting. People talked of keeping busy, taking exercise and engaging in voluntary work in the community. People learned to be patient, to cope with long stretches of empty time and to find an inner strength in themselves. One woman pleaded to be allowed to clean the DP facility so that she could feel she had a purpose to her day, but this request was declined. Another young woman described a docile acceptance of whatever was demanded of her by those in authority.

One man who had been in eight different hostels in two years was baffled as to why he was moved so often. He coped by disengaging.

*“I never know why they always change me the hostel. I never know why, but anyway, I don’t think again too much about that.”*

## 2 From Direct Provision to Status

Another man became involved in a local NGO, as the DP residents' representative, and similarly talked about distracting himself and not dwelling too much on his immediate difficulties.

*“My daily routine, they were just for me to miss trouble, not to lose hope, not to be... There is a spirit, just to try to be strong what they answer. On a daily basis I do a lot of voluntary job, just keeping myself busy. I do a lot of training. I was do boxing just to keep myself fit.”*

Some complained, some passively accepted, and others tried to cope by creating some personal control, for example by hiding a kettle to make coffee or asking for alternatives to what was on offer in the main dining facility. For the most part, people succumbed to the regime, which had inevitable consequences for the future process of transition.

Without rigorous state regulation and supervision, it is clear that some DP facilities operated more supportive regimes than others and had more supportive staff. The kindness of some made a great difference. While few respondents had any positive comment to make about life in DP, one young woman, who had come to Ireland as an unaccompanied minor, made good relationships with staff in the DP centre and she missed these relationships when she moved.

*“The most positive things I had was that the workers are good to me. That’s the thing. Especially the manager. They are so nice to me and I don’t make any trouble so I think to be honest that’s the most positive thing that I can ever think about. I got along with the cook – the chefs, everyone. I didn’t have any problem with them so actually I miss everyone in the hostels.”*

Small incidental kindnesses from individuals on the staff also emerged in otherwise bleak lives.

*“There’s only one man. He is nice. He’s a security guard. He’s Irish. He’s nice to everybody... otherwise nobody...”*

Whilst there is evidence of occasional friction, there is abundant data about the friendships formed in solidarity with other residents. The good relationships made while in DP sustained people and made life tolerable. For children, the ever-present company of other playmates was enjoyable. People

talked about learning from others and creating networks of support, sharing information and advice and problem-solving collaboratively. These social networks – including networks with people who had already moved out of DP – proved important when individuals ‘got their papers’ and were preparing to move. However, as will be evident below, the relationships that were formed in DP also meant that sometimes it was difficult to leave.

## Receiving a Positive Determination

When the time came to begin the integration process that had been kept on hold for so long, people’s response to receiving their papers varied between relief, joy and regret at so much wasted time. For many, the arrival of ‘the letter’ signified the end of a lengthy and stressful wait and as such, they were very happy and relieved when the letter arrived. One participant stated:

*“Oh gosh it was my best day ever, I was very happy. Very, very happy. I was shouting, I did not want to eat, shouting, shouting, shouting. ....So I was shouting making noise, screaming everything. I was ringing my friends to tell them, my friends they were ... I was very happy. Very, very happy.”*

Sometimes people did not react in the way that they thought they would react:

*“But then, before I got my papers I was telling my friends, you know, telling them when we’re all talking about it “if I got my papers I would scream. Everybody would not sleep in the hostel and I would be shouting, I would be knocking on everyone’s door” But that day when I got my paper, I was just so quiet. I was so speechless. I was like, “After all these years.” I just sat down and everyone was crying, everyone was screaming, I just sat down, I called my parents at home. My mom, she couldn’t believe me. She was like, “Don’t joke with me.” And I was like, “I’m not joking, why am I joking, this is very serious”, then she screamed.”*

One man talked in terms of a ‘miracle’ after receiving a response after only three years, when he was aware that others have waited for 10 years and more.

*“My feeling for me it was a miracle, it was a miracle, because when I saw the other people in the hostel for 10 years, 12 years, for me it was no life.”*

In keeping with the viewpoint that DP was like a prison, many participants felt a sense of freedom once they received their letter indicating that their status had been granted. A woman who had been waiting less than a year, felt a sense of arrival and new life after a period of being caught in a sort of limbo. She, like many others, was initially shocked and found the news hard to believe.

*“It was like I’m born, like I’m born with everything. You’re born when you’re already grow up. You seeing everything. Now I’m a new person. I’m here now. I was so happy. I didn’t know how to express my feelings because I remember when my lawyer called me, telling me the good news, I stayed for an hour without even telling anyone or calling anyone, because I didn’t know what to do. I didn’t believe I was so happy.”*

Some expected their joy to be boundless and were surprised at the complex nature of their emotional response when their letter finally came. For some, the arrival of the letter highlighted the many lost opportunities, having waited so long. After eight years, one man felt sad when he received his papers. The authorities expressed their happiness to inform him that his application was successful, but he felt a sense of sadness that he had waited such a long time and had no sense of transformation or optimism. His words highlight the long term damage done by the system:

*“When I received the letter I was not happy that they say I am happy that you have a paper. I was just feeling down. I was just say, I expect this for long to me to build my way. After how many years now...You give me that today. I’m not happy for anything. I see myself the same that I used to be in the Direct Provision.”*

After waiting six years, one man described his reaction to receiving his letter of approval as one of anticlimax and disbelief at so much invested in this one paper.

*“You don’t believe it because you have been expecting for the paper for a long time. Maybe we imagine something big, but it’s just one paper. One letter and the letter can just give you permission. You read and you read again. Repeat reading.”*

One man talked about how his three year-old son was frightened by his father's reaction, when his determination came through. The 'paper' takes on a huge significance for children, without their understanding the detail, and the child was confused and upset by the whole episode and by the apparent emotional disruption it caused.

Overall, the participants' descriptions of receiving their papers demonstrate not only the importance that they attached to being granted status but also the significance of being able to leave the DP environment and have the freedom to start their new lives. In addition, the reactions in many cases indicate the negative impact of the DP system on them as individuals, particularly those who spent lengthy periods in the system and felt that so many years had been wasted.

### Conclusions

The evidence gathered from the 22 people in this study is corroborated by the stakeholders who work closely with those seeking asylum, both during their process and after it is complete. It is clear that long term detrimental effects result from a regime that removes people's independence, ensures they are bereft of all but the most basic resources and at the same time, does not allow them to work, and limits their potential to learn or form social networks. For adults, children and the wider community there are lost opportunities for intercultural enrichment. Individuals suffer, as do family relationships, and for some poor physical and mental health are a consequence of the system. Unsurprisingly, it was hugely significant for people when they received notification that their applications for protection or leave to remain had been granted. However, for some this news was overshadowed by feelings of resentment or regret in relation to the years lost while living in limbo. In addition, as will be seen in the next chapter, initial joy often changed to stress when the challenges involved in transitioning from DP became apparent.

# 3

## Transitioning out of Direct Provision

*“You start slowly, slowly, because you are used to living in hostel. You get food, you get sleep. You’re very relaxed, you think about nothing. But when you go outside, another world, you have to do everything. To do everything for a long time is very hard. So you tend to feel like you are a little boy and then you’re a grown up.”*

### Introduction

**I**nitial joy at receiving a letter granting status is followed up by the painful reality of the difficulties involved in finding a place to live, accessing social welfare, and looking for work. The systemic infantilisation and loss of autonomy while in Direct Provision (DP), and the toll of the accumulated physical, mental and psychological harm becomes obvious when, after years of waiting passively, suddenly action is required. Having been passive recipients of state provision for protracted periods of time, those granted status are then faced with a daunting transition for which they are ill prepared mentally, economically or in terms of cultural awareness and vital social links. The response varies from case to case. For many, the transition was a complex blend of regret about the wasted years in DP, relief to be out or on the way out of DP, and hope for a brighter future.

*“I am going to be honest, behind me is very difficult because it is something it is not easy to forget. I hope very quickly I will be forgetting. I will look forward for my future to do other things.”*

*“We don’t have much, but to think we are out of that place. It just make you happy. We are still talking about it. We are still talking about it so it’s still affecting me.”*

*“It was a transit. You have passed it. You need to do a new life and move forward.”*

### 3 Transitioning out of Direct Provision

This chapter looks at the information and supports available to people during the transition period and some of the challenges that they faced.

## Provision of Information

Initially, those who were granted status were instructed to register with the Garda National Immigration Bureau (GNIB). This process seemed to run smoothly for the majority of those interviewed and participants reported that they were treated courteously by the Gardaí concerned. Usually their GNIB card arrived within the two weeks promised.

