

SSGT Refugee Support Grants Programme Interim Report - November 2018

1 Introduction

In June 2016 St Stephen's Green Trust (SSGT) launched the Refugee Support Grants Programme (RSGP) to “effect positive change in the lives of refugees and asylum seekers in Ireland by supporting organisations within the community and voluntary sector who are carrying out practical, relevant, effective and/or progressive work”. Following an open competitive call for applications, the projects funded focused mainly on supporting people in Direct Provision (DP) with refugee status, leave to remain or subsidiary protection to move out (see appendix 1 for a list of grantees and areas of work).

This paper is a summary of an interim report by the evaluator, Pamela Montgomery, to the SSGT trustees which draws from a high level desk top review of recent developments, grantee reports and discussions with grantees to give an overview of progress and learning from the programme.

A final report covering the three years of the operation of the programme will be available in late 2019.

2 Developments in the environment over the last year

Funded organisations reported the following changes in the broader context, which affected some aspect of their work:

- **Delays in the processing of applications** for protection – in April 2018 The United Nations Refugee Agency¹ reported that an average wait for an interview with the International Protection Office (IPO) was 19 months. However, as at October 2018 some RSGP projects reported a noticeable trend of faster processing times thus increasing the number of people with status residing in the DP centres they are working in.
- **Supreme Court decision on the right to work** – Following on from a Supreme Court judgement on the ban on asylum seekers' right to work, in November 2017 Government announced it would opt into the recast EU Reception Conditions Directive which provides asylum seekers access to the labour market and further education and vocational training. It also covers other key areas of the asylum process relating to reception conditions.

New right to work provisions came into force on 6 July 2018 – including conditions that the applicant has been in the State for 9 months or more and not had a first decision made on his/her status. Thus they do not apply to asylum seekers appealing decisions and exclude those who have been in DP the longest. There is provision for a withdrawal or reduction of DP allowances when people have been working for more than 12 weeks and a requirement to make a contribution towards the costs of accommodation. As of October 2018 the impact on allowances and payment towards costs of DP accommodation remains unclear.

¹ <https://www.unhcr.org/news/press/2018/4/5ae0228c4/unhcr-calls-for-action-to-cut-irish-asylum-waiting-times.html>

Project workers reported the new provisions as having had a huge impact on the atmosphere in Centres and as having raised spirits significantly. However potential pitfalls reported include - those who get a job, leave DP and then subsequently get their application turned down will lose their right to work and will not be eligible for a place in DP. Some project workers have therefore advised people not to give up their place in DP. Based on experience to date some project workers expressed concern about the sectors and jobs people are moving into – zero hour contracts with little security. Project workers have also highlighted that barriers to an effective right to work remain such as lack of access to driving licences.

- **Impact of the continuing overall housing crisis** - Rents have continued to rise over 24 consecutive quarters and the average rent nationwide is now 26.6% over the Celtic Tiger peak of 2008². Supply factors including a shortage of properties at rental prices within the HAP rate continue to make finding somewhere to move to from DP a key challenge. This has contributed to an increase in the numbers of people with status remaining in DP - 620 in November 2018, according to a report in the Irish Times³.
- **Pressures on DP places** - The inability of many residents to obtain alternative accommodation together with lengthy processing times for applications has contributed to an intensified shortage of bed spaces with occupancy levels at 96.9% in August 2018⁴.
- **Prospect of a new accommodation standard for DP** – in August 2018 the Department of Justice and Equality published draft national standards of accommodation for people in DP. In January 2018 the Office of the Ombudsman published a commentary which highlighted the unsuitability of DP for long term stays and issues around poor facilities including for cooking and childcare.
- **Introduction of a new family reunification programme** - a private members bill to remove the more restrictive provisions in the International Protection Act 2015 around family reunification passed Committee stage in the Seanad though failed to gain Government support. However a new Irish Refugee Protection Programme Humanitarian Admission Programme (IHAP) was launched in May 2018 whereby people with status can apply for immediate family members from specified countries to join them in Ireland with priority given to proposers who can also accommodate their family members. The scheme, which is a temporary measure, will bring up to 530 family members to Ireland. A first call for proposals opened in May and ran to the end of June 2018 with an indication that there would be further calls.
- **Development of a Community Sponsorship programme** – in September 2017 the Government announced its commitment to developing a Community Sponsorship programme to enable local communities to support the resettlement of refugees in Ireland.

