

Statement to Oireachtas Joint Committee on Public Petitions

8th July 2021

John Lannon, CEO

We thank the Committee for the invitation to discuss issues relating to Direct Provision.

Doras is an independent NGO that works to promote and protect the rights of protection applicants and migrants through direct support and advocacy. Our work covers immigration, international protection, refugee resettlement, anti-trafficking, integration and anti-racism. We support over 1,200 people a year through our Advice & Information centre in Limerick. The majority are in the international protection system or from a refugee background.

We've welcomed the Government's White Paper on ending Direct Provision. As the Committee members will know, it outlines a two-phase system with people spending up to four months in a reception centre before moving to own-door or own-room accommodation in the community. We welcome the limit on stays in reception centres, the emphasis on early integration supports, and the focus on the needs of children, families, and people with particular vulnerabilities.

The White Paper recognises the importance of fair and fast international protection procedures. This puts the onus on the Department of Justice to ensure adequate steps are taken to reduce the time spent in the asylum process.

For the White Paper implementation to be workable there also needs to be a clear plan to deal with the large existing backlog in Protection cases. There are close to 7,000 people in Direct Provision (including Emergency Accommodation) at present. We call for leave to remain to be granted to anyone who has been in the system for two years or more, as recommended in the Day report.

We're also very aware of how widespread the violations of human rights are right now in Direct Provision. The length of time spent waiting for an IPO decision is unacceptable, but so are the conditions in many centres today.

Less than two years ago we published a report highlighting the appalling conditions in Mount Trenchard Direct Provision Centre. That was closed in early 2020 but some or all the issues we raised still apply to centres around Ireland.

Independent monitoring of all centres is long overdue. In October, the Department announced that HIQA would do this but it hasn't happened to date. The Minister has said agreement has been reached with them in principle but HIQA is still not expected to undertake its monitoring role until the end of this year. The likely need for legislative change to put this in place hasn't been addressed which is worrying.

As was highlighted in the recent Ombudsman for Children's report, Direct Provision is particularly unsuitable and unsafe for children and families. The same is true for victims of trafficking and other forms of domestic, sexual and gender-based violence.

Another major area of concern is mental health. Protection applicants are up to fifteen times more likely

to be diagnosed with depression, anxiety or post-traumatic stress disorder than the majority of the population. Experiences of forced migration include trauma, torture, war and conflict, and human trafficking, and the impact of these are worsened by living in Direct Provision. The affects have been particularly acute during the Covid-19 pandemic.

We produced a report on this towards the end of last year; some key issues highlighted are

- congregated accommodation, and single adults having to share bedrooms with others is a cause of conflict, fear and distress. This coupled with the length of time spent in the system exacerbates pre-existing mental health conditions.
- substance misuse and addiction is a reality for many people in Direct Provision. This is linked to social exclusion; long-term unemployment and forced idleness, stressors associated with migration, and traumatic experiences. However, the substance misuse and addiction services available to people in Direct Provision are very inadequate.
- Not having on-site, targeted supports has been a key failure of the Direct Provision system. Staff in centres generally don't have adequate training. Mainstream mental health services are in principle available to people in Direct Provision but in practice there's limited knowledge of how to access them. Access is further diminished by cultural barriers and the lack of multilingual mental health services.

Another area we've looked at recently is access to employment and decent work for protection applicants. Our report, published in March, highlighted a number of key issues that impede their labour market integration. These include the location of Direct Provision centres; language; lack of recognition of skills and qualifications; the coordination of services to address other needs like housing, healthcare and education; employer engagement; and administrative barriers like the work permit and not being able to get a driving license.

This alone highlights how implementing the White Paper is a complex body of work that requires a whole of government approach. But it's got to be done. Direct Provision is an abuse of human rights and has to be ended.

Thank you.

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