Other than this initial instruction about GNIB, very little other information was given to those interviewed by the Department of Justice and Equality or by the Reception and Integration Agency (RIA). The initial letter was followed by a letter from RIA, informing them that they have 21 days to move out of DP. The following is an excerpt from this letter:

*“You must now make arrangements to move into the community and begin your new life in Ireland. Your current accommodation centre... is reserved solely for persons who remain within the asylum process. Having been granted Permission to Remain, you are no longer within that process. You must therefore make arrangements to move out of the centre as soon as possible but no later than (date). Please leave your accommodation in a clean and tidy condition. Do not take with you any property belonging to the centre.”*

The letter then went on to ask individuals to ‘pay particular attention’ to a number of things regarding accommodation. Individuals were told that they should ‘apply, in the first instance, for accommodation to the local authority for the area in which you intend to reside’ and it was also suggested that people may wish to look for rented accommodation.

The letter lacked specific information regarding how they should make an application to the local authority, where local authority offices were located or how they should seek rented accommodation. While the ‘community welfare officer’ was identified as someone with whom difficulties in finding



### 3 Transitioning out of Direct Provision

accommodation could be discussed, details were not provided about how community welfare officers could be contacted or where their offices were based. It is of note that, within the study, participants did not talk about getting help from community welfare officers.

There seemed to be an underlying assumption that people would know what to do upon receipt of the ‘granted’ letter. This was an unrealistic assumption, given that many of those transitioning were living in a system which caused them to be dependent on the state and isolated from the general population and from those who might be familiar with the processes involved. They had no understanding of the intricacies of a complex welfare system nor procedures for accessing rental accommodation in a market experiencing dire shortages of supply and constantly rising rents. Participants made the following comments:

*“That’s the thing. It’s a surprise. There’s no structure to inform you what you are supposed to do.”*

*“I’m just finding that it’s difficult because you don’t know anything. We don’t even have a list what to do next really, like even stage number one when you get your papers, you don’t know where to go and collect the form. We don’t totally have that information.”*

The lack of information caused anxiety and confusion for people who had been given no preparation, during time in DP, about what might happen afterwards.

*“... it is all stated in the letter, the means and what they offered you. Health service, you can use the health service like any other Irish persons. You can look for employment. You can look for education but it didn’t tell you how to do that.”*

As mentioned in the previous chapter, the Task Force on Transitional Supports, set up in the wake of the McMahon Report (2015), produced an information booklet at the end of December 2015. They advised at the time that the booklets are being distributed by RIA to those in DP with status. This booklet provides those leaving DP with information about the services and supports available to them. For the respondents in this study, no information booklet existed and so support, in the absence of state structures, was sought from many unofficial sources and networks.

## Sources of Support

People's access to and need for support during transition varied, but what is clear from the data is that they were generally dependent on non-statutory sources for this information and advice. Some managed to get information about social welfare and housing from others who had gone through the system before them, from the occasional supportive DP hostel manager, from non-governmental organisations (NGOs) that they were already linked in with, or from the local Citizens' Information Centre (CIC). These methods of getting information proved problematic for individuals who were not well networked, especially those who were experiencing mental health problems or who had not been in the country for long. Because of lack of clarity some acted on misinformation. One participant highlighted the fact that different people had different types of status, with different entitlements and procedures, depending on their status. This meant that advice from a former DP resident might not always apply to a particular individual's case.

For many of those interviewed, NGOs proved particularly important in providing support. They provided local knowledge about accommodation and services. NGO staff and volunteers took people, step by step, through the complicated processes of transitioning. They provided specific and practical help with form-filling, with sourcing accommodation (assisting with checking property websites, phoning landlords etc.) and with applications for family reunification. Participants valued the personalised approach of NGOs whose focus was to ease the path to integration in the face of complex and frustrating bureaucracy

*"I know of [named NGO] and I start going there... They fill my form... From there if I got any letters or I wanted to fill form or if I have any problem, I need someone to advise me I go to [NGO]. They help a lot of time. I think they're great people."*

It should be noted that many of those who participated in this study were recruited by NGOs. As noted earlier, the sample is thus not representative and in fact it is likely that the more vulnerable individuals transitioning from DP did not participate in this study. NGO staff observed multiple and varied support needs and were concerned about individuals who do not have the motivation or the

### 3 Transitioning out of Direct Provision

know-how to access the help they need. As a result, their needs go unidentified and unsupported.

*“It’s a whole spectrum of people with different needs, different abilities. I would say that there is quite a portion of people there that just don’t know how to deal with it because of the institutionalisation and because of the problems they have brought with them. The ones who need help may be the ones you don’t see.”*

*“Those that are struggling the most are the ones that are least likely to look for or access services. They are least likely to engage in research or study reports and therefore it’s more difficult to reach the need of those that are furthest removed from services.”*

The transition from DP to community living was particularly hard for those suffering from depression, who found it hard to leave the legacy of their old life behind. In keeping with the literature, for some, the process of recovery from trauma or from mental health difficulties could only really begin when the move out of DP occurred and the uncertainty of the asylum process ended. The data suggests that counselling was a positive support in these instances.

*“After having my paper that’s where I manage to do, to cry. I never really cried before. Sometimes it’s hard for me. I am just a person who gets depressed... I think when I was going for my help to the counselling thing it really helps me. My doctor told me, you’re only going to see something ahead. Backward is just backward. That is why I say my first life is my first life – gone. Then my new life is now this one – my new life.”*

One woman had to rely on advice from her lawyer for ongoing information, after her status had been awarded.

*“Because I just get my papers before I know anything in the country. I was still new so everything I’m doing after getting my paper I have to be directed by someone. So on that stage I am still referring to my lawyer: ‘What can I do next?’ It makes my process go slow. Another thing, I’m applying for my child to join me so they’re trying to find out if he can join me soon, so that I can know which accommodation to look for.”*

For many, the best source of support was others who had been through the transition process before

### 3 Transitioning out of Direct Provision

them and had untangled the steps in the welfare and housing systems.

*“A lot of people who left Direct Provision, they know people who have left Direct Provision also, so they contact those people and they get their supports. Sometimes they link with them. They stay with them until they get a house. Those supports are always there.”*

Some people reported being treated harshly by DP managers, whereas others experienced kindness and flexibility in the interpretation of the system. In some cases DP managers provided ongoing supports while people tried to locate a place to live and the finances to pay for it. There was evidence that participants who were living in the same hostel were treated differently by a manager, with some being put under pressure to leave the centre quickly, while others were told that there was no rush to leave.

*“Then I went to my manager and said I have not got any house so you’ll have to hold on for me and she said, ‘no problem’. But they were not pushing me, They were not telling me that I had to leave, no...”*

This additional support was at managers’ own discretion and not a feature of state policy or regulated practice. Another participant had a very different experience to the person quoted above. She stated:

*“I told them I can’t leave because I have a baby. They said to me you have three weeks, you have time. That’s the answer they give me.”*

All this discretion and serendipity leaves the system open to inequalities, where individual asylum seekers may be treated more, or less favourably between and within different accommodation facilities.

## **Financial Hurdles in Transitioning: Accessing Social Welfare and Rent Supplement**

Getting access to social welfare and accommodation are interlinked, yet the systems seem to obstruct

### 3 Transitioning out of Direct Provision

one another in allowing people to transition from DP into the community. In order to register with the Department of Social Protection to be able to claim Jobseeker's Allowance or other entitlements, proof of address is required, but the majority of participants were told that the DP hostel was not acceptable as an address. In keeping with the research by Crosscare et al. (2014), which found that misinformation or omission of information was a problem for immigrants accessing social protection, in our study people were often not informed of their full entitlements, including Exceptional Needs Payments and the fact that they could get a reduced rate of Jobseeker's Allowance while in the hostel. Most of the participants continued to receive the minimal DP rate while they attempted to make the transition, although there were a few exceptions, thus suggesting inconsistency in the system. One participant talked about his friend who had been given the full allowance once his status had been granted, even though he was still living in DP:

*“They pay him the full money, weekly money. They say OK - you can stay here [in DP]. You don't need to pay bills or pay any rent. You can save this money for your deposit or for your first rent. Then you can go and pay that money for your rent or for your deposit. It's as simple as that.”*

A stakeholder talked about the challenges of getting a deposit together when one was receiving only €19.10 per week:

*“I suppose there is a long period of time between getting social welfare payments changed over from the Direct Provision €19.10, to their own individual entitlement. Without that changeover happening, they cannot access supports for rental allowance. They don't have a deposit. They have been surviving on €19.10 a week, so they don't have a deposit saved up. A lot of accommodation would require a three-month deposit plus one month in advance.”*

In reality, it would seem that all of those who had been granted permission to remain should have been entitled to a Jobseekers' Allowance of between €100 and €188 per week, depending on their age, instead of the DP allowance of €19.10. Indeed these individuals may in fact be entitled to make retrospective claims in relation to this money. In addition, many if not all should probably have been able to access an

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Exceptional Needs Payment to pay for the desposit. There also appeared to be discrepancies between social welfare offices in relation to what people were entitled to. One stakeholder spoke about a client's experiences:

*“He said they don’t pay [deposit]. I think that most of the social welfare officers don’t pay deposits. It wasn’t long ago that they started doing that. ... we were campaigning and we were saying a lot of things about how difficult it was. I think that changed and social welfare officers in [named office] started paying. I don’t know for other areas or other hostels if they pay their deposit for them.”*

Participants described the information that they had been given. One woman told how she could not access Jobseeker’s Allowance without first having an address. Yet obtaining rental accommodation which would provide this address was very difficult without having a social welfare payment. Thus she was caught in a vicious circle:

*“I went to social welfare first. They gave me an interview for Jobseekers [allowance]. But they said, I have to get a house, I have to have an address, before they see me, before any other thing, because they can’t interview [me] while I’m living in Direct Provision.”*

Finding an alternative address was extremely difficult in circumstances where participants could not afford to pay deposits and rent while receiving only €19.10 per week. Landlords generally required a deposit and at least one month’s rent in advance and so people were caught in a bureaucratic bind where one set of rules was out of sync with those of another department. This resulted in delays for people leaving DP even after their long-awaited approval for status had been delivered, with the time taken to leave DP accommodation varying from between one month and seven months, for those who had already completed the process.

People who had found themselves waiting for long periods in DP for a determination on their status then found themselves in another limbo between getting status and moving out of DP. A woman who had been 11 years in DP had received her papers one month prior to the research interview and was

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still living in DP. She stated:

*“I can’t pay for the house myself and actually there’s no fund that is readily being given to people to access that. You have to go through social welfare, but the social welfare you have to ask for that money (rent supplement) when you already have got the house, but to get the house you need that money. That is where the trick is. That is number one. This is why I am two legs. One leg is still in here and I’m trying to move out. Moving out is not as flexible as it would seem to be.”*

Delays in receiving rent supplement were common. In many instances people who had managed to move into private rented accommodation - usually by borrowing money for the deposit and for the first month’s rent - then faced the challenge of waiting for their rent supplement for several months. Many of the participants were paying out €100 a week out of their €188 Jobseekers’ Allowance, in order to pay their rent while they waited for their rent supplement to be processed.

*“Looking for a house is so difficult because most of the landlords, they don’t want rent supplement ... they just want you to come and pay their money. But after a while we got somewhere ... and she is willing to take the rent allowance. We had to use our basic allowance to pay the rent. We are still waiting for the rent allowance.”*

One participant, who was under 25 years of age and in receipt of just €100 unemployment allowance per week, was paying €93 for rent and electricity, which left him with €7 a week for food and other essentials. This was significantly less than he had been getting in the DP system, where he was provided with all his food. Having been dependent on the DP system for several years, he was now forced to be reliant on food vouchers from the Society of Saint Vincent de Paul, and the kindness of friends. Even when the Rent Supplement came through, the amount of money provided was usually not sufficient to cover the rent, as is often the case for the general population.

In addition to the problems getting a deposit / first month’s rent and paying the rent in the absence of rent supplement, participants also faced expenses in obtaining household items. Having moved to Ireland with few belongings and having lived in DP hostels on €19.10 per week, most participants did not have items such as bed linen, cutlery, or crockery. Purchasing these items resulted in further

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financial pressure. One stakeholder commented:

*“They may have a cooker in place ... but certainly in terms of pots and pans and even cups and plates and all that type of stuff, no, you’re expected to provide your own. We have a reputation of trawling through all the second-hand shops ... trying to help families in particular, to kit out their kitchen so that children have something to eat on.”*

The result of the current system is that the majority of people get into debt, be it formal or informal, to enable them to leave the DP hostel. This may be in addition to a previous debt incurred while in DP. Those with a social support network borrowed from friends (often people who have made the transition before them); others went to lending agencies (one cited a €120 charge for a €400 loan). One stakeholder stated:

*“Some people are borrowing money off loan sharks to get out, get deposits together so then they’re going to be caught up in that trap for a while. People really want to get out as quickly as possible... they’ve been in there [DP] for so long.”*

The net result of an inhospitable and often obstructive social welfare system is increased likelihood of cycles of poverty, where people cannot access their entitlements and are forced to borrow while they wait for the state systems to function appropriately.

Applying Baker et al.’s theory of equality (2004) or Amartya Sen and Martha Nussbaum’s (1993) capability approach helps illuminate the resulting discrimination, inequality of opportunity and lack of capability experienced by those attempting to move on from DP (Gateley, 2014). Lack of income and resulting poverty, and the lack of ability to participate fully in society, are key indicators of social exclusion. Already socially excluded by the policy of dispersal and DP accommodation, this is clearly exacerbated rather than alleviated by the lack of support around transitioning out of DP, accessing social welfare and sourcing accommodation (Crosscare et al., 2014).



## Other Hurdles: Finding Accommodation

As mentioned previously, within a fortnight of the Minister for Justice and Equality's letter arriving, most received a letter from RIA giving them just two to three weeks to vacate the DP hostel. Notwithstanding the financial challenges discussed above, actually finding suitable accommodation was very problematic, with multiple barriers in place.

*“No it's just, after days I receive letter from, the granted letter, to say that I should leave the accommodation within two weeks or three weeks.”*

*“Well, the first big challenge is getting accommodation outside, that's the first big challenge. There are a couple of challenges that you meet but that's the first one because you really don't know where to start ... (you don't know) your left from your right.”*

Participants reported that – apart from the financial challenges of affording to rent - they faced numerous other hurdles in attempting to find accommodation and therefore could not move out of the DP hostel quickly. To begin with, many of the participants simply did not know how to look for accommodation, having been isolated from the general population and never having rented previously. For example, some did not know about property websites such as daft.ie nor did they know that one often needed to arrive early to view properties, as many other people could be looking at the property. Also, the rural locations of some DP centres meant that it was difficult to travel to view properties.

In addition, they were faced with the challenge that landlords often would not accept rent supplement and instead preferred tenants who were working. Given that as asylum seekers the participants had not been permitted to work, this placed them at a significant disadvantage.

*“Actually, all of the houses, the landlord need only people who's working. If you don't have job, if you not working, you can't get a place, that is your problem.”*

Another challenge individuals faced was getting appropriate references for landlords, given that they had not rented or worked previously in Ireland. Some DP hostel managers supplied them, other DP

### 3 Transitioning out of Direct Provision

hostel managers said that they could not, indicating that there is no clear cut policy on this. Language barriers served as another challenge. Individuals had difficulties filling in forms or trying to understand the process they needed to navigate.

*“Apart from that you have to fill a lot of forms. You have to apply for Jobseeker Allowance. You have to fill many forms. At that time I don’t speak English good and my English is still bad but at that time my English not very well at all, so I have to find someone who can help.”*

An additional challenge related to the belief that people were being discriminated against because they were not Irish. One of the stakeholders made reference to this:

*“A lot of people don’t know how to go about finding a house. They go to phone ... different rent-out places and they refuse them because they have foreign accent and they don’t want to give it to a foreigner. That always happens. There are a lot who do give it to foreigners as well, so there’s a balance as well. Even if you get a house a lot of people are sharing houses with other families. Two bedroom and they are sleeping on the floor, this kind of thing.”*

Given the current Irish housing crisis, accommodation is often in short supply and so the challenges facing those leaving DP meant that competing with others in the rental market was even more difficult.