² Daft.ie (2018) *Rental Price Report An analysis of recent trends in the Irish rental market 2018: Q2*, available at <https://www.daft.ie/report/2018-Q2-rentalprice-daft-report.pdf>

³ <https://www.irishtimes.com/news/social-affairs/grand-hotel-in-wicklow-to-be-used-as-direct-provision-centre-1.3695628>

⁴ Reception and Integration Agency (2018) *Monthly Report August 2018*, available at <http://www.ria.gov.ie/en/RIA/RIA%20Monthly%20Report%2007-2018.pdf/Files/RIA%20Monthly%20Report%2007-2018.pdf>

3 What has been achieved to date – Sept 2016 to Sept 2018

An overview of achievements to date is summarised below. 473 adults have been supported directly by funded projects through advice, support or legal expertise – with 819 people benefitting when other members of the household are added in. The majority of these (N=582) were supported by six projects focused on providing assistance to those living in DP to move on or to those who have recently exited DP living in the community.

Evidence on support needs

Information on the type of support needs being met by the five projects providing general support are set out below. These projects provide general support to residents living in or who have recently moved on into the community from: The Eyre Powell, Co Kildare; Mosney, Co Meath; Globe House, Co Sligo; Old Convent, Co Mayo; and The Montague, Co Laois. The projects provided support to 278 adults with practical advice, information and advocacy. The nature of support provided varied considerably. In some cases project workers provided assistance on specific issues which were resolved quickly. Other issues required significant input over a longer period or support was needed to help people deal with multiple issues across a range of areas. Unsurprisingly securing accommodation was the most frequent support need with 117 people provided with practical help.

The most frequently recorded accommodation issue on which support was needed concerned help around getting on housing lists, followed by assistance with applying for HAP, dealing with landlords and finding accommodation. Other issues included: accompanying residents to view accommodation – in the majority of cases accompanying female residents; help in applying for a transfer to another local authority area; and in finding suitable accommodation for people with special needs.

The second most frequently dealt with need related to support to adults to become involved and engaged in local communities provided to 35% of residents and those who have recently left DP. This included helping people make contact with local groups, to take part in community activities or attend community events. A number of project workers reported that when people get status the focus is on practical issues to enable them to get out of DP as soon as possible so much of this work will take place after people leave DP. Support was also sought for children though this appears to be at a lower level provided to around a fifth of those supported (22%).

Just over a quarter (27%) of those supported received assistance around job search or obtaining employability skills including help with accessing courses and supports, preparing a cv, finding work or accessing employment services and 28% were provided with support around social welfare entitlements. Help to access education and training was provided to around a fifth of people with support in identifying and/or applying for further or higher education courses and accessing financial support the most frequently mentioned areas.

Around a fifth of people obtained support on issues around documentation. Applying for or resolving issues around passports or travel documents and getting an Irish Residence Permit were the most frequent mentioned areas. Support was also provided to ten people in relation to family reunification. The specific issue of family reunification was the focus of another project which has provided specialist expertise to 127 people on this issue.

For those obtaining accommodation or who had moved into accommodation in the community, practical supports around setting up house, such as help in setting up utilities and assistance in furnishing accommodation were provided in response to need. Help on budgeting and money matters was also provided including accessing food banks and opening a bank account or credit union account.

4 What difference has been made

Project beneficiaries

In the face of a very challenging housing market and other barriers a significant tangible outcome has been the number of people supported to move out of DP. Five projects providing general support reported that 61 of those they had worked with were now living in the community – 131 people if family members are included. A further project was successful in supporting 33 households comprising 82 people from DP into suitable accommodation in the community. Other tangible outcomes for the general support projects include: 41 people now in further or higher education; 26 in paid employment; 57 either in or having completed courses concerned with employability, 1 individual supported to successfully apply for family reunification and 47 adults reporting or assessed by project workers as now more engaged in the community as a result of the support received. A further project focused on family reunification has supported 57 families apply for and then be reunited with family members in Ireland supporting the arrival of 110 family members.

Policy and practice

Direct provision - Most projects have worked at a local level and have built effective working relationships with local officials in statutory agencies, letting agents and others thus providing useful contacts when seeking to resolve administrative and practical obstacles faced by individuals particularly those relating to issues where there is some level of discretion built into procedures.

