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Transitioning 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

Submission to the Taskforce on Transitional Supports for Persons Granted Status in 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"
(Male participant who spent 7 years in a Direct Provision hostel)

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Introduction

This submission is based on the preliminary findings of research that is funded by the Irish Research Council under its New Foundations – Engaging Civil Society strand. The research was conducted in partnership with the Irish Refugee Council. A research team of academics and asylum seekers conducted interviews with ex-asylum seekers who have been granted refugee status, subsidiary protection or ‘leave to remain’, as well as with relevant stakeholders. A total of 22 individuals who had experience of living in Direct Provision (DP) hostel(s) were interviewed. Fourteen had already made the transition and eight were in the process of trying to move out. To date, five stakeholder interviews have taken place.

Summary of Key Findings

Participants spoke of a great sense of relief, joy and freedom when they received a letter indicating that their claim for asylum, subsidiary protection or leave to remain had been granted. However, for most these feelings were shortlived as they struggled to make the transition out of the DP hostel in which they were living. Below are the key themes that emerged:

(1) Provision of Information

Other than being instructed to register with the Garda National Immigration Bureau (GNIB), none of those interviewed were given verbal or written information at any stage by the Department of Justice & Equality or by the Reception and Integration Agency (RIA) telling them what to do regarding the transition process. For example, no guidance was provided as to how to apply for social welfare payments or housing. The process of registering with GNIB seemed to run smoothly for the majority of those interviewed and participants reported that they were treated courteously by the Gardaí concerned, and usually their GNIB card arrived within the two weeks promised.

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 support organisations they were already linked in with, or from the local Citizens Information Centre. These methods of getting information proved problematic for individuals who were not well networked, especially those who are experiencing

mental health problems or who have not been in the country for long. Some acted on misinformation.

(2) Proof of Address

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. They were not informed that they could get a reduced rate of Jobseeker's allowance while in the hostel.

"I went to social welfare first. They gave me an interview for job-seekers. 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 rent while receiving €19.10 per week. Landlords generally required a deposit and at least one month's rent in advance.

There is also the issue of setting up bank accounts and accessing other services that need proof of identity and address.

(3) Finding Rental Accommodation

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.

"That's the thing, it's a surprise, there's no structure to inform you what you are supposed to do. 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."

Those who had a good relationship with their DP hostel manager were reassured that they could take their time to find suitable accommodation. Others felt under huge pressure to leave.

"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"

Sometimes people within the same hostel had different experiences in this regard, indicating that DP hostel managers adopted different approaches to some individuals. In several cases participants got more support from ancillary workers like security guards or chefs than from the managing staff.

Participants reported that they faced numerous challenges in attempting to find accommodation and therefore could not move out of the DP hostel quickly. The first challenge is raising enough money for a deposit and a month's rent in advance

"A deposit, that was a big problem. It takes too much time. Maybe two month, three months, waiting in [DP] accommodation."

"And [social welfare] ask me to bring agreement with the landlord; now the landlord refused to take allowance. I told [social welfare] I don't have deposit but for them to give you deposit you have to bring agreement. How can I bring agreement [from landlord] when I don't have the deposit?"

Participants were not provided with information about Exceptional Needs Payments for rent deposits. Those with a social support network often borrow from friends (often people who have made the transition before them); others go to lending agencies such as Providence (one cited a €120 charge for a €400 loan).

The second challenge was that landlords often would not accept rent supplement and instead preferred tenants who were working:

"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."

A third 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 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 job-seeker 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.

Finally, giving the current housing crisis accommodation was often in short supply and so the challenges facing those exiting direct provision meant that competing with others in the rental market was 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 eighty people in small rooms, they're waiting to see the place."

(4) Difficulties with Rent Supplement and other Social Welfare Payments

Delays in receiving Rent Supplement were common. Of those interviewed who had managed to move into private rented accommodation, several were still waiting for their rent supplement over four months later. Many of the participants were paying €100 euro a week out of their €188 euro job seekers' 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 per week, was paying €93 for rent and electricity, which left him with €7 a week for food and other essentials – less than he had been getting in the DP system where he was provided with all his food. Without the support of food vouchers from the Society of Saint Vincent de Paul, or the kindness of friends, he would be going hungry. In addition, 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.