*“I was looking for a place every day. On daft.ie and on Rent.ie I call many times. Sometimes I called to see the place and there’s a lot of people there that are looking for a place. Sometimes you go, you would see maybe 80 people in small rooms, they’re waiting to see the place.”*

Another participant talked about his time in DP, when he was attempting to make the transition:

*“Sometimes I feel so depressed. Sometimes I stopped looking for a place, even I don’t want to check in on daft (daft.ie) or those places. I said maybe I don’t know what to do, the place ... to find a place is simply impossible. I have friend who say everything at the beginning is very hard so you don’t have to give up.”*

### 3 Transitioning out of Direct Provision

For many of the participants, eventual success in getting accommodation was because of a mixture of perseverance, assistance from NGO's, friends recommending them to their landlords, sympathetic landlords or luck. One man described how he went to view a property and when the landlord discovered that he was from the same country as his wife, he rented the property to him and did not require him to provide a deposit of a month's rent in advance, until his social welfare payments came through. He reflected on this:

*“This, I think, just for me. Most people, they don't have this chance. They are completely stuck in hostels. How the people can pay, for example, €1,000 or €1,200 deposit when they pay you weekly €19 or something ...”*

There is also the issue of setting up bank accounts and accessing other services (e.g. gas, electricity etc) that need proof of identity and address. Seemingly simple things like providing proof of address in the form of utility bills often proved impossible for individuals who had only lived in DP since arriving in Ireland:

*“I don't have any account, bank account. They want a utility bill. I don't have nothing. Even the letter they gave me from Justice is not helping me. They have to look for the travel document, travel document is not helping me. It's like useless so you have to get the letter...”*

One man described how 'the social' (community welfare officer) informed him that he needed to provide a bank statement before he could be provided with his social welfare payment. This did not seem to be normal practice and it was unclear why he was asked. The man described the problems he had in opening a bank account to meet this condition, as he did not have an acceptable 'proof of address' for the bank.

*“In Dublin, the first thing that they ask me, they ask me bank account. I couldn't make that bank account, because all the bank here ask me for proof of address. I was new in that home, and I couldn't make any address. My friend told me it's better to make contact with one of these internet [companies] like UPC or something... I called to UPC and I give all my things, all my details. Even the UPC asked me [for] the proof of*

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*address. I said, “You are my proof of address.” They asked me, “You have to give us the proof of address.” I was stuck in that situation. I couldn’t make any proof of address to make a bank account.... I couldn’t get any money from the social.”*

The man approached a number of banks. One bank’s head office stated that they could not open a bank account for him because he was from Iran and he might want to transfer money there – perhaps because of US sanctions against Iranian financial institutions at the time, which affected some Irish banks. Having approached a few banks, this man eventually met a sympathetic bank manager, in a small branch, who allowed him to set up an account.

## Conclusions

At the time of our research, the state had made little information, advice and support available to those granted status as they attempted to transition from DP into Irish communities. The recently published information booklet mentioned above goes someway to address these issues. Accessing social welfare and finding accommodation are interlinked and complex bureaucratic processes often contradict each other. People are delayed in DP by their inability to satisfy conflicting requirements of government departments, and because of the challenge in finding rental accommodation without financial resources for a deposit and payment in advance. This is exacerbated by the accommodation crisis in Ireland, where waiting lists for social housing are long and rental costs exceed the amounts paid in rent supplements. Having waited for years to be awarded status, those seeking protection in Ireland find themselves faced with endless systemic and practical hurdles, in their efforts to begin the long process of integration.

# 4

## Transitioning into the Local Community

*“The first thing is that the big, big thing for you is going to a big community. You don’t have any clue what will happen in the future. You feel you are alone. People don’t know how to swim and they put them in the big sea. You have to try and save yourself.”*

### Introduction

There is a great sense of freedom for those who finally have a chance to make a home for themselves after the institutional life of Direct Provision (DP). Yet, those who make the first steps into Irish communities through contacts with friends, church groups and NGOs and who manage to find accommodation in a difficult housing market, find that they still have many issues to face. They report the change in their lives from dependency to autonomy with a mixture of pleasure and justifiable fear, given the daunting systems with which they are confronted. Dreams become tempered with the realities of financial management on meagre resources, sometimes with poor language skills, limited knowledge of Irish culture and scant social networks. Some continue to visit their friends in DP and for some, access to an occasional meal helps them to cope on a very restricted budget. According to stakeholders it is those with the most traumatic history, and mental health issues, who are more likely to be socially isolated and not linked in with support organisations. They can remain where they are in DP for long periods, without the necessary knowledge and support to begin to navigate the system. Such individuals require intensive support in making the transition. Without such support there is a risk that, upon transition, mental health problems can increase in the face of isolation, intransigent social policies and structures. This chapter looks particularly at the experiences of those who managed to leave DP and, in particular, at their narratives about education, employment and family reunification.

## Getting Settled

Having found accommodation, the main challenge faced after transition was integration into the community, to make friends and to feel at home. As mentioned previously, despite RIA's name – Reception and Integration Agency – there was no evidence from participants that RIA played a part in facilitating the integration of those transitioning from DP hostels. Similarly the Office for the Promotion of Migrant Integration (OPMI) does not appear to take any responsibility for the integration of people leaving DP, despite the fact that they have secured their status in Ireland. For the most part people who took part in this study were left to their own devices.

*“Yeah it was very hard you know, but you must do your best to be integrated. You can't stay ... at home. No, you have to be together with those people, with Irish people.”*

Although most of the research participants were still struggling, to various degrees, with establishing the most basic of requirements for an integrated life – as was evident in the previous chapter – some at least, were able to dream of better times ahead.

*“Freedom – you can do what you want to, live where you want to live. Yeah, I like to get a good job... just like everybody else.”*

Similarly, although still in DP two months after receiving her papers, one woman sustained herself with a dream for her future.

*“I'm just comparing being free and the separate rooms, imagining the kitchen where I listen; my child is watching TV while I am cooking or he's going to the bedroom and study there while I am in my own room. I am just imagining something like that comparing to the hostel where other people they're living with their children in the same hostel room.”*

People had a vision of their future that was humble and unassuming. Their dreams were about surviving their long ordeal and maintaining a level of resilience to carry them through the process of settling down in Ireland, now that their papers have finally come through.

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*“I just want to live in peace. What do I mean by that? To be able to pay my rent and to survive, to manage to pay everything. My bills. Everything to live, to live a quiet life. A good life. Yeah.”*

Being integrated and contributing to the community featured in the plans of a number of people whose future settlement was above and beyond personal interests and linked to being a useful and connected member of a community.

*“I see myself finished at school, and helping people, stable and smiling. I don’t know how to say it but I am thinking positive.”*

A sense of community and solidarity motivated another woman to become part of supporting others, so that their hopes of a new life might be more easily achieved.

*“So what I am doing in [named advocacy group]... actually now is I’m just trying to find a way of giving back. Because they were a lot of support to us. And the [advocacy group] was a huge, huge support to me towards the end of last year and this year as well. So that’s why I want to make myself available to help, and help people that are going through the same thing as I am. Since I have experience...”*

One woman explained that what most people hope for is a place to call home, a place where they know they have become truly integrated as members of a community to which they really belong.

*“Having been in isolation for so long, you come out and you’re there on your own. If you’re not the kind of person that wants to reach out or mix up, it’s difficult to get into the society and establish yourself, that you’re a member of this society. I’ve been living in Knockmore<sup>8</sup> now. It’s a very small society, community. It’s lovely. I’m trying to get involved in my children’s school. That’s one way of getting, maybe, involved in the community. But most people still find it hard. They’re still isolated because Direct Provision is all they’ve known. You might have been here nine years and you can’t really say, ‘oh I’m from this place’...We still don’t feel like that. So hopefully living in*

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8 ‘Knockmore’ is a pseudonym

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*Knockmore now, in this small community. Getting to know people from the school, going to school plays and all that. Hopefully we'll be able to say soon that we live in Knockmore we belong to the community of people in Knockmore. So that's another challenge."*

For many, it was difficult to create networks of support in the wider community, when they were used to being surrounded by people in DP. They had forged a life and connections that were difficult to leave behind, even though this was a cherished goal. One participant described the challenge of leaving these connections and friends behind, when she was moving out.

