

Healing the Wounds of Isolation: Letting Children Be Children

Impact Report Summary



St Stephen's Green Trust (SSGT) has a goal to support vulnerable migrants to become full members of our society and believes that dismantling barriers to integration for children living in Direct Provision (DP) will effect change. The activities for children living in DP grant programme is SSGT's contribution to that change.

SSGT trustees are pleased with the outcomes of the grant programme but are conscious of the context in which the grant programme is operating. It is clear that the practice of keeping children in institutions for years is not in their interests and does not contribute to their well-being. The Department of Justice and Equality and the Department of Children and Youth Affairs have a particular responsibility to support children living in Direct Provision. We ask those bodies to consider the report's evidence about the need for and benefits of extracurricular activities for children living in Direct Provision and to find a mechanism to ensure universal access to activities.

Our thanks to the report author for a comprehensive study and to those who participated in the grant programme and responded to the surveys and interview. We thank our programme donors: Sisters of Mercy; Disalced Carmelites and the Daughters of the Cross of Liege.

SSGT trustees support those seeking better ways to meet the needs of asylum seekers living in very difficult circumstances as they await determination of their international protection status. While those alternatives are being developed we believe we have an obligation to help children live the best lives they can. It is their only childhood.

Orla O'Neill, Executive Director
July 2019

July 2019

Grant Programme for Activities for Children
Living in Direct Provision Centres

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SECTION 1

background

St Stephen’s Green Trust (SSGT) has had a grant programme for activities for children living in Direct Provision Centres (DP) for the past five years (2014–2019) funded by the four Irish Sisters of Mercy Provinces and other donors. A total of €320,000 in grants was made to 20 community and voluntary groups, enabling approximately 2,500 children living in DP to participate in hundreds of sporting, cultural and leisure activities in their local community. The objective of these small flexible grants is to allow groups to pay for activities for children and establish relationships with local sporting, cultural, recreational and community organisations. It aims to ensure that children can leave a centre for at least a few hours each week.

“Get me outside. Please. I don’t like it here. I don’t like it here because it is here all the time. I’d like options, like anyone. Outside of here.”

19-year old girl, Focus Group, Direct Provision Centre, Feb 2019.

The children of families living in DP are particularly vulnerable members of Irish society due to their uncertain status, the indefinite length of time they and their families wait on the determination of their protection status, the realities of living within institutional settings, often for long periods of time and the economic insecurity their parents often endure.



Since 2014 a SSGT grant programme has provided almost

€320,000

to 20 organisations enabling

2,500

children living in Direct Provision centres to access activities

“There is a lack of crèches in the centres or trusted reliable babysitters that could free parents up to bring their child to an activity. Or parents don’t have money, so they often can’t buy the items required for an activity. Then, even, if they do manage to get a babysitter and buy the equipment, there is often no transport. So they are trapped.”

Grantee A, Volunteer Community Organisation, Questionnaire Response, April 2019.

The types of activities organised for children varied, ranging from swimming classes to summer camps, city visits to adventure centre weekends, GAA camps to soccer, dancing, singing lessons and more. The most common activity (75%) was access to swimming pools or lessons. The number and frequency of activities organised depended on the capacity of the grantee organisations, which impacted the size of the grant they received, and the availability of services and clubs in a particular area. Children’s and parent’s wishes and interests then informed the activities selected. Several other demographic factors also affected how the grant operated, including the numbers and ages of children living in a particular DP centre at a given time.

SECTION 2

direct provision system context

The Irish state has a statutory obligation to offer reception conditions to persons in the protection process, as defined in the Reception Conditions Directive (Recast) transposed into Irish law since 2018. This Directive places obligations on the State as a whole for the delivery of a range of services many of which are delivered by the Reception and Integration Agency (RIA) within the Department of Justice and Equality. Others are delivered by the Department of Health's Health Services Executive (HSE) and by the Department of Education and Skills.

In Ireland, people seeking international protection are accommodated in congregated settings in a system of residential institutions known as Direct Provision centres. The location of centres is driven by a market-dependent approach focused on property availability rather than proximity to essential services such as health and education, or to local amenities and transport links. Seven of the buildings are State-owned but all current provision is through a for-profit management model by private contractors, including catering companies and hotel owners. Calls for the transformation of this system began when it was first established in 2000.