Also, most participants did not have household items given that they had lived in DP hostels on €19.10 per week since arriving in Ireland. Purchasing these items resulted in further financial pressure. 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, with some already having been in debt.

(5) Transitioning into the Local Community

Despite all these obvious difficulties, some of the more resilient people still managed to make this transition, although the lack of available accommodation was still problematic for many. Some people got assistance from friends, churches or mosques, or local organisations like the Integration Support Unit in the Edmund Rice Centre in Waterford, Doras Luimní in Limerick, the Irish Refugee Council or Crosscare Refugee Service in Dublin, Dóchas for Women in Monaghan, or NASC in Cork. The main additional challenge faced after transition was integration into the community, to make friends and to feel at home. 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.

“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.”

According to stakeholders those with a traumatic history, and a history of mental illness, who are more likely to be socially isolated and not linked in with support organisations, remain where they are, without the necessary knowledge and support to begin to navigate the system. Such individuals require intensive support in making the transition.

(6) Family Reunification

For many of those who received refugee status family reunification was a key priority. 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 immediate and long term housing needs. Many participants continue to struggle with knowing how to navigate the family reunification system.

“I don't know. I waited ... a year. 2 years? I don't know.”

(7) Education and Employment

It was of note that the majority of participants were keen to go on to third level education or to get a job as soon as possible, and to contribute to Irish society. Some spoke about not wanting to waste any more their life. They viewed their time in the DP system as lost years. While they hoped to get into college or to get a job without delay,

this often proved difficult. The vast majority of the participants were still looking for work and many struggled to find appropriate education. The many years they had spent not working or not in education while in the DP system acted as a barrier to securing jobs or education when they made the transition. 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. Some had done every FETAC level course possible during their time in a DP hostel. This was the case for one participant who spoke about living in a DP hostel for 8 years:

“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 T.V. Come for your lunch. 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 participants seemed very unsure about how to access third level education. It was notable that the academics conducting the study were sometimes asked questions about how to access particular courses within their universities.

Recommendations to Facilitate Transitions from Direct Provision Hostels

The list of recommendations below draws on the data in general as well as specific suggestions from participants:

1. Treat all those transitioning from direct provision in a similar way to 'Programme Refugees', which would ensure a smooth passage through the housing and social welfare system with the support of resettlement officers.
2. Provide clear written and verbal information through a designated person on what is needed to make the transition out of the DP system, including

information on registering with GNIB, housing options, social welfare system, rent supplement, and organisations in their area that can support them, and where they can get further advice.

3. Provide a resettlement grant large enough to pay rent deposit, first month's rent, and household essentials. Overall, every effort needs to be made to ensure that the process of transitioning out of DP hostels is 'poverty proofed' especially considering that people involved have lived in poverty for many years while in the DP system.
4. Appoint designated officers in local Department of Social Protection offices who can help people through its system and who can ensure that they are fully aware of their entitlements.
5. Ensure acceptance of the DP hostel as an address for those with refugee status, subsidiary protection or 'leave to remain', so that they can get social welfare allowances and open bank accounts. This could enable people to start saving some small amount of money while attempting to make the transition.
6. Provide people with a realistic timeframe for exiting DP hostels, especially given the current housing shortage.
7. Provide funding so that organisations can employ resettlement workers to provide outreach, advocacy and support to assist people through this transition. Some organisations have actively started reaching out to those over five years in DP hostels on the understanding that they will shortly be given asylum. However they are not funded to do this and it was putting a strain on existing resources.
8. Provide advice and information to people regarding education and employment options or ensure that they are aware of where to get this advice.
9. Increase the number of primary care social workers providing a service to direct provision centres. These professionals can work with individuals and develop

essential links between the DP centre and the local community. There is currently only one social worker with this brief (location in Baleskin reception centre).

10. 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.

11. The different challenges facing those granted Leave to Remain needs to be recognized and considered – e.g. they have to renew their GNIB card at a cost of 300 euro each time; they do not have an automatic right to family reunification.

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The views expressed are those of the authors.