

UNHCR's priorities for the next Irish Government



Ireland has long been a welcoming nation, proud of its tradition of offering refuge to those in greatest need. As a country that upholds its international obligations, Ireland continues to provide sanctuary to people fleeing war and persecution.

In recent years, global displacement has risen sharply, and Ireland has also seen an increase in the number of people seeking international protection, driven not only by the war in Ukraine, but also by escalating conflicts and crises around the world.

To meet this demand it is vital that we build an international protection system that not only adequately safeguards the rights of those seeking safety, but also promotes integration, inclusion and support within local communities hosting new arrivals.

Ahead of the formation of a new government here are UNHCR's key priorities for an efficient human rights based international protection system in Ireland.

1. Ensure fair and efficient human rights-based asylum procedures.
2. Implement the [EU Pact on Migration and Asylum](#).
3. Ensure an adequate reception and accommodation system for all asylum seekers in Ireland.
4. Encourage inclusion, integration and support host communities.
5. Combat racism and misinformation.
6. Tackle roots causes of displacement and respond to humanitarian crises.

1 Ensure fair and efficient human rights-based asylum procedures

While staffing at the International Protection Office (IPO) has increased over the past year, the growing number of applications for asylum has outpaced the processing capacity, resulting in a large backlog with 22,548 applications pending as of December 2024. The median processing time for decisions is currently 79.5 weeks. Similarly, figures at the International Protection Appeals Tribunal (IPAT) continue to increase with 9,243 applications pending in December 2024. To reduce these backlogs, it is critical to increase the number of staff dedicated to processing applications and appeals.

UNHCR's welcomes the outgoing Government's commitment to allocate additional resources for the international protection process and calls for its implementation in 2025. A dynamic, well-resourced system can respond efficiently to demands and changing patterns, while avoiding backlogs and bottlenecks. Faster processing times, without compromising the quality of decisions, will boost public confidence in the asylum system and ensure that asylum seekers receive decisions in good time. This in turn will help refugees integrate more quickly enabling them to participate fully and contribute to their local communities. It will equally make it more practical to return those found not to be in need of protection and increase the likelihood that they will return voluntarily.



2 Implement the EU Pact on Migration and Asylum

The EU Pact on Migration and Asylum introduces new rules to create a unified and more effective asylum system across EU member states. In June 2024, the Irish Parliament voted to opt into the EU Pact, marking a significant step towards reform. This will require a comprehensive overhaul of national laws and procedures, with full implementation set for June 2026.

Prioritizing the implementation of the Pact on Migration and Asylum in 2025 will be essential to ensuring that more efficient asylum procedures deliver tangible results as early as possible. When adequately implemented, the Pact will streamline the asylum process, increase efficiency, and establish a more effective returns process for those not in need of international protection. This will create a fairer and more efficient international protection system, strengthening public confidence while upholding the rights and dignity of asylum seekers.

As Ireland develops its National Implementation Plan for the Pact, key areas of investment must be addressed to ensure its success, namely:

- **Border Procedures and Restriction of Movement**

Under the new EU Pact, a mandatory 'border procedure' to access the territory will be introduced for some individuals applying for asylum, designed to accelerate the entire international protection process and leading to faster decisions.

UNHCR advocates that border procedures must be carried out with full legal safeguards and respect for the right to seek asylum, even in emergencies. While under the Pact timebound restriction of movement (detention) of asylum seekers entering the EU may be justified under specific, limited conditions with adequate procedural safeguards, states must first demonstrate that all less restrictive alternatives have been considered. Ireland currently detains asylum seekers in exceptional circumstances only. In designing the new border procedure, it is very important that this remains the case and that alternatives to detention such as humane restrictions on the freedom of movement are prioritised. Alternatives such as regular reporting requirements, assigned residence, or surrendering IDs can be just as effective, cheaper and offer better value for money than detention.

Children should never be detained for asylum or migration related purposes. Vulnerable individuals, including victims of trauma or trafficking, and those with psychosocial and intellectual disabilities must be excluded from these border procedures entirely.