In recent years the number of new applications has been moderately rising, with an average of 319 new applications per month in 2018, or 360 per month in the first half of 2019. In June 2019, there were 6,083 people living in 39 centres. Children make up approximately one third of all those accommodated within the system. At the start of 2019, five of the centres were oversubscribed. By June 2019 this had resulted in 760 asylum seekers being accommodated in hotel rooms as an emergency short-term measure. At the same time, approximately 730 people (12 per cent of all residents) living within DP have received positive decisions on their protection applications but have been unable to move out as they cannot source alternative accommodation due to the shortage of housing affecting wider Irish society.

A number of important reforms have been introduced in recent years (particularly since the publication of the McMahon report in 2015) including changes

in the right to work for some asylum-seekers; the Office of the Ombudsman and the Office of the Ombudsman for Children can now investigate complaints made by asylum-seekers living in DP centres; an increase in the weekly allowance from the end of March 2019 (up to €38.80 per adult and €29.80 per child); and the provision of communal kitchens and self-catering accommodation in a number of centres.

SECTION 3

evaluation methodology

The main objective of this research was to generate insight into the potential benefits of and barriers to providing access to extracurricular activities for children living in DP centres across Ireland to deepen SSGT's understanding of the realities faced by its grantee organisations and children living in DP; ensure the grant programme remains oriented to best respond to children's needs and to share research findings with grant beneficiaries, grantee organisations, civil society, and key government departments to increase knowledge and learning.

The evaluation methodology included a quantitative questionnaire sent to current SSGT grantees, semi-structured focus group discussions; semi-structured individual interviews; data and indicators from national and international public reports and a brief literature review on the reception and protection system in Ireland. It was carried out by an external consultant, Niamh NicCarthaigh, between February and May 2019, gathering information from: 12 completed questionnaires, returned from 16 current grantees; three focus group discussions with 24 people, who were either parents or children living in two DP centres and nine in-depth interviews with child rights and refugee rights advocates, DP Centre Managers and the Executive Director SSGT. The 12 respondents had collectively facilitated access to activities for 1,894 children in 14 centres since 2014. In 2019 alone the groups were working with 720 children, the majority of whom (69%) were aged 13 and under.

SECTION 4

outcomes and impacts on children's lives

4.1 Positive impacts

“My favourite camp was the swimming one in the summer. There was loads to do and lots of kids, so we could make friends. My new friend’s name was Ciara and she was my best friend in the camp. She had twin sisters and it was great.”

E*, 10-year old girl, Focus Group, Direct Provision Centre, Feb 2019.

Children, parents, community organisations and centre management were united in their view that providing extra-curricular activities beyond DP centres and within the community was invaluable. Benefits of activities were cited as: addressing the serious gap in the provision of access to activities for children; increasing children’s confidence and skills; helping normalise children’s lives and reducing stigma; creating opportunities for connection and integration and fostering resilience and supporting mental health.

“Here in the centre they closed the sports hall and the football area. We don’t know why. Before, adults and children were using both. Now the hall is a storage area. Now there is nothing here, and this is very bad for my son. He is a young boy, so has a lot of energy. He likes football, but there is nowhere to kick balls or do sports in here. So now, instead of playing when he gets back from school, he just goes to sleep. He does his homework and goes to sleep in the room. Before he would do homework and go to play. Now he can’t.”

A*, 32-year old woman, mother of four children, Focus Group, Direct Provision Centre, February 2019.



3/4 of grantees organise **swimming lessons for children** using the SSGT grant

Children, their parents and grantee organisations reported visible improvements to a child’s confidence and sense of pride in themselves whenever they learned new skills through the grant-funded activities. It is widely accepted that prolonged periods of stay in collective centres can lead to marginalisation and dependency.¹ Access to extracurricular activities can help counter this by providing important opportunities for children to mix and play with other children of their own age. This exposure outside school hours enables them to forge new friendships and strengthen existing bonds. By increasing their sense of connection and belonging, the risk of isolation decreases and wellbeing increases. Access to activities also plays a role in reducing the stigma that children living in the Direct Provision system can face, or fear they will face, if other children discover that they are living in the local centre.

“The stigma associated with living in Direct Provision is very real for the young people we work with. They kept bringing up the issue of wanting to do “what normal kids do”. They want to do what their peers are doing. There is a big gap in services for young people living in Direct Provision, so bringing them to activities that their peers already access improves their well being and increases their confidence.”

Grantee A, Volunteer Group, Questionnaire Response, April 2019.