Family reunification - Advocacy by the family reunification project and others contributed to a private members Bill being introduced in the Seanad intended to widen the range of dependents who might apply for reunification though this subsequently failed to achieve government support.

5 What has been learned from the work of the projects

In contrast to refugees arriving under the IRPP, there are no dedicated Government resources or programmes to support people exiting DP. The wide range of support needs experienced by people leaving DP have been met through the provision of flexible services ranging from signposting to providing more hands on support and assistance by projects under this grant programme.

Key elements of the support have been identified as:

- **Person centred one to one support** tailored to individual need; which builds individual capacity and empowerment; and incorporates advocacy to service providers on behalf of individuals or around common challenges;
- **Accessible on the ground support** through drop in or by appointment 'clinics' in DP or local venues in close proximity;
- **Signposting** to sources of local support and the development of **local step by step guides**;
- **Building relationships with local service providers and private sector landlords and estate agents** to increase knowledge around the particular circumstances and needs of those transitioning from DP;
- **Maintaining contact** with those who have progressed from DP and providing follow up support as required.

Experience to date also suggests the need for projects to have access to specialist legal or other technical advice on more complex issues such as family reunification. No appeals process on decisions around family reunification makes the availability of this expertise critical. Some of those moving to the community do not require ongoing support or obtain this themselves. For others, support is needed in the immediate period or when problems arise sometimes as much as a year after leaving the accommodation centre or when as one project worker put it *'the social isolation begins to kick in'*.

6 Challenges which have emerged

Two years experience from RSGP has demonstrated that the key barrier to transition is the length of time involved in getting accommodation. Three underlying factors are: administrative delays across a range of areas; a lack of housing within HAP rates; and specific challenges in securing accommodation.

Administrative delays

Projects reported individuals receiving letters from the IPO stating it would be recommending the award of status but then up to 3 months delay before receiving notification of the full decision. Delays associated with the issuing of Irish Residency Permits (required to go on housing lists) were reported to have increased over the last year with processing times around 3 – 6 weeks at best with much longer delays of up to 6 months reported. The next step which is a requirement to access HAP is to make an application to get on a local authority housing list. Current processing times vary significantly across local authorities but can take 2 months or longer. There was some evidence that

through advocacy and relationship building processing times have been mitigated to some extent with officials taking a more flexible approach to the standard of documentation required or prioritising applications from residents to reduce delays. However, experience to date suggests that a frequent scenario is of clients having to wait around for a number of months after receiving confirmation of their status before they are in a position to start looking for accommodation.

A lack of available housing within HAP rates

A scarcity of housing overall and within the rates payable by HAP continues to be a major barrier to transition. In one county the position was so poor that no viewings have been secured for residents in the area over the last 6 months. In response some projects have actively set out to develop relationships with letting agents in particular to explain the merits of the HAP system and to provide references for people as they would have no track record of rental. While many residents have a preference to remain in the vicinity of DP centres which have been their home for lengthy periods and where they may have built up contacts in local communities, where their children attend school and where, following on from the removal of the bar on paid employment, increasingly many will have jobs, the reality is that securing accommodation will require a move to the outskirts of cities and towns or to another area altogether. While projects have worked to support people to source accommodation in more affordable locations this can bring additional problems – projects reported people feeling very isolated in rural areas with which they have no connection, compounded by prohibitive travel costs.

Securing accommodation

DP residents have no rental history or references they can provide to landlords. There is little scope to save for the costs of moving into accommodation - being able to cover the costs of deposits and the first month's rent in a timely way is critical to secure properties. While deposits can be met by applying for an exceptional needs payment from the Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection (DSP) administered by local Community Welfare Officers (CWOs) there appears to be considerable variation and inconsistency around whether these costs will be met. Evidence of differences emerged both between counties and within counties and in the approach of individual officials with instances of similar cases having very different outcomes; deposits paid in full, minimal contributions made, or applications turned down. A further issue is the processing times for HAP - only payable from the date on which an application is assessed and accepted as being complete. There is no provision for meeting landlord requirements with respect to a payment in advance to secure the property and landlords have to wait for the HAP application to be processed before receiving any payment.

The pressure then is on people to get into debt to pay deposits and upfront rental costs often in the hope that these will be refunded by DSP. It was reported that the approach of some CWOs is that there can be no retrospective refund of deposits. One project reported however that it has negotiated an arrangement with the CWO locally that the project pays deposits from a revolving loan fund set up for this purpose which is then refunded by people when deposits are processed by DSP.