*"Sometimes in life you meet some lovely people that you don't want to leave them behind. I feel like crying. My children say 'No. We are not going. We want to be playing. I miss my friend. I miss this. I miss that.' I just have to close my eyes and say, 'We just have to go now. We will come and visit them.'"*

Another participant's words suggested her isolation within the community, when compared with the companionship that was available in DP:

*"I miss sometimes the people... when they come to eat and talk you forget the problems and I miss that."*

Some participants returned to visit the DP centre frequently, in order to maintain the social connections. These friendships were particularly important when it proved difficult to form new relationships within the community. One stakeholder expressed concern about this, particularly with regard to people's mental health:

*"They suffer isolation and stuff like that because they're so used to having all the people around them. They're very isolated and we have to be very mindful of those out in the community then, in case their issues around mental health or anything like that increases".*



## Financial Pressure

Having been provided with all basic accommodation and food whilst in DP, there are many new issues to deal with in the transition process. There is uncharted territory in the registration and payment for utilities and other household bills, in budgeting and managing limited budgets while establishing a home, from scratch. There is evidence in the data that people needed support with the practicalities of operating household goods and heating their homes without creating huge electricity bills. At the same time, delays in payment of entitlements like rent supplement – as discussed above – made the financial management task excessively hard. Some people were told they would have to wait for up to six months for the payments to which they were entitled. There are unexpected and unsupported costs for bins and transport and the imperatives of money-management on small budgets become apparent all too quickly.

*“First life. You start step by step, then you get used, you learn by everyday. That’s the thing, paying the bills and managing the little money. You’re supposed to buy food so you know how to space it and to cut it in chunk you know.”*

Support groups feared that debt and financial pressure made people vulnerable to exploitation by money lenders and others who may take advantage of their situation.

*“I think there’s the potential for exploitation. I don’t necessarily... I can’t say that it’s going to be prostitution. I can’t say that it’s going to be anything, but when you really are struggling to live, you are vulnerable and that’s our worry.”*

A man who had been in DP for eight years regretted nothing in his move into the community, other than the new stress in his life of trying to meet the demands of bills. He saw the financial conundrum as a government responsibility, and struggled to understand why the state would award status without realising the financial costs that accompanied this for those who wished to integrate into Irish society, including the costs incurred in getting a GNIB Registration card (a cost of €300 every time the card is renewed).

*“The government have to consider when they know they give a paper for people in Direct Provision. They have to know those people doesn’t have nothing in their pocket. The government have to support them. They’re not supposed to pay like a GNIB card. The government have to support them to give them some deposit money for them to get the location for their house. Have to give them some pocket money where they can buy their duvet, their things for the house...”*

Overall, participants were of the view that there was a failure to recognise the financial costs of resettlement or the bureaucratic processes people must negotiate, with little support.

## Transitions for Children and Parents

For children too, who have known little other than life in DP, there are difficulties in transition. As mentioned above, they miss their friends and familiar routine. Some asked to be brought back to the accommodation and took time to get used to the fact that their new home marked a permanent move from DP. Parents, and sometimes new friends, worked hard to encourage adjustment. One mother spoke about this and referred to her landlord’s kindness:

*“They adapt easily. They can’t even wait. Even my daughter will say, paint my room pink. My teddy bear, my Hello Kitty by my bed and everything. I do everything like that, so they were happy. When we first moved, they first of all feel lonely. They said, oh, my God, I miss my friends. They said, ‘Mommy, can we go back and play?’ I said, ‘no, we are not going back. This is our house. We’re going to stay here now.’ ‘But nobody to play with, it’s so quiet, it’s so this and that.’ I said, ‘you’re going to adapt with it. You’re going to adapt’. Funny enough, my landlord did a tree slide for them in the garden.”*

The move out of DP gave some parents a renewed sense of autonomy in their role. One mother of four children was awarded status after seven years in DP. She spoke about what this meant to her both as an adult and as a parent:

*“When you have freedom out of the asylum seeker system, you know that you have got*

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*your dignity back, your freedom back, everything back because you're now back on your feet. You can now decide, oh, I want to eat fried rice this morning, or I want to eat plantains and beans in the afternoon, or I don't feel like eating today, I just want salad or I want to take my children to the park or I want to take my children to the cinema. Let's go and watch a movie. You are now the controller of your life and the destiny of your life and your children. You know what is good for them."*

Getting used to additional space, to having separate rooms after sharing a room with all the family, also requires adjustment. Children born in the hostel had no other reference point for normality and needed to be gradually introduced to a new lifestyle

*"...we are training him to sleep alone now. Most of the time, he woke up and asked us, "Where are you?" It's very hard, because he was there for ... He was born in 2012, yeah for two years, we sleep all together. Another thing that was in hostel, for children, the children who lived in hostel, or were born in hostel, it's a very hard situation for them."*

Older children who had felt hugely disadvantaged, in comparison to their peers at school, had waited impatiently for the 'response' to come and status to be awarded. They too had experienced social exclusion and isolation. They had not wanted to accept invitations to friends' houses because they were aware they were unable to reciprocate when their turn came. They listened while peers talked about holidays and regular family routines, and struggled to understand why their family situation compared so disfavouredly to that of others. For them, the awarding of status and the move out of DP presented new opportunities and new prospects for the future, but these were not without hurdles.

## Education

### *Education while in Direct Provision*

While in DP, although children can access primary and post primary education, access to education for adults is extremely limited. Most do not qualify for funding for third level education. This is because of the years of residency required to be eligible for education supports and non-recognition of their years spent in DP. As a result, many of the participants completed courses well below their existing level of education because they wanted to remain occupied. One man with a degree in bio-medical technology, who wanted to do a Masters in Pathology, did a Further Education and Training Awards Council (FETAC)<sup>9</sup> course in Healthcare Assistance because he was not eligible for anything at his own level of qualification. People studied English at a range of levels as well as Social Care, IT and Accounting, but seemed to be only able to access courses up to FETAC Level 4. Some had done every FETAC course possible, during their time in a DP hostel. This was the case for one participant, who spoke about the monotony of the DP regime, living in a DP hostel for eight years and how he made the most of the opportunities he could get.

*“... Same thing, everyday. But while I was there I was able to do some courses, you know....the manager told us about it. ... I did ECDL while I was in the hostel. I did horticulture....I did payroll technician, I did business studies, secretarial, and I did few other ones, which, lots anyway ... anything that come my way, just to keep myself going rather than just sleeping.”*

Many completed courses that they were not really interested in because they allowed escape from the monotony and stresses of life in DP. Many saw education as an opportunity to be grasped whenever possible, and regretted the limited educational opportunities that were available in DP. Some people appeared to know little about FETAC courses and were not sure what their entitlements were, in this

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<sup>9</sup> People who have not completed the Leaving Cert often undertake FETAC courses as a means of getting into university. A FETAC Level 5 needs to be completed to gain access to a university degree as a mature student.

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regard. Those interviewed who did not speak English as a first language had attended English classes mainly run by voluntary organisations and had often done everything possible to prepare themselves for the world of work, although long stays in DP hostels had militated against this. A stakeholder felt that education classes in the community, for those resident in DP, were an effective first step for people on the road to integration.

*“We try and build on people’s skills as much as we can so that when they do leave, they’re ready to hit the ground running.”*

Overall, while many of the participants participated in as many educational courses as was possible and valued these learning experiences, ultimately many saw their time in DP as wasted time which could have been spent learning what they really wanted to learn and building on prior qualifications, something which would have made the next stages, whatever they were, much easier for them. For those who attended post primary school, they regretted the fact that upon reaching school-leaving age, they had not been able to move on to third level and as such, were left without a purpose, while their peer group moved on to college. Since September 2015, school leavers who have been in the system for five years and meet certain criteria, can now apply for financial support to access third level education.

### *Education upon transition*

Upon receipt of status, many of the participants talked about their excitement about the opportunities that would now become available, in terms of education and employment. Gaining status opened doors that were previously shut and gave hope. One man spoke about the possibilities for the future.

*“I wanted to go to the further education. They told me they can’t pay my fees there because of my status. If you are an asylum seeker you’re not entitled to go to that college because the fees are high. When I went back to them with my status they were able to help me. That’s something. That’s something that shows that opportunities are there. I think there are opportunities. It’s good to... I think education is the key to many things.”*

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Having left DP many of the participants were eager to start studying straight away. However, again, many barriers were faced. To begin with, some participants had unrealistic expectations, believing that they could leave DP and begin a university degree immediately. Often this was not the case, due to various reasons including their English competency not being of the required level, previous qualifications not being recognised, not being eligible for grants, not understanding admissions procedures and having missed deadlines for college applications. Again, this lack of knowledge stemmed from their lack of integration and from their social isolation while living in DP.

Many research participants, including advocates working with those transitioning from DP, seemed very unsure about the system of eligibility for education grants. Some of those who wished to know how to access third level education asked the academics conducting the study how to access particular courses within their universities. The convoluted regulations around educational grants and admissions posed barriers for those trying to integrate into communities and eager to build their skills as a route to employment and a better life. For the most part it was friends, charitable organisations and NGOs that provided opportunities for those in transition and supported them with information, payment of fees and recommendations about learning opportunities.