There were other positive outcomes, including strengthening multiple relationships inside centres and with the local community; encouraging others in the community to provide additional funds or supports; empowering parents and other centre residents and increasing grantee organisational knowledge and staff motivation.

¹ UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), *A guide to international refugee protection and building state asylum systems*, 2017, Handbook for Parliamentarians N° 27, p.98, available at: www.refworld.org/docid/5a9d57554.html.

“Before this programme of activities we had existing working relationships with all partner organisations in the local community development groups and with centre management. All of these relationships were considerably strengthened as a direct result of commencing this SSGT programme and they have continued to strengthen throughout each of the years of programme delivery. In addition, we strengthened relationships with a number of families living in the Direct Provision centre, who became increasingly active and engaged with activities and support services since the programme was implemented.”

Grantee F, Migrant Rights Non Governmental Organisation, Questionnaire, March 2019.

In the DP system important elements of a child’s life are taken away from the control of their parent including not having the means to organise the basic socialising routines of a child’s evenings or days beyond school hours. For many parents this includes not being able to afford to bring their child to or from activities or to organise outings as a family. Once extra-curricular activities and trips commenced, grantee organisations reported marked improvements in relationships between parents and their children.

“The existing relationship between children and parents improved following their engagement with grant activities. It meant they had something positive in common that they could talk about together and remember together.”

Grantee G, Community Organisation with large volunteer corps, Questionnaire, Feb 2019.

Many communities were keen to collaborate with grantee organisations to open up access to activities. In several locations key local organisations such as the GAA, Foroige or summer camp organisers used the opportunity to widen membership and increase support to and connection with children living in a DP centre in their area.

“Our work with children organising activities outside the Direct Provision centre led to the increased involvement of some of the Foroige Youth Leaders who had already been volunteering in the centre. They saw what we were doing, and then began to volunteer with us to accompany children on the cinema trips we organised.”

Grantee A, Volunteer Organisation, Questionnaire, April 2019.

The grant often stretched further than its original amount with additional funds frequently provided by the community and local businesses. Upon learning of the extent of the needs and the reality that DP contracts do not guarantee that children can participate in community activities, local groups began to provide discounted prices or give free places to children living in their local centre to ensure they could participate. Some centre managers contributed when an event or activity took place within centre grounds. Some centres increased transport flexibility for activities outside the centre once the grantee had done the organisational work. This was particularly likely if a large group of residents was attending a one-off activity outside. However, this was not the case in all centres, where transport was consistently a major barrier.

“The grant has meant that people in the area have become more aware of and sensitive to the issues facing asylum seekers and refugees. From organising the swimming lessons we established good relationships with the local leisure centre staff. As a result, the centre gave us a number of free places on their summer camps. In addition, some teenagers were offered work experience there, which they took up! When a new sports centre opened in the area, some staff transferred there, and they offered us free camps for the children. We couldn’t avail of that offer though, as we would have needed transport to get the children there. The SSGT grant doesn’t cover that level of transport and neither did the DP centre.”

Grantee A, Volunteer Organisation, Questionnaire, April 2019.

While community generosity is welcomed and is an indication of the potential resources and goodwill available at the local level it was wholly dependent on the area context and largely due to the proactivity, networking skills and visibility of grantee organisations. Consequently, in some areas children benefitted more than in others, leaving many with persistently limited access to outside activities.

Residents in DP centres are keen to increase their self-reliance and networks when provided with opportunities, including having meaningful input around which activities their children participate in. Ensuring consultation with parents and children is a core principle of the SSGT approach. In one DP centre the SSGT grant is managed directly by a resident-led organisation registered with its local Public Participation Network.

Grantees reported organisational benefits from operating the grant, including increased staff commitment to work with residents due to greater understanding of the reality of their lives. New partnerships were often created at the community level as a result of the grant, benefitting wider areas of an organisation's work.



92%
transport
as barrier

11/12 grantees said **lack of affordable or dependable transport remains the key barrier** to access activities outside of the Direct Provision centres

4.2 Barriers to operating the grant programme

“Here, children are stuck. Everyone is stuck here. If you want to go into the town you need a bus or a cab that costs seven euros. That amount is impossible for us....

Sometimes my younger son asks me why are we living here. He says he wants to go out. But I can't, because if he wants to join any basketball or football club we can't afford to get there. This is another hurdle. Or on weekends there is no bus. So all the time they stay inside: school and inside, inside and school.”

X*, 33 year old woman, mother of two children. Focus Group Discussion, Direct Provision Centre, Feb 2019.