- **Vulnerability identification**

It is crucial to systematically identify individuals with specific needs and vulnerabilities as early as possible in the asylum process to ensure that these can be responded to appropriately and sustainably. This includes unaccompanied and separated children, victims of trauma and persons with physical or mental disabilities. Ireland has never had an effective and comprehensive system of vulnerability assessment in place, with the procedure being suspended entirely from March to November 2024. A new service has now been put in place and there is also good practice that can be built on from the response to refugees from Ukraine, as well as the vulnerability triage process in place since December 2023 to prioritize those most in need of state provided accommodation. Accurately identifying and addressing the needs of vulnerable individuals requires well-trained staff and adequately resourced, specialized services, tailored reception conditions for individuals with specific needs, as well as streamlined processes for vulnerable individuals, from screening and registration to asylum determination.

- **Legal counselling and assistance**

The Legal Aid Board must be adequately resourced to provide free legal support to international protection applicants at every stage of the asylum process. This will

ensure fair and effective access to asylum, while improving the efficiency and compliance in the system. Without proper legal assistance from the start, applicants may struggle to navigate the asylum process, weakening their ability to adequately present their claims. This often leads to longer, more costly delays and increases the likelihood of appeals. Adequate support is especially vital for vulnerable applicants to ensure they are treated fairly, and their claims are processed effectively. UNHCR encourages close collaboration between states, UNHCR and NGOs as these organizations are crucial in providing information about the asylum process, legal counselling and assistance. In designing the new border procedure, it will be very important to ensure that such organisations are facilitated to access applicants freely at these new facilities and that they are sufficiently resourced to enable them to provide such information within the new time-frames.

- **Independent national monitoring mechanism**

Under the Pact, states must establish a new robust and independent monitoring mechanism to ensure compliance with EU and international law, particularly in how new arrivals are processed and the border procedure is carried out. The monitoring process will focus on key areas, including ensuring individuals are informed of their right to seek asylum and are supported in doing so; verifying that de facto detention is conducted lawfully; and ensuring applicants have access to an effective complaints mechanism if they believe their fundamental rights have been violated.

For this system to work effectively, the Irish government must ensure that the monitoring body is truly independent from the authorities it oversees and is adequately resourced to carry out its role.



3 Ensure an adequate reception and accommodation system for all IP applicants

Since December 2023, there has been a backlog in providing accommodation, with more than 3,000 applicants without an offer of accommodation. All IP applicants must be offered adequate state-provided accommodation on arrival which, at a minimum, adequately meets their basic needs.

Currently, tented accommodation sites are being used as means for reception, with more than 500 residents in tented sites. Tented accommodation should be reserved for temporary, emergency use only and be phased out as quickly as possible to ensure dignified living conditions for applicants.

The outgoing Government's Comprehensive Accommodation Strategy (CAS), published in March 2024, offers a much-needed roadmap to address Ireland's current accommodation challenges for international protection applicants. The target of 14,000 state owned permanent beds by 2028 marks a positive step towards improving the quality of accommodation.

UNHCR calls on the incoming government to commit sufficient capital funding to fully implement the accommodation strategy and ensure contingency plans are in place to manage any future fluctuations in arrivals.

To make the Comprehensive Accommodation Strategy a success, UNHCR urges the incoming government to focus on developing a suitable distribution model and increase accommodation capacity through the use of state land for prefabricated and modular units, the construction of new Reception and Integration centres and the purchase of suitable medium and larger properties.

It is important that national standards are upheld, and that commitments outlined in the Strategy and the White Paper on Ending Direct Provision are met. In particular, the reception and accommodation system should:

- Respond to individual needs and streamline processes for vulnerable individuals.
- Provide services that are rooted in human rights and equality.
- Deliver high standards, with independent inspections by the Health Information and Quality Authority (HIQA).
- Encourage integration by offering housing, employment and education services to effectively support people to start to live independently in Ireland.
- Actively promote communities and not-for-profit organisations to support applicants and their families throughout the process.

The White Paper emphasizes that adopting a human rights-based approach must include adequate living allowances to prevent international protection applicants from falling into poverty. It also commits to introducing an International Protection Child Payment, given that international protection (IP) applicants are not eligible for child benefit payments, differently from all other children in Ireland. IP applicants currently receive a means tested weekly allowance of €38.80 for an adult, and €29.80 for child. However, these amounts have remained unchanged since 2019, despite rising inflation and increased living costs of living. Although funding was allocated in both the 2024 and 2025 budgets for this specific purpose, the International Protection Child Payment has yet to be introduced. Consequently, the incoming government should:

- Increase living allowances for IP applicants to reflect inflation and the rising cost of living.
- Introduce the promised International Protection Child Payment, which would help reduce child poverty among applicants.



