

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

*27 June 2023*

*Challenges facing refugee and migrant children in Ireland*

## **Opening Statement for Tomás O’Ruaric, Assistant Secretary**

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### **Introduction**

Cathaoirleach,

I would like to thank you and the members of the Committee for the invitation to attend before you today to discuss the important issue of the challenges facing refugee and migrant children in Ireland.

We are joined today by my colleague from the Department of Education, Senior Inspector Linda Ramsbottom.

### **Enrolments**

The numbers of refugees arriving in Ireland, both from Ukraine and from other countries, is at an all-time high. As of the end of May 2023, 15,589 Ukrainian pupils had been enrolled in primary and post-primary schools across Ireland.

The Department of Education receives a monthly overall figure for the number of children enrolled in schools that are residing in international protection accommodation from the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth. At the end of May 2023, DCEDIY reported that there are 2,855 children enrolled in schools that are living in IPAS settings.

The Department of Education is committed to delivering an education system that is of the highest quality, and where every child and young person feels valued and is actively supported and nurtured to reach their full potential.

Refugee and migrant children in our schools have faced enormous challenges in their lives, and are one of the most vulnerable groups of children in Ireland. I will speak about the supports and strategies that have been developed to support refugee and migrant children in the Irish education system.

### **Migrant Integration Strategy**

The Migrant Integration Strategy published in 2017 sets out the Government's commitment to the promotion of migrant integration as a key part of Ireland's renewal and as an underpinning principle of Irish

society. A key element of the Strategy's vision is for migrants, and particularly their children, to benefit fully from the education system.

Actions relevant to the Department of Education under the Migrant Integration Strategy continue to be progressed and the Department will continue to engage with the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, who have responsibility for the Strategy, to support arriving families.

### **REALT**

Regional Education and Language Teams (REALT) were established to support existing structures in responding to the needs of Ukrainian and International Protection applicant children accessing education. Their primary role is to assist in allocating children to school places and to support schools in meeting the needs of children as they arise.

### **English Language Support**

Children and young people learning English as an Additional Language (EAL) require well-planned support tailored to meet their individual language needs in order to participate fully in school life and to derive maximum benefit from their education.

The Department of Education provides specific English Language support to schools with pupils newly arrived into the country that have English as an additional language. Schools may also apply for further language support through the staffing appeals process. In all, the Department has allocated almost 2,000 posts to schools for EAL purposes.

### **Increased Staffing**

In addition to EAL supports, it is estimated that almost 600 mainstream posts have either been newly allocated or retained in schools due to increased numbers of new Ukrainian arrivals.

### **Special Education Needs Allocations**

In August 2022, due to the rapidly increasing arrival of Ukrainian refugees, additional temporary special education supports were put in place to support schools with large Ukrainian enrolments. Schools where 10 or more Ukrainian pupils are enrolled are provided with additional Special Education Teaching resources and schools with 15 or more Ukrainian pupils are provided with additional Special Needs Assistants. The process implemented has worked very well, and a total of 548 schools received additional temporary SET hours and 329 received

additional temporary SNA supports. The same level of resources are available, under a separate process, to support schools who have enrolled a significant number of International Protection children.

## **DEIS**

The Department provides a wide range of supports to all schools to support the inclusion of all students and address barriers to students achieving their potential.

Supplementing the universal supports available to all schools, the Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools (DEIS) Programme is a key policy initiative of the Department to address concentrated educational disadvantage at school level in a targeted and equitable way across the primary and post-primary sector.

In March last year, Minister Foley announced the single largest expansion of the DEIS programme. This benefited 361 schools. The programme now includes 1,200 schools and supports approximately 240,000 students. This means 1 in 4 of all students are now supported in the programme.

The refined DEIS identification model includes a component to reflect the level of educational disadvantage experienced by students who

reside in International Protection Accommodation Services (IPAS) centres or Emergency Orientation and Reception Centres (EROC).

Identification of schools for inclusion in the DEIS programme allows for a consistent approach in the allocation of resources across Departments to combat the consequences of deprivation.

### **National Action Plan Against Racism**

There is a strong focus on education in the DCEDIY's new National Action Plan against Racism and implementation plan published by the Minister of State for Community Development, Integration and Charities, Joe O'Brien in March of this year.

The Department of Education will continue to progress the actions to strengthen inclusion and anti-racism at all levels of the education system.

### **Wellbeing and Psychological Supports**

Child migrants can face challenges relating to personal, physical and emotional safety. The wellbeing of children is at the core of all that we do in the education system. Supporting wellbeing allows children to feel safe and happy in school and to learn. We are lucky that our schools provide a caring and supportive environment where children can flourish.

### *Guidance counsellors*

Guidance counsellors support refugee and migrant children in post-primary schools in terms of personal and social development, educational development and career development. This could include, for example, information on what stage of the system would be appropriate for children to enter to continue their education in Ireland, information on grants, subject choice and entry requirements to institutions, and career guidance information.

The Strategic National Framework for Lifelong Guidance is under draft and is expected to be published in Autumn 2023. Access, inclusion and universal design are key concepts within this framework.

### *Mental Health Supports*

NEPS continues to gather information on the Ukrainian and other refugee experiences through interaction with their psychologists working in schools, attendance at REALT meetings and keeping up to date with national and international research.

On the basis of the evidence and experience, NEPS has developed a range of supports and resources for refugee and migrant children, including:

- Webinars attended by almost 1,500 teachers which are based on the Hobfoll principles,
- The Psychological First Aid response developed during the COVID-19 pandemic has been translated into Ukrainian and Russian, and more recently Arabic and Turkish.
- The 'Stress Factor' training course aims to support school staff to build resilience for all, including children and young people with additional needs and those affected by trauma and adversity.
- Training for schools on 'Embracing Diversity' will be finalised over the summer and available to schools in the next academic year.
- Teacher practice support sessions where teachers can engage with NEPS on issues arising in regard to newcomer children were offered regionally.
- Wellbeing resources for students from the Ukraine are available on gov.ie, including advice for supporting children with special education needs and supporting children at a time of war.

## **Conclusion**

In conclusion, I want to thank the Committee for the invitation to attend today and to provide an update on the actions being taken by the



Department of Education to support refugee and migrant children to overcome the challenges they face.