Direct Provision centres are often in isolated locations poorly served by public transport. The lack of access to affordable, regular transportation and the prohibitive cost of organising alternative transport was the key barrier for nearly every grantee organisation, with (11/12) respondents citing transport as the main (7) or second biggest (4) barrier to enabling access to extra-curricular activities for children.

“When our children make friends outside it doesn't make sense, because they can't keep them. Because those friends can never come to the centre, and because, without transport, we cannot take our children outside to visit those friends.”

B*, 36 year old woman, mother of three children. Focus Group Discussion, Direct Provision Centre, Feb 2019.

While centre management provide transport, residents and grantees reported that in the majority of centres this was run on rigid and limited timetables, which hindered or blocked access to activities during evenings, weekends or holidays.

“As a Centre Manager I don't have a flexible transport fund, so I don't have the authority to increase the existing budget if a local organisation has managed to get some places in classes in town for children after school or at the weekends. I would have to ring head office (centre owner). They will likely say that we haven't got the budget for that. At my level I could more easily do things for the betterment of the children living here if it was written into the centre contracts with the government that transport had to be made available for children to go to activities in the evenings or during holidays.”

Manager, Direct Provision Centre, In-depth Interview, Feb 2019.

Even if the grant enables an organisation to link children in with activities that they would like to participate in, covering the costs so those children don't have to pay to attend, additional expenses beyond class prices or membership fees regularly prohibit participation, including costs such as purchasing sports gear, football boots, team jerseys,

swimsuits, swimming goggles, lesson books or day-trip pocket-money. While SSGT allows a part of a grant to be allocated towards meeting these costs, for many grantees they remain a barrier to guaranteeing access to activities for children.

All SSGT grantees expressed concern about the length of stay and the adverse impact they could see it having on people's mental health, motivation and resilience. They said the longer a child remained living in the DP system, the more demotivated they and their parents often became and this visibly affected both the mental health of the child and the interest of the parent to push for the child's involvement and inclusion in extra-curricular activities.

Several grantees expressed concern that certain children were routinely less able or completely unable to benefit from the activities they organised. This includes some of the more vulnerable children in a centre, such as those with physical disabilities or special support needs, including autism. Targeted interventions, beyond the SSGT's grant, would be required to ensure the full inclusion of these children.

Grantees also noted that the activities they were more easily able to organise were frequently more suitable for younger age groups. There were often fewer options for older teenagers, particularly those aged 16 years and more, or for the youngest children. What possibilities were available were frequently prohibitively expensive.

While the aim is to ensure that all children can access at least one activity, some children end up sidelined if they don't feel comfortable with or interested in the wider group choice of activity.

“Instead of going to a camp, I would like to join a club and do it every week and get good at something, rather than going to a camp during the school holidays. We get to run in school, cross-country, so I would prefer to do running classes in the evenings. This would help upgrade my running skills. I would prefer if we could go run or do GAA, or football, or sports, instead of going to camps.”

T*, 9-year old boy, Focus Group Discussion, Direct Provision Centre, Feb 2019.

On some occasions cultural and gender issues impacted a child's capacity to participate. Two grantees reported that young girls faced additional barriers to attendance. Increased consultation with parents was needed to address these barriers, along with a wider set of options for children and parents to choose from. However, this wasn't always possible, particularly in more rural areas with lower availability of activities locally.

While a universal approach that strives to ensure access to extracurricular activities for all children is necessary, it needs to be accompanied by a deep level of targeting to meet the specific needs of individual children. Grantees were clear this would require increased investment in both funding and human resources to ensure that in-depth assessments of children's individual needs could be conducted and then matched with what activities were available and possible in the community.

The pace of arrivals and departures into and out of centres means grantee organisations can struggle to maintain a clear view of who is in a centre at a given time. The majority of grantees reported that centre management were helpful and happy to collaborate with them, yet were often extremely busy. They expressed concern about how relationship-dependent programme outcomes were, explaining that the dynamic creates uncertainty and places them in a vulnerable position in the face of staff management changes in a centre. The new national standards to be introduced in 2019 will require a position with a social care background to be placed in each reception centre but facilitating access to extra-curricular activities is not explicitly part of their responsibility.

Survey respondents said they would like the right of children to access minimum levels of activities outside of centres to be formalised within RIA policy at the national level, written into centre management contracts and included as a priority within other department strategies, such as the Department of Children and Youth Affairs.

