



A CONSULTATION REPORT

OUR VOICES, OUR LIVES

Protection, Integration and Ireland's Asylum System



Acknowledgements

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INTRODUCTION

2026 is a year of significant change in Ireland with the transposition of the EU Pact on Migration and Asylum by way of the International Protection Act 2026 and the future publication of the Migration and Integration Strategy. The Refugee Advisory Board brought together a group of individuals with a refugee background to discuss these developments and share challenges and recommendations in the following three areas:

- ➡ **Family Reunification and Citizenship**
- ➡ **Well-being in the International Protection System**
- ➡ **Integration**

The topics for discussion were agreed by the Refugee Advisory Board in advance given their impact for people seeking asylum in Ireland. The views and opinions captured in this report represent those of the participants, with a refugee or asylum seeker background, who took part in this one-day consultation.

Methodology and Approach

On the day of the consultation, Maria Hennessy provided an overview of the changes in the protection system as set out in the International Protection Act 2026. The discussion was divided among the three different themes: family reunification and navigating the protection system, wellbeing and integration. Participants rotated across three different tables to provide their contributions on each theme.

FINDINGS

1.....

Family Reunification and Citizenship

This theme focused on legal pathways and durable solutions. The two topics of family reunification and citizenship were identified as the most pressing issues for participants given the recent changes in the International Protection Act 2026 in relation to family reunification and recent changes on citizenship.

Delays in administrative processing of applications was a common reported theme across both family reunification and citizenship applications. This was particularly challenging for applicants who had submitted all the required documentation but were not provided with reasons as to why their applications were outstanding. Some participants also felt that clear practical information was hard to find surrounding legal options, family reunification, citizenship, and support services. Language was cited as a barrier as most information that was available was in English only. In relation to documentation for both of these types of applications, it was felt that the requirements did not always reflect the realities of forced displacement. Some applicants had left their homes with little warning, while others came from countries where records are unavailable, government administration is no longer functioning and contacting the authorities is not an option for protection reasons.

Family reunification

The new International Protection Act 2026 has introduced new rules for family reunification including a two-year waiting period, strict income threshold conditions and requirements around not being in receipt of social welfare or housing support.

Delays in family reunification worried most of the participants, particularly due to the impact of children's safety, wellbeing, education, and development. Many explained that prolonged periods of separation placed enormous strain on families and, in some cases, can contribute to relationships breaking down over time.

Family separation impacted participants' mental health and wellbeing. A majority stated that the constant worry about loved ones abroad made it difficult to focus on academic studies, work, and building a new life in Ireland. One participant noted that being separated from family for a long time can lead to sense of worthlessness, especially for parents who are without their children. Likewise, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) can be exacerbated if there is prolonged separation from family.

The new income threshold requirements for family reunification introduced by the International Protection Act 2026 were widely seen as a major barrier for families. Participants explained that refugees are often trying to learn English, leave international protection accommodation, find stable employment and support relatives overseas at the same time, making it difficult to meet the required income thresholds. There was also a concern that people would take drastic measures and engage in exploitative work in order to meet the thresholds and not access vital support when needed if they felt it would impact on their chances of being reunited with their family.

“All of these changes under the family reunification rules will be a big barrier to reuniting with family, particularly as a single parent.”

“With only one income coming in it will be difficult to meet these requirements to bring my family here.”

Citizenship

In terms of durable solutions, participants saw citizenship as much more than an administrative status. Citizenship represents belonging, security, and being fully part of Irish society. However, many participants found the current naturalization process lengthy and difficult to navigate. Common concerns included administrative delays, limited communication or updates on progress and at times complex documentation requirements. Some participants said the uncertainty surrounding their application caused a lot of stress and worry.

Rather than the process providing a clear pathway to belonging and security, these uncertainties and barriers left participants feeling helpless and unable to determine whether their case would be resolved which left most feeling “in limbo.”

“*I have been waiting more than four years for a decision on my naturalisation application and when I send an email asking for an update, I get no response which is frustrating.*”

RECOMMENDATIONS TO GOVERNMENT:

- ➔ **The income requirements and restrictions related to social welfare and housing for family reunification should be reviewed.** Greater flexibility is needed for applicants experiencing financial hardship.
- ➔ **Family reunification and citizenship applications** should be processed quickly to enable people to move on with their lives.
- ➔ **There should be a more flexible approach to documents required for citizenship and family reunification applications.** Greater account should be taken of the circumstances of refugees who are unable to obtain official records.
- ➔ **Improved information provisions would be helpful throughout the process.** Regular updates on the processing of applications, including timelines would help reduce uncertainty and consideration could be given to an online tracking system where applicants could check the progress of their application without having to make repeated enquiries by email.

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Wellbeing in the International Protection System

This theme focused on participants’ perception of the international protection system and its impact on their well-being. This was not only with respect to the determination procedures but also people’s experiences in the accommodation system. Some participants discussed their previous experiences whilst others addressed the future changes in the International Protection Act 2026.

A common thread in the discussion was the complexity of international protection determination systems and how difficult it is to navigate legal procedures. Some spoke of not understanding the letters they received from the International Protection Office (IPO). Here language was also a barrier in accessing clear practical information. Illiteracy of applicants was raised as a concern when the process will be much faster with a move to placing all the information on an online portal.