4 Encourage inclusion, integration and support host communities

Supporting the self-reliance of asylum seekers and refugees is key to fostering successful inclusion and integration into society. By providing education, training opportunities and enabling access to the job market, individuals with valuable skills can be empowered to live independently and contribute to the local economy and to the communities where they live. Recognizing and utilizing the skills and experience of refugees not only helps fill skills shortages, but also strengthens the workforce, benefiting communities, and employers alike.

UNHCR calls for the following:

- Streamline work permit processes and timelines for asylum seekers to enhance access to the labour market and help them contribute to Ireland's economy as soon as possible.
- Develop and resource a comprehensive national integration policy that builds on successful initiatives like the recently appointed Local Authority Integration Teams. These teams play a crucial role in supporting the local integration and inclusion of asylum seekers and refugees across the country.

- Invest in robust data collection on refugees and those granted international protection status in Ireland, ensuring that data is collected in line with data protection laws and privacy rights. Access to accurate, reliable data will empower better policy decisions and targeted resources.



5 Combat racism and misinformation as it seriously harms asylum seekers and refugees

Asylum seekers and refugees, along with other minority groups, are particularly vulnerable to racism and xenophobia, that can take the form of both verbal and physical attacks. UNHCR has been made aware of an alarming rise in these incidents, especially on social media, where vulnerable groups are frequently targeted.

In response, 2024 saw the important launch of the National Action Plan Against Racism, marking a commendable step forward. Key initiatives of the Plan include:

- The appointment of a Special Rapporteur on Racial Equality and Racism.
- The creation of the Ireland Against Racism fund to support anti-racism efforts.

UNHCR urges the incoming Government to ensure the full implementation of the Action Plan as a vital tool in protecting vulnerable communities from hate and intolerance, including but not limited to better protect asylum seekers and refugees. It should be noted that racism and xenophobia do not affect refugees and asylum seekers in isolation, but rather are wider social problems and need to be addressed as such.

Further in October 2024, Coimisiún na Meán (Ireland's Media Regulator) published its Online Safety Code which sets clear rules for video-sharing platforms headquartered in Ireland. The code prohibits the uploading or sharing of harmful content, including incitement to hatred or violence, racism and xenophobia. To make this work effectively, it is essential that the Commission is provided with all necessary resources and support to effectively monitor and enforce these new guidelines.

In 2024, there has been a concerning rise in protests and attacks at sites earmarked as accommodation for asylum seekers and/or refugees. The Protection of Private Residences Bill introduced in the last Dáil proposed introducing restrictions on protests

held close to private residencies, which would include facilities for international protection applicants. In the interest of protecting all peoples' safety, and supporting accommodation solutions, consideration should be given by the incoming government to ensure that refugees and asylum's seekers facilities, wherever these may be located, are adequately protected from any acts of violence.



Tackle roots causes of displacement, respond to humanitarian crises and support solutions

Ireland has a strong track record of responding to humanitarian emergencies and funding development projects in some of the world's most vulnerable regions.

UNHCR calls on the incoming government to build on this legacy by continuing to address the root causes of displacement, strengthen its support for refugees and all forcibly displaced, and support lasting solutions through the following actions:

- Continuing to support and provide funding to UNHCR, other UN Agencies, international NGOs and humanitarian organisations intervening to address the needs of, and find solutions for, forcibly displaced populations and communities hosting them.
- Extend humanitarian and development assistance to countries hosting refugees and along key migration routes.
- Increase official development assistance to meet Ireland's commitment to allocate 0.7% of GNI to development by 2030 with a focus on forcibly displaced populations.
- Honour commitments to resettle 600 refugees to Ireland per year over the period 2024 to 2027 and continue supporting the Irish Refugee Protection Programme.
- Expand opportunities for refugees to come to Ireland by resourcing safe pathways for education and employment.

