



An End to Direct Provision?

Peter McVerry SJ, well-known social advocate, writes about the legacy of Direct Provision. Will the government follow through on its commitment to abolish Direct Provision centres?

In Direct Provision centres, whole families, including children and teenagers of opposite genders may have to share one room, and single people often have to share with others who are strangers. They have no privacy. This is a child protection issue that has been criticised frequently. Designed as a short-term measure, while applications for asylum were being processed, the average length of stay is about three years. Many have had to live there for five or more years. They have no cooking facilities, so they depend on whatever meals are provided. Until recently, they had to survive on a paltry weekly payment of €19.10 per adult and €15.60 per child, which has now been increased to €38.80 per adult and €29.80 per child. This enforced poverty makes integration with the local community difficult.

The time spent waiting, the indefinite nature of that wait, the overcrowding, the lack of privacy, the inability to cook or live a normal



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family life, the idleness, the isolation, the difficulty accessing services – all combine to make Direct Provision a difficult and in many cases traumatic experience. People are afraid to complain for fear of reprisals, and many have limited or no English to communicate with management. The system has a particularly negative impact on vulnerable people with special needs as well as children and young people.

Direct Provision centres are degrading, inhumane and illegal. The government has been legally obliged, since July 2018, to carry out an assessment, within thirty days, as to whether an asylum seeker is a vulnerable person with special needs. But, three years later, no vulnerability assessment



Direct Provision Centre located at the old Mosney holiday park, in Gormanston, Co. Meath

process has been established.

The system is based on a premise that many asylum seekers are lying and trying to 'game the system'. This creates insurmountable barriers to accessing the protection many deserve, as it approaches them with suspicion and greets them with a hostile environment, subjecting them to years of destitution. Many experience the system as one that is more concerned with refusing their request for asylum and removing them than ensuring that those in need of protection are given a chance to rebuild their lives.

Asylum seekers are often seen as a burden on our society, but the evidence shows that most of them, when granted leave to remain, make a very

positive contribution. Our treatment of them is a reflection of the value that we place on human dignity and human life, and our willingness to share what we enjoy with those less fortunate than ourselves. As Pope Francis says in *Fratelli Tutti*, 'no-one will openly deny that they [asylum seekers] are human beings, yet in practice, by our decisions and the way we treat them, we can show that we consider them less worthy, less important, less human.'

In the Old Testament, the prophets urged the people of God to welcome 'widows, orphans and strangers'. Widows, because they had no husband to protect them from exploitation, orphans because they had no parents to protect them and strangers because they had no friends to protect them. In the New Testament, Jesus tells us we will be judged by 'I was a stranger and you took me in' (Mt 25).

Fortunately, the government has an ambitious policy to abolish the Direct Provision centres. It seeks to put the asylum seeker at the centre of the process, recognising that many of them have been through deeply traumatic experiences and are suffering post-traumatic stress disorder. It is based on mutual respect and trust. It emphasises early integration into the local community, provides intensive support and focuses on the needs of children, young people and families.

The implementation of this new policy will require considerable political will and constant monitoring. We can all add our small voices to ensure that it actually happens. ♡