It was evident that, in accessing education, the particular circumstances of those exiting DP were not taken into account, particularly in relation to financial barriers. One participant who had a degree and wished to pursue a masters, spoke about the Back to Education Allowance (BTEA), explaining that in order to qualify for it for a third level course, he firstly had to be on the Jobseeker's Allowance for nine months. Having spent years in DP, he felt that he now had to waste even more time before he could continue with his education.

*“Like me, if I want to go to study, there’s a big barrier in front of me. If I want to go to second level, study in second level, I have to be in Jobseeker Allowance for 76 days. It means for 76 days you have to be in Jobseeker allowance, they give you Back to Education allowance. For third level, you need to have 286 days. If I want now, today, to apply for a third level, I have to wait another year. Just wasting time. They are all very bad system of barriers.”*

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In relation to families, sometimes the transition out of DP made educational matters more difficult. Supports for children's education and links to schools that were sometimes facilitated in DP are ruptured on transition and it can be challenging for those with fewer language skills and resources to recreate these relationships, without supports.

*“The link to schools is broken when you leave Direct Provision so they have to do everything on their own and many of them don't know how to go about these things.”*

### Employment

For many people, the securing of status meant one very important thing: the right to work. Having spent years living in DP, participants were eager to become self sufficient as quickly as possible:

*“The positive things is I know one day I'm going to get a job. I'll be able to look after the family, be able to sort my bills and stuff. That's what I'm looking towards now, nothing much, just a job and live on... We have to move on. That's the only thing that I see here.”*

A previous report by the Irish Refugee Council, *Counting the Cost* (Conlan, 2014), showed evidence of the many barriers faced by asylum seekers in accessing employment following time in DP. Similarly, for those who participated in this study, accessing employment was very challenging when the transition from DP was made. Only one of those who had made the transition was working: this man was working as a leaflet distributor, having already worked illegally in that role while in DP. Reflecting the findings of *Counting the Cost*, a number of reasons were identified for this, including the fact that people had been out of the workforce for many years resulting in long gaps in their CV, that most had never worked in the Irish context, an inability to speak English well enough, a lack of qualifications, or the fact that qualifications from abroad were not always recognised, as well as there being potential racial discrimination.

The requirement to have previous experience was particularly frustrating for people who had spent

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years in DP wanting to work, but not permitted to do so. One man, keen to get any kind of employment, found that even for the most low-skilled jobs, there was an emphasis on prior experience.

*“I have been looking for a job, but everywhere even for cleaning... can you imagine I apply for cleaning online. They ask me for experience... for kitchen porter – experience. If you say I was an asylum seeker for six years, they reject you.”*

A woman with third level qualifications in social care similarly found that the gaps in her CV, when she was in DP and not allowed to work, were impeding her from getting jobs for which she applied. The feedback she got in relation to being turned down for work was that others had a wider range of experience.

*“I have qualifications, third level qualifications in social care, but since I’ve graduated, it’s two years I’ve not worked. I tried to apply for jobs but like I don’t have experience. These are the answers I got through applications I made. People have more different experience. This is where the trick is.”*

After almost four years in DP, one man found accessing employment an insurmountable problem. He was loathe to make the accusation of racism but was convinced that the training and employment structures favour those who are not black skinned.

*“Job issue in Ireland is hell, that one is another big challenge, hell. They will always favour their Irish citizens before they think of black people, that one is clear and certain. They will prefer to train an Irish person and give the Irish person the job, rather than accepting a person who got their certificate that will offer the person a job. October will make me four years into the country, I have never worked. It’s not that I don’t have the experience or I don’t have the certificate, I got the certificate. I’ve given so so many CVs out, so many Cvs outside, I have not attended even two interviews. I don’t know I can say it’s something like racist, I cannot say it’s racist, but the issue of getting a job in this country is one of the greatest challenges I face and even after leaving the hostel.”*

This man had become disillusioned about the prospect of finding work, and was now considering



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emigration, like many Irish people who have sought work outside the country.

In the absence of employment opportunities, several people spoke of having worked voluntarily – both while in DP and since leaving it – as a way of making connections and preserving their mental health. There is some evidence in the data also, of people pursuing opportunities for self-employment through starting their own business. One woman who had left DP described how she had her own business, a bakery, prior to coming to Ireland. She was finding the on-going dependency and inactivity difficult, following the transition into the community. She had tried voluntary work but as a lone parent, she found the lack of childcare in Ireland a barrier to her entering the workplace.

*“Before I came here I was working...I had my own business. I always be on my own, and to come here on that, you know dependent on somebody else is not easy for me. I’m feeling nothing, I want to survive myself. I was running a bakery, you know, with like a take-away.”*

Reflecting the concerns that many Irish people have, another woman feared that setting up her own business might lead to hardship if things did not work out as she might be no longer eligible for social protection and medical cover.

*“You really need a medical card, because every appointment you have you pay €50. What if you start a business and things are not working the way you envision it? That’s my problem. I’m better off working. I’m using my hobby, what I know how to do best, as my second part-time job.”*

People gave much evidence of their willingness and enthusiasm for work, but in an employment market showing only tentative signs of recovery work was still in short supply. In addition to job scarcity, those with unrecognised professional skills and possible language difficulties find it hard to compete. The time in DP could have been spent on developing an increased awareness of Irish and European culture, on developing language proficiency and other social and employment skills but opportunities for doing so were often not available or at best, were very limited. Instead, people lost confidence, their skills became less current and alongside their lack of familiarity with the Irish workplace, they became

increasingly disadvantaged.

There is evidence that NGOs and local education providers make some provision for refugees and asylum seekers to participate in courses and assisted with job seeking, but this is ad hoc and by no means designed to meet the specific and varied needs of those recently granted status and leave to remain in Ireland. In 2015, the Irish Refugee Council partnered with the National Learning Network in running a pilot project which provided tailored support to 20 asylum seekers who had received papers and were trying to access employment. The evaluation of the project showed evidence of the benefits of such a scheme (IRC, 2016). All this highlights the need for specialised education, and for preparation for employment programmes to be customised for those who are new to Ireland and generally cannot be expected to compete for jobs without additional, targeted supports. This needs to be another element in an holistic resettlement system.

### Family Reunification and Supporting Family Members at Home

For many of those who received refugee status, family reunification was a key priority. Some of those with refugee status had already applied for family reunification but this is not an option for those with leave to remain, unless they are working and earning at least €30,000 per annum. A mother of three who had spent over three years in DP, had wasted no time in trying to get her children to come and join her.

*“Yeah, I’ve already applied for them for family reunification. In the [Department of] Justice I’ve sent for them their passport, birth certificate and everything so I’m waiting for them to answer me back.”*

Some families had been separated for so long that children were uncertain about coming to Ireland to join their parent, who had been gone for many long years. Maintaining contact while in DP was costly and relationships inevitably suffered. One woman with four children in her country of origin had been waiting in DP for over eleven years, during which time her relationship with her children had become

## 4 Transitioning into the Local Community

complicated and inevitably more distant. This highlights the irreparable damage to relationships done by the protracted nature of the asylum determination system and lengthy stays in DP.

*“Yeah, I’m going to try this reunification... family reunification, but then there is a problem. They are not interested in coming. They’re interested in seeing their mother more than coming. That is where the trick is. We have to talk and see. We have to talk and talk and talk.”*

What was clear was that for many for whom reunification was a possibility, this was their priority. All other plans and dreams were dependent on being reunited with family members.

*“But my plan is just when I will see my family and I will see what to do in future.”*

*“I am just expecting to see my family again soon and living happily, having a good environment, a house.”*

A man who had separated from his wife while in DP, urgently wanted to sort out the emotional and affective aspects of his life, before looking at economic and material stability.

*“The first thing I need would be family. I can’t stay alone like this. Look elsewhere and find who else will love you for the rest of your life? Your wife. And then get my son to see me, maybe he could come over for the weekend. And I want to get a good job for myself. Not any job. I want a good job. And do something for the community.”*

Many participants continued to struggle with knowing how to navigate the family reunification system and there were related issues with language barriers and interpretation services. Little information was available about how to go about this or how long the process was likely to take, although this clearly impacted on their overall sense of wellbeing and immediate and long term housing needs. Some stakeholders fear that lack of information leaves applicants open to exploitation by those who would claim to be able to satisfy hopes for family reunification.

