

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

Briefing Paper on Integration and  
Refugee Issues

21st February 2023



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

## Briefing Paper on Integration and Refugee Issues

21<sup>st</sup> February 2023

### Introduction to Community Work Ireland

Community Work Ireland welcomes the opportunity to make this submission to the Joint Oireachtas Committee, from our experience in supporting communities to address the challenges being faced by people who have come to Ireland seeking protection, recognition and security.

Established in 1981 as the Community Workers Co-operative, Community Work Ireland (CWI) is a national organisation that promotes and supports community work as a means of addressing poverty, social exclusion and inequality and promoting human rights. We have a membership base of almost 900 community workers and community work organisations working with the most marginalised communities throughout the country.

Since its establishment Community Work Ireland has worked with our members to promote anti-racism, inclusion and interculturalism at international, national and local levels working from the principles, processes and methodologies of community development. Some of this work is listed in Appendix 1.

Over the past year in particular, CWI has been extremely active in responding to the needs of communities as they strive to meet the challenges and opportunities presented by the increased levels of migration into local areas. This work has included training for communities and community workers, playing a strong leadership role in the community sectors response, engaging with politicians, government departments and stakeholder fora, providing direct support to communities and supporting those from Ukraine as well as International Protection applicants in their efforts to have a voice in local and national responses. This work is outlined in more detail in Appendix 1.

This work has provided the state with a clear communications pathway to those responding to the crisis on the ground throughout the country. It has resulted in evidence-based suggestions for improvements to various government departments, in particular DRCD and DCEDIY. The work is being carried out by CWI without any additional support or resources.

Similar to responses from other sectors much of the response is reactive and there is now a need to build the foundations for a more sustainable approach.

## Public Support and Inclusive Communities

The current refugee crisis has been described as unprecedented and the worst since the Second World War, with many thousands seeking refuge in European countries. The vast majority (90%) of those fleeing the war in Ukraine are women and children. The Government has a duty of care to support them through the system and ensure they are protected from further harm.

A poll by the Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission in 2022 found that there is 'robust support for refugees'<sup>1</sup> in Ireland. Public support for the humanitarian role that Ireland plays in supporting people seeking refuge is welcome. It presents many opportunities for community involvement, support and solidarity, and it is important that our political leaders respond accordingly.

As the war in Ukraine continues and potentially escalates, and the numbers of those seeking refuge continue to grow, **without a new approach by the government, communities will struggle to respond.**

## Racism and the rise of Far-Right Activity

If we are reflecting on issues relating to integration and refugees, it is critical that we do not ignore what is becoming an everyday reality.

Over the last six months, a small group of people have been increasingly and actively stoking fear and division in communities across Ireland, exploiting and weaponising valid concerns at the lack of access to public services and unmet needs, and the perceived displacement of services particularly in the area of housing and health. This growing minority are deliberately focusing this unrest on migrant communities, particularly those in direct provision and emergency accommodation. The current energy and cost of living crisis is providing further opportunities for this minority of people to target the most vulnerable. Unprecedented levels of direct racism and violence are emerging and increasing at an alarming rate.

State failure in the delivery of affordable public housing and the impact of the cost of living on those on low incomes has been a particular tool for recruitment into the far right. Minority ethnic communities cannot be scapegoated for a long-standing State problem. Political rhetoric must not feed into this narrative and political leadership is required to address this.

There are also growing concerns in the creation of a two-tiered systems of support and rights for refugees and people seeking asylum. This will have a long-term detrimental impact on people as one group is treated differently to another.

Racism and far-right activity cannot be ignored in the planning of integration strategies. The challenges presented to communities and to those seeking protection and safety here are clear. The potential for community division, the amplification of hate and racist narratives and direct targeting and threats to the safety of asylum seeking and refugee women, men and children as outlined by our colleagues for the Far-Right Observatory, all require an immediate and proactive response.

## Integration

Migration is a reality that is likely to increase over the next number of years, as the economy grows and as wars increase. As a society we need to stop the racialisation of categories of migrants, and

---

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.ihrec.ie/robust-support-continues-for-refugees-says-new-national-survey-on-international-human-rights-day/>

our political leaders need to refrain from references to economic migrants and assumptions that migrant men in particular are coming to Ireland illegitimately and that they pose an automatic threat. Leaders must categorically refute claims that Ireland is less safe because of the arrival of people seeking international protection. There is no evidence to support this. Indeed, the data shows that the majority of violence against women is perpetrated by men known to them.

Creating the conditions for integration is critical and must be based on equality and social inclusion ensuring access to sufficient income, resources and services for all, including to all migrants, while maintaining respect for different cultures and cultural expressions. It is essential that there is vocal political leadership for this.

## **Support for Communities and the Role of Community Work**

It is imperative that communities receive the support that they need to engage with issues of concern to them. This must be supported through a community development approach, which recognizes the reality of local challenges, the dangers of far-right interference, and can work to respond to a range of concerns within and across communities. Communities need to be seen as stakeholders in promoting the integration and inclusion of asylum seekers and refugees and given the necessary tools and resources to do this.

Community workers have a central role to play in this, working with communities to build a sense of belonging, cohesion, and inclusion for everyone in Ireland. Alongside other civil society groups, community workers have played an important role in challenging racism, misinformation and division, including in the context of international protection.