Likewise, there were challenges when corresponding with the determination bodies or their appointed legal representatives, waiting for responses and waiting for long periods without knowing where their international protection application was at, which made the overall process more stressful.

One aspect of the new International Protection Act 2026 which was welcomed was the faster processing times, which hopefully will lead to quicker decisions. It was expressed by some participants that it was important that applicants in the process got the right support in the quicker processes including legal representation. Participants also welcomed having a new independent body, the Chief Inspector of Asylum Border Procedures with oversight over the border procedure. Participants were concerned about some of the new changes including the possibility of detention being used and restriction of movement.

In terms of the broader protection system the following matters were raised by participants as impacting well-being:

- Language barriers where residents in accommodation centres had to rely on other residents to interpret for them, which was difficult for private communication. This was also raised as an issue when accessing local healthcare support.
- The standard of food varies in centres with people with allergies having limited options and people with young children not having enough variety of food.
- The remote location of some centres made people feel further isolated with poor transport links.
- A long time spent in accommodation centres impacted on people's self-esteem where they felt segregated by the community. Participants also raised how challenging and difficult it was to transition from IPAS accommodation to the local community. Some participants who have family stated that their children felt excluded from peers.
- The need for trauma informed healthcare was raised with people stating the importance of being able to actively get involved in the decision-making process when it comes to their own health. More available psychological support would help. Participants also felt that the length of time to access healthcare services varies widely depending on one's location.
- Training of staff in IPAS accommodation centres to engage with applicants was raised including the need for a trauma informed approach. UNHCR's supportive spaces project that trains IPAS and reception staff to implement trauma-informed practices was welcomed. Training on cultural awareness and anti-racism was also raised.

Various activities were raised as supporting well-being:

- Having platforms where asylum seekers and refugees can be heard including, but not limited to, consultations;
- Praying and meditation spaces;
- Children having access to play areas;
- Gardening areas around centres;
- Swimming classes and access to gyms;
- Day trips with local organisations and communities;
- Provision of space for various activities in accommodation centres;
- Community volunteering;
- Sports-related activities;
- Investing in shared community spaces like community centres;
- Friendship building through language exchange and English classes;
- Welcome café for new arrivals;
- Counselling services.

RECOMMENDATIONS TO GOVERNMENT:

- ➡ **Provide accessible information for all applicants on the new international protection system** including people who are illiterate and unable to complete an online application for international protection.
- ➡ **Create a repository of good practices** to help wellbeing in centres.
- ➡ **Train staff in the international protection** determination bodies and healthcare staff on trauma informed practices.
- ➡ **Create an advisory panel** where people who have been through the international protection system can provide advice to government based on their own lived experience.¹

¹ This could be similar to the model in the United Kingdom called the ALEAP (Asylum Lived Experience Advisory Panel). More information on that model is available here: <https://tinyurl.com/2nje58sx>

3..... Integration

Integration is a two-way process, centered on belonging and mutual trust. It requires commitment and engagement from both migrant and refugee communities and wider society. A strong theme emerging from the discussions was the importance of mutual understanding between refugees and host communities.

“Exchanging knowledge and experiences is one of the first things we should do together when integrating in a new place. It also allows us to contribute by bringing our own skills here.”

Barriers to integration identified included:

- Experiences of racism and discrimination;
- Language;
- Social isolation;
- Unequal access to services across the country.

“People think if you are in one of the big cities that you are not isolated but there can still be challenges. Some people are anti-migrant and for no reason they will say they don't want us to be there which can be very hard”

Key factors for supporting successful integration:

- Participating in community activities and volunteering;
- Building relationships and friendships with local people;
- Learning and practicing English with the right supports in place.

Positive examples of inclusion included local friendship groups, Sanctuary Runners, Africa Day celebrations, churches, community gardening projects and art programmes among others.

Whether refugees feel included varies considerably depending on individual experiences, geographical location and related access to support services.

All participants emphasized the need for coordinated solutions such as:

- Increased language supports including for more advanced levels of English;
- Anti-racism education initiatives by local, regional and national civil society and government actors;
- Befriending programmes;
- Social and cultural initiatives at county level;
- Outreach initiatives to IPAS centres, including the creation of safe spaces;
- Strengthening refugee-led organisations and promoting community leadership among refugees and migrants.

“There is stereotyping at times, with the perception that refugees are here for benefits from the government but if people got to know one another, they would understand what it means to be a refugee.”

RECOMMENDATIONS TO GOVERNMENT:

- ➊ **Create a public repository of good integration practices** including the examples above and employ them at the local, regional and national level.
- ➋ **Use the Ireland against Racism Fund 2026** to ensure resources at the local level for activities related to anti-racism education and related activities.
- ➌ **Create safe spaces for those in IPAS centres** to connect and form friendships and ensure there is an active space for ‘Friends of the Centre’ groups in all accommodation centres.
- ➍ **Develop and deliver comprehensive intercultural training** for frontline staff and service providers engaging with refugees.
- ➎ **Ensure sufficient coverage of accessible mental health supports** throughout Ireland.