A possible solution has been identified through the work of one project which negotiated access for people in DP to the Homeless HAP Place Finder Scheme on a pilot basis over the last year. This provides access to an enhanced rate of HAP, restricted viewing of properties, the payment of deposits and up to two months' rent in advance. Importantly, eligibility for the scheme cuts out administrative delays and provides for deposits and advance payment of rents to landlords within a streamlined process – the project has found arrangements can be made in as little as 5 days. A further project has recently negotiated access to the scheme. In view of the potential of Homeless HAP to address the challenges of affordable housing and securing tenancies, SSGT has made a grant to Mercy Law Resource Centre to prepare a short legal opinion on eligibility and provide advice and training at a local level for RSGP projects and others.

Access to banking/finance

A related issue concerns difficulties in opening bank accounts due to strict regulations around identity – a passport or driving licence is required. The position is less clear for credit unions with some projects reporting accounts being opened but some reporting difficulties. It has been established that at least one bank provides banking for those without this documentation to open a basic 'money in, money out' account (no on-line banking facility or ATM card) with documentation from DSP. The IHREC has an interest in this area and has cases pending in relation to this and around access to learner driver permits. IHREC has offered to provide advice to anyone affected and information has been forwarded to all RSGP projects on who to contact.

Other challenges which have emerged include:

Access to accommodation for people with specific needs –accommodation for people with physical disabilities and older people with mobility problems emerged in a number of projects in the context of a scarcity of provision overall;

Standard of documentation required to support travel expenses based on medical need – one project found procedures to be unworkable.

Rate of job seeker allowance for young people leaving DP – due to their vulnerability young people leaving residential care can obtain the full rate of JSA (£198 pw) but this does not apply to young people leaving DP - the normal rate applicable to those under 25 (£107.70 pw) affecting their ability to move out of DP.

Appendix 1 Projects funded under RSGP			
Focus	Grantee	Project Name	Purpose
Preparation for transitioning from DP	Cultúr	Moving on Project	To support people transitioning from Mosney accommodation centre, County Meath, by developing a transition model based on the central involvement of residents in identifying needs, the provision of one to one support by a project worker and the creation of an inter-agency/residents group to provide a mechanism for residents to advocate for these needs directly to service providers.
	County Kildare Leader Partnership (CKLP)	Positive Transition Project	To support residents transitioning from Eyre Powell accommodation centre, Newbridge, having difficulty accessing accommodation through one to one support by a project worker, the development of a referral process for supports and Transition Pack for people leaving DP.
Preparation for transitioning from DP and longer term support	Laois Partnership	Transition from DP Project - year 2 being paid in 2018	To provide an advice service to residents of the Montague accommodation centre, County Laois, through one to one support and to develop a revolving loan fund to bridge the gap between deposits for accommodation being due and being secured from the DSP.
	Jesuit Refugee Service Ireland (JRSI)	PATHS Project (Providing Asylum-Seekers in Transition with Housing and Support)	In conjunction with the Peter McVerry Trust, to assist people recently granted status or leave to remain but still living in DP to access appropriate accommodation and comprehensive multidisciplinary supports using the Housing First model.
	Diversity Sligo	Transition from DP to the Community	To support people transitioning from Globe House accommodation centre, Sligo, through one to one support by a project worker and an orientation programme to support integration.
	South West Mayo Development Co (SWMDC)	From DP to Independent Living	To address gaps in supports to people moving from the Old Convent accommodation centre, Ballyhaunis, or transitioned to accommodation in County Mayo through one to one support by a project worker.
	Doras Luimni	RAIS (Refugee Advocacy and Integration Support) Mentoring Project	To support people transitioning from DP or who have recently transitioned in Limerick through the development of a community based support service provided by a network of volunteer mentors.
Broader integration issues	Irish Refugee and Migrant Coalition (IRMC)	A Community Development Response to Integration, Resettlement and Relocation	To develop community approaches to the long term integration of asylum seekers and refugees which will result in the development and adoption of a National Community Development Programme. Completed grant in April 2018
	NASC	Family Reunification – Securing Integration for Refugees and Persons Eligible for Subsidiary Support	To support refugees and people who have been granted subsidiary protection to bring their families to Ireland and provide an evidence base to advocate for a change in law and policy.