*“The problem is that lawyers are exploiting people in family reunification. I told people that you don’t need to have a lawyer. Your case will go forward anyway. Whether you are successful or not, it’s all down to the Department of Justice, not down to a lawyer.”*

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Once again those seeking protection need to be able to negotiate a complex bureaucratic system, where there is a lot of paperwork and a general lack of clarity about timescales and other aspects of the process. Things are further complicated by the need to provide documentation, some of which requires contact with countries and regimes from which people have escaped because of risk to their lives.

In addition, participants spoke about their desire to support family members who were in their countries of origin. While doing so during their time in DP might not have been possible, supporting family became somewhat more feasible following transition. One young person who had recently been granted refugee status stated:

*“My brothers, they’re in school so of course in [country of origin] the situation is very hard. There’s no job. There’s nothing. The country every day is going down. For them they need my help. I have to help them. They don’t put pressure on me. I feel what they’re going through.... I understand them that’s why I have to help them sometimes. Whatever I got I have to help them.”*

Attempting to support family at home resulted in even more financial pressure for people making the transition from DP.

## Conclusions

For the most part, people moving out of DP and beginning the process of integration voice modest hopes for the future. Alongside the immediate challenges of transition from DP into the community, people’s hopes were related to reunification of family members and stability in terms of education and work. For a few, there is a tentative dream of travelling a little and owning a home but for the most part, people desire security, stability and a less stressful life. Those who had already made the transition appreciated simple but significant differences between their old and new life.

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Participants again faced multiple challenges. While many longed for the normality and satisfaction that education would bring, they were again confronted with rules and regulations that made some courses inaccessible to them. Work remained purely an aspiration for almost everyone interviewed in the research, with many finding that their time in DP had left a legacy that made obtaining employment very challenging.

In addition, there was evidence that financial management was a challenge for people and that it was also difficult to organise family reunification, something that was a priority for many. While people were glad to have moved on from DP, many missed the companionship that was instantly available within DP centres.

Overall, the evidence in the data pointed time and again to the need for a comprehensive resettlement system for individuals and families that would encompass information and advice, financial supports and practical and psychosocial support. The next chapter will outline what is needed in more detail.

# 5

## Recommendations

### Summary

This research and a number of national and international studies have shown that time spent in Direct Provision (DP) does not contribute positively to transition and integration (Arnold, 2012; Conlan, 2014; Fazel et al., 2005; Health Service Executive, 2008; McMahon et al., 2007; Szczepanikova, 2013). On the contrary, people report becoming progressively disempowered and depressed, as their search for safety and protection takes away their autonomy and leaves them without opportunity for work, learning or adequate respect and privacy. Those waiting for long periods in DP for a definitive response to their application are shown to be at risk on various fronts. The loss of autonomy experienced in DP can result in negative implications for self esteem and mental health, both of which impact detrimentally on the transition process. The denial of the right to work and limited access to education means that people are ill-prepared for the transition from DP to community life. The impact of long periods spent in DP on children is also a cause for concern, both while they are in the DP system and throughout the integration process. Much time spent in DP is currently wasted and all the skills and richness of asylum seekers are left unrecognised.

The data in relation to moving from DP centres into communities gave a stark account of the challenges faced, virtually unsupported, by those granted 'protection' by the Irish State. The paucity of resettlement infrastructure was clear in people's lack of information about the steps to be taken to best avail of their newly awarded status. Individual DP managers and community support groups tried to fill these gaps in the state systems without adequate resources. As mentioned previously, this meant, in practice, that while some had information and guidance, others were left 'in the desert' without direction. Following the negative impact of life in DP hostels, came evidence of the daunting experiences of accessing social welfare and finding affordable rental accommodation in a time of extreme shortage. Consequently, many respondents were still living in DP centres several months after receiving status or leave to remain in Ireland. Rather than grasp their long awaited freedom, they were unable to find a way through the maze of bureaucracy and financial demands that would allow them to transition. For many it was necessary to get into debt in order to make the transition. Prevented by the DP system from forging social networks

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or acquiring the necessary cultural knowledge, people were largely dependent on other asylum seekers for support. The search for employment and access to education brought yet a further series of challenging hurdles. In addition, those who wished to pursue their entitlement to family reunification, found difficulties with accessing accurate information and advice.

Overall, the process of transition and integration emerged in the data as muddled and unsupported at a systemic level. Those who had made some progress, frequently attributed this to the kindness of individuals, community groups and DP staff. These were people who went beyond their remit to provide information and guidance that should have been automatically triggered by the award of status.

### Recommendations

The overwhelming evidence from the literature, stakeholders and those living and transitioning from the DP system is that DP should end and be replaced with a humane and supportive service for those seeking protection in Ireland. Nonetheless, given the remit and recommendations of the McMahon report (2015), it seems likely that DP will remain in place, at least in the short term. While the recommendations here relate to transition from DP into the wider community, many of them would also be of relevance even if a different system of support and accommodation for asylum seekers existed.

The list of recommendations below draws on the literature, the data in general as well as specific suggestions from participants. While some of the recommendations echo those that have been made about DP for over 15 years, the main focus of the recommendations is on factors that impact on the transition process. As such, the recommendations are aimed at facilitating transitions from DP centres and easing the process of integration of refugees and asylum seekers into Irish communities. Where possible, research participants' words or those of stakeholders are used to ground the various suggestions. The recommendations are presented under two main headings: namely *'preparation and support prior to transition'* and *'transitioning and settling into communities'*.

## Preparation and Support Prior to Transition

### The Direct Provision System

- **All those living in the Direct Provision system, should have access to supported self-catering facilities.** Currently the loss of autonomy experienced by those in Direct Provision centres is detrimental to the welfare of an already vulnerable group. There is evidence that the negative impact of this loss of autonomy extends beyond Direct Provision centres, into the transition and integration processes.
- **Delays in the asylum process must be reduced as a matter of urgency.** This is particularly important given the evidence of the harm caused by protracted waiting periods, both while in Direct Provision centres and subsequently, while trying to transition and integrate.

*“Waiting is the same as not knowing what’s going to happen tomorrow. It’s very hard. It’s very painful.”*

- **Payments for adults and children living in Direct Provision centres should be increased to a level sufficient to allow residents to meet their own living needs, including catering for themselves.** The poverty experienced by people in the Direct Provision system hinders the ability to integrate, both while in Direct Provision centres and when one leaves the system. The transition is made particularly difficult because of the fact that those leaving Direct Provision generally have no financial resources to use while seeking accommodation and attempting to restart their lives.

### Integration and Support:

- **While living in Direct Provision centres, cultural integration should be supported by designated, well-resourced organisations with local knowledge**



**and an understanding of the complexities of interculturalism.** Mutually beneficial opportunities for community integration should be facilitated while the applications for refugee status, subsidiary protection and leave to remain are being considered. Time spent in the Direct Provision system should allow people to be meaningfully occupied according to their capacities, from the outset, and opportunities for learning about Irish culture and communities should be available. The unknown outcome of an application for protection does not require the lives of asylum seekers to be placed on hold. Integration does not just require asylum seekers to learn and adapt to new and unfamiliar circumstances. It also suggests reciprocal learning and adaptation on behalf of those responsible for developing and implementing the social structures and for those that live within them.

*“[There needs to be]...more integration while people are in hostels. There’s very, very little integration. Most hostels are outside of towns or outside of communities. There’s no interaction and so if people start integrating from the start...it would make the transition easier and make their life in Direct Provision a lot easier.”*

*“[We need to know]... how to connect to the other people outside. I think it’s bigger, because when you go out without knowing really people outside, what are you going to face? How are you going to find all those things?”*

- **The number of primary care social workers providing a service to Direct Provision centres should be increased.** These professionals can provide practical and emotional support to individuals and families and can develop essential links between the Direct Provision centre and the local community, thus facilitating integration and easing the transition process. There is currently only one primary care social worker nationally with this brief, located in Baleskin reception centre.

## Education and Work

- **Asylum seekers should be allowed to study and to work.** The right to work and to study should be granted to those seeking protection, within a reasonable amount of time, so that they are socially integrated and better prepared for life, irrespective of the outcome of their application. The majority of countries within the EU allow asylum seekers to work, after six months in the system.

*“First thing is to let everyone in Direct Provision go to school, college, third level education. Whereby what they are doing, at least by the time they’re finished, they can work. Then moving out they can go straight to job. Or they should allow them, those who can work. To work and make a programme rather than just giving to them. Let them work.”*

- **While awaiting the right to work, asylum seekers should be facilitated to participate in targeted volunteering and internship schemes that would allow them to maintain and develop their skills.** This would ultimately facilitate their entry into the labour force, their transition from Direct Provision centres and their integration into Irish society.

