

Joint Committee on Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth

Integration & Refugee Issues

I thank the Cathaoirleach and members of the committee for the invitation to contribute today. I am delighted to be here and to be joined by my colleagues Gary Daly and Rohana Perera.

To give a brief introduction to Le Chéile, it is a broad-based cross-sectoral alliance that was set up in 2020 to celebrate diversity, call for social and economic justice in Irish society and challenge the far-right.

The Objectives of Le Chéile are to:

1. Build a national alliance across all sectors of society to stand against the far-right, reject their politics, and send a clear message that far-right and hate movements are not welcome in Ireland.
2. Challenge far-right politics and narratives and debunk far-right myths and misinformation.
3. Challenge the far-right anti-lockdown rhetoric.
4. Stand for diversity, and with groups targeted by the far-right.
5. Call for social solidarity & economic justice – by recognising that the far-right in Ireland is seeking to exploit the understandable distrust of the political establishment and general alienation.

Refugee Integration:

Far right disinformation tactics and strategies use dehumanising language to scapegoat minorities and incite tensions. This poses one of the most serious issues for communities in engaging with refugee integration and for asylum seekers and refugees themselves.

Since 2018, the far-right have been increasingly organised in attempting to build a narrative of racism, homophobia, and transphobia in Ireland.

Two factors have contributed to a vacuum for misinformation to grow and false rumours to spread, sometimes by members of the far right:

1. Political and Economic Conditions:

Figures and groups try to insert themselves, online and offline, into local communities. They exploit locals' concerns to further their own agenda. This has been evident in protests against direct provision centres for years. Oughterard, Rooskey and Killarney. In 2020, the far-right used COVID-19 theories to grow their reach, particularly through the use of social media.

The people who are attending these protests may not be far-right (some are not even racist) but are driven to take part out of fear about the epidemic of violence against women, or rage and despair at the government's failure to take any real action to deal with the housing and homelessness crisis or to properly resource our health service.

2. Government Response:

The Government needs to boldly challenge the disinformation being spread, and address the role that government policy has played. The far right are pushing the narrative that the housing crisis is made worse by asylum seekers taking up accommodation that would otherwise be available for those on the homeless list. It has created a space for far-right claims to 'House the Irish first' and 'Look after our own'. This has added fuel to far-right claims and provided fodder to disinformation strategies. The poor state of public services in Ireland is not the fault of refugees. The government should be building adequate social and affordable housing for those on the homeless list (As of December 2022, 11,632 people) and also building suitable temporary accommodation for asylum seekers while they await the processing of their applications. The government needs to address this. Far-right narratives on housing need to be challenged at every level and not left to the community and voluntary sector, or to anti-racist activists.

To sum up, I reiterate that to plan and invest in the legal and integration needs of all those who come to Ireland seeking sanctuary, we need to address two key issues:

- We need to recognise that the anger and alienation that communities are feeling are being exploited by the far-right and provide fertile breeding ground for targeted disinformation campaigns.
- The refusal or failure to directly challenge far-right disinformation can result in legitimising, or providing oxygen to the arguments of the far-right and shifting the political terrain further to the right.

Go Raibh Maith Agaibh,