The disparity in grantee size and capacity affects programme delivery in multiple ways, including how connected staff may be to other similar organisations or to broader developments or networks that shape the DP system. Organisations were not aware of what other SSGT grantees were doing, the types of activities they organised or

collaborations they may have created with local communities or centre management. Operating in isolation, they felt they lost time seeking solutions or solving problems that could benefit from quick exchanges with other organisations working with people in the DP system.

Grantee organisations reported that parents were not always invested in ensuring their child participated in the organised activities. While a child's attendance was influenced by factors such as length of stay and its impact on motivation, sometimes it was simply the case that details about an activity had not spread sufficiently among residents. At other times parents didn't realise that a grantee organisation had organised the event or activity and that there may have been a significant cost to do so. Some groups ask parents for a nominal, refundable contribution, to increase the value connected to a day out or camp. If a particular child doesn't appear when the bus is leaving for the activity, the grantee either absorbs the nominal amount to cover costs, or it is returned to the grant fund.

All grantees face the challenge of managing parental hopes and matching these with the availability of services, in addition to navigating relationships with centre managers. However, this can be a greater challenge for resident-led grantees. As grantees consistently advocate for additional transport, funds and support from centre management, a contractual obligation upon centre owners to facilitate integration and extra-curricular activities would mitigate the risks of placing resident grantees in difficult situations with centre owners. Responsibility for juggling the requests and preferences of fellow residents also includes listening to stories of frustration or fear from parents about their own lives and that of their children. With no separation between their work and living situation, the risk that resident-led grantees face would be exposed to increased stress than other grantees is clear. So, while it will be vital to encourage the creation of further resident-led initiatives, it will be equally important to provide additional supports to such grantees, including increased contact with the funder, 'care day' breaks, and the creation of mentoring linkages with other grantees, for example.

SECTION 5

feedback on grant programme format

Grantee feedback was that the grant programme's format and administration play a fundamental role in successful outcomes for children.

"We found working with SSGT great. There was strong communication and they provided clear guidelines...they reacted to feedback and took positive action. For instance, we explained that while the grant covered swimming lessons, this wasn't sufficient to enable a child to get to the pool, as some parents couldn't afford to pay for swimsuits. In response SSGT allowed the grant to cover swimsuit purchase in certain cases. It's a small example to show that they came up with solutions to issues we raised, which was really important."

Grantee G, Larger Community Organisation, Questionnaire Response. March 2019.

Community groups found the flexible nature of the funding meant they could be highly responsive to children's needs, albeit within the limitations of what was available in their area and other barriers beyond the cost of an activity. Grantees also valued the grant's light reporting and administrative burdens. This enabled small or all-volunteer community groups to get involved, including those unable to apply for existing statutory grants that had accounting burdens and reporting mechanisms that made them unfeasible for smaller groups.

The community and voluntary sector believes it has an important role to play in the overall national response to people in the Irish reception system. SSGT's strategic decision to channel its funds through this sector provided organisations with the opportunity to show that they could step up to the challenge of addressing an important gap in the overall response to children in the DP system.

The outstanding level of commitment by grantee organisations was evident from the programme's overall outcomes. Survey responses and interviews

showed how individuals had gone beyond their expected roles, recruiting more volunteers to assist with grant delivery or giving up evenings and weekends to get children to activities.

However, some respondents worried that SSGT was substituting for the role of the state. In the absence of a sufficient statutory response, they feared their work might hide the true extent of service provision gaps. They worried their involvement would prolong the State's continued failure to adequately address children's integration needs.

Grantees reported a sense of frustration at the limits of what they were able to achieve. While they could see multiple positive impacts, they expressed concern about the ad-hoc nature of what they could provide and fears about the sustainability of the grant's approach in terms of longer-term impacts upon children's integration.

“There needs to be much more integration than an activity here and there for children. People... need better support from the beginning - from their arrival into the Direct Provision system. They need far better support throughout the process of waiting for their official status. If that happened, then when they would get their status they would have established more connections in the community and feel more part of Irish society. It would start to heal the wounds that being isolated in centres can cause.”

Grantee H, Small Volunteer Organisation, Indepth Interview, Feb 2019.

Many groups said the programme's dependence on their networking skills, community goodwill, and smooth relations with centre managers was unsustainable, and that a formal obligation upon centre management and local authority structures to guarantee access to opportunities for children was necessary.