Responding to racist activity means recognising, resourcing and supporting the work of the many groups promoting interculturalism and integration throughout the country. We believe it is important that the government frames the needs of asylum seekers in the context of human rights, promoting progressive narrative and policies for people seeking asylum. The perspective and language used by the government in this area has the potential to either foster a sense of solidarity or further perpetuate racism and discrimination.

Refugees and asylum-seeking communities too, require support to ensure that their collective voices, views and diverse perspectives are heard in the responses that are being developed.

### **What is required now we believe is an approach to:**

1. Develop and build infrastructure to enable a strategic and proactive approach to integration, inclusion and support for refugees and asylum seekers.
2. Equip local communities, community workers, refugees, people seeking asylum, and community leaders to respond effectively including responding to anti migrant protests and those instigated by far-right actors. This approach must facilitate proactive community engagement, preparation and planning in advance of new accommodation being proposed and center communities as key stakeholders.
3. Create the conditions for involvement, inclusion, empowerment and leadership of refugees and asylum seekers.
4. Put in place supports for all seeking international protection whatever their gender while recognising the particular supports needed for groups including women (who may for example have experienced violence or separation from their children) children (who may for example have experienced violence or separation from their parents), older people and victims of the wars in their country of origin as well as members of minorities and marginalized groups.

5. Develop tools, training and guidance which can be disseminated quickly to assist communities to respond.
6. Share learning with local and national decision makers through existing structures and processes.

The rapid and urgent response required to provide emergency shelter and services to people should not, even at this early stage, overshadow the need to consider a longer-term vision and coordinated strategy to support inclusion, interculturalism, integration and social cohesion.

Community Work Ireland advocates for integration and the empowerment of refugees and people seeking asylum to have a say in the policies and practices that affect them in Irish society. This requires a process of community development and engagement with all affected communities which should be recognised and resourced.

**We therefore call for:**

1. **A funding stream supported jointly by DCEDIY and the Department of Rural and Community Development** that would support a community engagement and community development response to integration and refugee issues, including supporting a response to the issues posed by far-right agitation.
2. Given the urgency of the current situation, **support for a recruitment/secondment scheme for skilled community workers to drive the community engagement and response scheme**, and investing in a central support that will support and network the workers, ensuring their practice is best on best principles. A small consortium of organisations already immersed in community engagement, communications and strategies for countering the Far-Right are willing to collaborate with DCEDIY and DRCD on this initiative.
3. **A programme of training and support for staff** in community organisations, local authorities and public bodies to enable a strategic and proactive approach to reaching communities.
4. **The recruitment of two** FTE community development workers in each local authority to create. Creating an on-the-ground skilled workforce to actively engage and support communities, strengthening social cohesion and promoting integration. Staff can be seconded from and be based in the local community organisations for an initial 6 months.
5. **The publication and resourcing of the National Action Plan Against Racism.** The consultations were completed prior to 2023 and the rise of organised anti-migrant and anti-refugee hate and disinformation. Measures and resources to counter this should be incorporated into the current plan, its implementation and resourcing.

**The above recommendations are also core recommendations of the Ukraine Civil Society Forum of which CWI is a member.**

## Appendix 1

CWI work on anti-racism and integration throughout the organisation's history has included:

- Membership of the government's National Consultative Committee on Racism and Interculturalism (NCCRI)
- Membership of the Irish Network against Racism
- Membership of the Core Group of the Far-Right Observatory
- Participation on the advisory group for the development of the Government's Community Sponsorship Programme
- Establishment of CWI Direct Provision Working Group
- Organisation of community consultations for the forthcoming National Action Plan against Racism
- Consultations with members to inform submissions on e.g. the White Paper on Ending Direct Provision, incitement to hatred legislation and the NAPAR

## Appendix 2

CWI work since Feb 2022

- Organisation of a series of training events for communities, community workers and youth workers on recognising and responding to the far right (next training Jan 23<sup>rd</sup> and Feb 7<sup>th</sup> with 80 Family Resource Centre workers and 26<sup>th</sup> Jan with youth workers in association with NYCI).
- Production of a toolkit on recognising and responding to the far right which has been widely disseminated <https://www.cwi.ie/25471-2/>
- Engaging directly with communities in need of support in tackling far right actors and seeking to build a model of support for integration and inclusion.
- Supporting community groups in funding applications (e.g. for children's mental health support)
- Organisation of training with Parable Communications on "*Words that work – Countering divisive messaging and the spread of hate speech*" (next training Jan 25<sup>th</sup> – 60 people registered)
- Participation on the Core Group of the Far Right Observatory
- Convening the community cluster of the Ukraine Civil Society Forum. The cluster has almost 100 members working with Ukrainian people at community level on a paid and voluntary basis. It includes Ukrainians themselves with representation from every county in the country.
- Playing a lead role in the development of community sector proposals to Government on responding to the Ukraine crisis.
- Attending meetings with the Taoiseach, relevant ministers and civil servants on the Ukraine response.
- Attending and advocating for evidence-based improvements in responses to the Ukraine crisis with DCEDIY at the Ukraine NGO Stakeholder meetings
- Attending regular meetings and advocating for evidence-based improvements in responses to the Ukraine crisis with DRCD.