## Transitioning and Settling into Communities

### Provision of Information

- **Upon receipt of status, people should be provided with clear written information on what is needed to make the transition out of the Direct Provision system.** Further verbal information, through a designated person, should also be available. The information should include information on registering with GNIB, housing options, the social welfare system and rent supplement. In addition, information should be provided about local organisations that can provide support and advice. Since this research was conducted, the Department of Justice produced a valuable information booklet, in English, for those getting refugee status, subsidiary protection or leave to remain. However, it needs to be printed in several languages, and backed up with access to individual personal support, advice and advocacy.

*“I think you should let some people know, give them direct support, whereby you let them know what to do, the next steps to do, because some people, they just got their papers and they don’t know how to move on. It’s tough. Whereby you’re looking for a house I think government should be able to assist in that way. Provide houses for people since the landlord don’t want rent supplements.”*

### Seeking Accommodation

- **Once granted refugee status, subsidiary protection or leave to remain, people should be provided with a realistic timeframe of at least three months for exiting Direct Provision hostels, especially given the current housing shortage.**
- **Ensure acceptance of the Direct Provision hostel as an address, for those with refugee status, subsidiary protection or leave to remain, so that they can obtain social welfare payments and rent supplement and so that they can open bank accounts.**

*“If they give you address and then everything is coming one after one.”*

- **The Reception and Integration Agency (RIA) should provide a standard reference to those exiting Direct Provision, in order to help them obtain rental accommodation.** In instances where RIA is not willing to provide a reference, written reasons for this should be given and an appeal mechanism should be put in place.
- **Ensure that Rent Supplement is paid in a timely manner.**

### Access to Financial Support

- **As soon as people receive their papers, they should be entitled to normal social welfare allowances instead of the Direct Provision payment.** This should apply to everyone and should not depend on the discretion of different Department of Social Protection personnel. Providing everyone with this payment immediately would help to poverty-proof the transition period and would allow those transitioning to save money while looking for accommodation.

*“Not everyone has friends. Not everyone has opportunity.  
Not everyone can borrow money.”*

- **Staff of the Department of Social Protection should be provided with training so that they are sensitive to the needs and experiences of those transitioning from Direct Provision Centres.** In the meantime, designated officers should be appointed in local Department of Social Protection offices, to help people to navigate the system and to ensure that people are fully aware of their entitlements.

*“Even if you can put in the Social, somebody to talk to and direct,  
to tell you and advise you. You have to work. You have to do this.  
You have to do that. You understand. Not to leave people like in  
the desert and you don’t know what direction to take. And the  
person you meet, the first one just bring you down again.”*

- **A resettlement grant should be provided.** It should be large enough to pay for a rental deposit, first month's rent and household essentials such as bedding and kitchen utensils. Overall, every effort needs to be made to ensure that the process of transitioning out of Direct Provision hostels is poverty-proofed, especially considering that people involved have lived in poverty for many years while in the Direct Provision system.

*“[They need to give]... financial support to help you move out, quick as possible, to go to settle down. Then you try to plan your future, what you are going to do next. You go to school or you look for a job between the studies.”*

## Resettlement Support

- **An interdepartmental resettlement office should be established to provide both programme refugees and those exiting Direct Provision centres with the necessary supports to ease the challenges of transition and integration.** While resettlement officers from the Office for the Promotion of Migrant Integration (OPMI) currently support programme refugees who arrive in Ireland, this support does not extend to those exiting Direct Provision centres. As is currently the case with the OPMI, an interdepartmental resettlement office would be responsible for the implementation of all aspects of a carefully conceived resettlement process, from arrival in Ireland to full integration and family reunification. It should work in close collaboration with civil society, including NGOs and local communities. Particularly intensive support should be provided in the six month period after status is achieved, during the initial three months when the individual may still be in the hostel, and for three months after leaving. Longer term support may be needed by some, particularly those who have experienced trauma or mental health problems.

*“I think that the government should put in place a scheme or a programme that will help the people in the hostel because if there is something that will link them to the services, how to take care*

*immediately of people who are going out of the hostel, of those situations, would be something nice, though it's not easy. ...The situation is that sometimes it is not easy for us who just go like that out and sometimes you will have depression from the hostel that you have to leave."*

- **In the absence of the availability of a government resettlement team, funding should be provided so that organisations can employ resettlement workers or keyworkers to provide outreach, advocacy and support to assist people through this transition period.** In the study, it was found that some community organisations have actively started reaching out to those over five years in Direct Provision hostels, on the understanding that they will shortly be given their papers (in line with the McMahon report recommendations). They worked with people to try to ensure that their future integration needs might be purposively anticipated and supported. However they were not funded to do this and it is putting a strain on scarce resources.
- **Outreach workers or key workers, whether state employed or working for NGOs, should endeavour to be proactive in offering support to individuals in Direct Provision who may be unlikely to seek out services by themselves, due to reasons of vulnerability, ill health, lack of confidence or lack of motivation.** At the same time, workers must of course, respect the fact that some people may not want or need any support with the transition process.
- **Service providers need to be aware that for some people, the process of recovery from trauma or from mental health difficulties may only begin when they leave DP and a safe place has been reached. Therefore, ongoing support may be needed when the transition has been made.** This reflects ongoing research by SPIRASI and highlights the need for counselling to be available and for continuity in counselling relationships.

## Education and Training

- **Customised educational and preparation for employment programmes need to be available to people leaving Direct Provision.** Opportunities for upskilling and for internships for those coming out of long periods in Direct Provision centres should be explored. The Irish Refugee Council's collaboration with the National Learning Network is a good example of a scheme that has been deemed successful and that helped people on their journey towards employment and integration, following Direct Provision.
- **Time spent in Direct Provision centres should always count in relation to residency requirements for access to third level education grants.** Time spent in Direct Provision should also count when applying for citizenship.
- **People exiting Direct Provision should have immediate access to the Back to Education Allowance.** The criteria for eligibility for Back to Education Grants needs to be altered to ensure this.

## Family Reunification

- **People exiting Direct Provision should be provided with clear guidance and assistance in relation to the family reunification process. Family reunifications should be completed in a timely manner. Reunified families should be offered psychosocial support to help rebuild relationships, if necessary.**

## Identification

- **People need assistance in acquiring acceptable forms of identification, so that they can do practical things like open a bank account or acquire a driving license.**

### Different Needs of those Granted Leave to Remain

- **The different challenges facing those granted *Leave to Remain* need to be recognized and considered**, for example, the fact that they have to pay €300 each time they renew their GNIB card and the fact that they do not have an automatic right to family reunification.

### Further Research

- **More research needs to be carried out into the longer term experiences of the resettlement process and the statutory and community supports that are needed to ensure real and lasting integration.**



## Final Words

The fact that transitions are complex moments in the life trajectory is widely acknowledged, be they moves from primary to secondary school, from work to retirement, or from independent living to living in care. Civil servants preparing for retirement are entitled to fully resourced courses to enable them to transition from work to retirement. Prisoners being discharged from Irish prisons have access to ‘resettlement services’ and support for ‘reintegration’.<sup>10</sup> Those who have been granted refugee status, subsidiary protection or leave to remain in Ireland are faced with transition and integration challenges of a substantial nature. Many of those transitioning have spent long years in Direct Provision centres, living on extremely limited financial means, in a system where they cannot work or pursue higher education and training. Consequently, they do not have access to the financial or cultural resources that enable easy integration into local communities. Nevertheless, there is no systematic, supported process of resettlement and transition for these individuals. Provision of refugee status, subsidiary protection or leave to remain are just the beginning of a process that should activate a carefully considered and well resourced programme of transition and integration, such as that already available to ‘programme refugees’. Those who have been accepted as having the right to remain and make their lives in Ireland urgently require clear, comprehensive and accessible supports, in order to ensure that they can fully integrate into Irish society. In sum, these words from the Department of Justice, Equality and Law Reform document, *Integration: A two way process*, still apply: “Afforded the appropriate support and opportunities, refugees will be enabled to demonstrate their talent, skills, enthusiasm and culture and contribute to the social fabric of Ireland.” (Interdepartmental Working Group on the Integration of Refugees in Ireland, 2002:42).

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<sup>10</sup> <http://www.irishprisons.ie/index.php/services-for-prisoners/reintegration>

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