Several grantee organisations explained that operating the grant placed already stretched teams under increased pressure and said that a more sustainable approach would be to cover all or a portion of the staff time and administrative costs required to manage the programme.

SECTION 6

further support gaps

Interviews with parents, children and grantee organisations highlighted additional gaps they believed require urgent attention and support including: increasing activities and amenities available inside DP centres; ensuring access to activities for parents, particularly lone parents; increasing opportunities for family activities; increasing access to education and training opportunities for adults and increasing support for children once they move out of DP centres.

Eleven of the 12 respondents rated the current availability of onsite activities in their local centre as very limited. A quarter (3/12) of these respondents rated it as severely limited with only a homework club available for children in the evenings. Only a quarter of respondents said there was a crèche facility for young children, with just two out of 12 grantees noting that children had access to a play area on the centre grounds.

“It is so hard to exercise here because there isn't any equipment or anywhere to run. It would be so good to have bean-bags, to be able to go running, to pass things, to play catch. I wish we had a relay track or anything to help with running. I wish there was some kind of exercise camp we could go to with equipment to train.”

A*, 12-year old boy, Focus Group, Direct Provision Centre, Feb 2019.

Adults, particularly lone parents, explained they continue to face multiple barriers to leave centres to access training or work opportunities. The lack of on-site crèches, child-minding options, or sufficient access to affordable, regular transport meant they often felt trapped.

“My son is seven years old, so he started going to camp. I see a difference in him from attending and that's great. But if you also have a baby who is three years old, he can't

go to camp. So you must stay in the centre to mind him, even if your other children are out. In the end there is no break and you stay in the centre every day.”

B*, 36 year old woman, mother to three children. Focus Group Discussion, Direct Provision Centre, Feb 2019.

Discussions with sixteen mothers found that opportunities for time alone were rare. In settings where entire families live in one shared room with children, often for years, with dozens to hundreds of other residents in a centre, parents find little time for themselves, which increases stress and decreases resilience.

Many parents expressed the hope that greater provision could be made to ensure that a certain number of activities organised outside of DP centres would involve not only children, but also parents together with them.

“Each one of us would like to do things with our children, but we can’t afford to bring them out. Can you ask the organisation (SSGT) for this? Can you tell them that we are very happy, when we see our kids getting out, doing things, but that we would love to do some things with them too, as other families do.

All: Yes!”

All eight participants in agreement, Focus Group Discussion, Direct Provision Centre, Feb 2019.

“Parents with young children considered the swimming lessons a success because the place we used had a parent and toddler pool and another area for older children. This meant that parents with several children could take part in this activity as a family. The day trips to Water World that we organised were also very popular as they allowed families to engage with each other together, regardless of the children’s different ages. It also allowed people to commit on a once-off basis, when committing to a full programme for the entire family may have been difficult.”

Grantee F. Migrant Rights Organisation, Questionnaire Response, March 2019.

There is a need to increase opportunities for parents and children to bond outside of centres, to create happy, shared memories together, at the same time as providing opportunities for integration with other families in the locality. Nearly all (11/12) grantees were unaware of dedicated centre budgets to facilitate access to activities outside of centres, which they attributed to the fact that it had not been a requirement in contract negotiations with RIA.

Though beyond the scope of the SSGT grant a consistent theme which emerged in discussions with parents in the two DP centres was the need for greater support to ensure that adults can access better educational opportunities and skills trainings. Barriers related to the FETAC level of courses which asylum seekers were allowed participate in and the lack of transport options, crèche and child-minding facilities.

Grantee organisations welcomed the flexibility of the SSGT grant programme in allowing children who had moved out of centres to continue to participate in activities for up to a year. However they continued to have concerns about these children and saw a need for wider supports during the transition period.

SECTION 7

ensuring future support for children in direct provision centres

The impact review found that children’s access to life-enhancing cultural, social and integration opportunities remains wholly insufficient two decades after the introduction of the DP system. The response is reliant on an adhoc collection of statutory and voluntary initiatives and temporary funds such as the SSGT grant programme rather than a systematic and resourced approach to meeting the needs of this vulnerable group,

There is no dedicated statutory fund allocated per child that community and voluntary organisations could access to continue to support children living

in DP centres. The statutory grant programmes that exist have heavy administrative burdens and their competitive basis fails to guarantee universal access to extra-curricular activities for all children.

There was a lack of clarity among many respondents about which statutory bodies they could hold to account or work in partnership with to guarantee children's access to extra-curricular activities. This reflects the reality that no state agency has taken a clear lead to ensure that children can consistently leave DP centres to avail of integration opportunities.

Respondents were united in the call for a flexible, inclusive, participatory fund that would take the form of a dedicated budget per child per year. It should cover the duration of a child's stay in a centre, continuing for up to a minimum of six months once the child is living in the community. While united in the call for national leadership to ensure integration at the local level, respondents had different perspectives about how any potential future fund should be best administered.

More than half (7/12) of the grantees said a national fund spearheaded by the Department of Justice and Equality (DOJE) with the Department of Children and Youth Affairs (DCYA) would be their first preference to try to guarantee sustained support for children. Grantees also mentioned the Children and Young People's Services Committees, an interagency group with a national remit which meets regularly at the county level.

Within the DOJE, both RIA and the Office for the Promotion of Migrant Integration (OPMI) were mentioned. While RIA has responsibility for the DP system, respondents saw potential for OPMI to take on a stronger role.

The majority of respondents (8/11) wanted parents to be given greater capacity to make decisions about the type and timing of activities for their children. Of these, three suggested an increase in the overall financial allowance provided to parents each month; while five called for the provision of additional funds earmarked specifically for activities that would take into account the many competing priorities for parents' limited resources.

All 12 respondents said that voluntary sector involvement, with its community development ethos and rights-based approaches, would remain

crucial for connecting children in DP to existing community networks. Increasing the funds available to the voluntary sector was the preferred way forward, for a third (4/12) of the grantees, above every other approach.

All 12 grantees consistently said that centre owners and management teams must do more to ensure access to activities for children. Yet none chose centre management teams as their preferred structure to guarantee access to activities for children. However almost a half (5/11) of the respondents called for increased efforts and resourcing from centre management as their second or third preference. All respondents thought giving sole responsibility to centre owners carried too much risk. Citing the power imbalance between parents and centre management, cost-cutting dangers inherent in a profit-driven approach, and the lack of qualified community development professionals among Centre staff, grantees instead envisioned a partnership model between empowered parents, the voluntary sector and centre management.

All grantees saw the need for additional roles to act as liaisons with the voluntary sector, including family support workers, community workers or youth workers. Bodies cited included the HSE Social Inclusion Officers and local development development committees (LCDCs) under the Department of Rural and Community Development. There were several calls to ensure that wider training and awareness work is carried out with people in key positions within the community, including doctors, social workers, county councils and health workers.

SECTION 7

recommendations

St. Stephen's Green Trust

- Investigate handover options for provision of activities post-2020 – SSGT should work with key organisations to advocate for sustainable mechanisms and structures to continue and expand the provision of extra-curricular activities and integration support for children living in the DP system.
- Create a grantee network to share knowledge, learning and experiences.
- Continue to monitor and evaluate the grant approach in its final year as information from people working on the ground must continue to inform any intervention to assist those living in DP.

Community and youth organisations

- Bodies such as the GAA, Scouts, or other youth bodies should urgently develop national policy and practice around including children living in DP in their remit in the best interests of children living in the Irish State. While these groups already actively include children living in the local DP centre in some locations, it is not the case everywhere.

Irish government

- The state must do more to ensure effective community-led approaches can meet the integration and development needs of asylum-seeker children at the point of entry to the system.
- The DOJE's migrant integration strategy should specifically include asylum seekers. An example is the New Scots Refugee Integration Strategy (2018-22),² a cornerstone of which is ongoing consultation with both asylum seekers and local communities to help build social

connections, encourage protection applicants to contribute to their community and foster a positive sense of belonging for all involved.

- Establish and resource a grant programme to assist all children in Direct Provision: funding should be universal and responsive to changing demographics in centres and to the local context specificities; appropriate in terms of reporting and governance requirements to ensure accessibility for smaller community and voluntary groups; and in line with best-practice principles of inclusion, participation and empowerment to provide children and their parents with the ability to direct their own lives. Estimates from the SSGT grant programme suggest that a minimum allocation of €300 per child per annum would be required to provide modest levels of access to extracurricular activities for each child living in a DP centre. This estimate does not take account of the higher costs for children with additional needs to participate in activities or the resources needed by groups to manage the project.
- Ensure a coordinated interagency response – every government department has a responsibility for children living in DP centres but RIA in collaboration with the DCYA are best placed to take a leadership role to ensure the provision of resources to guarantee sustained access to extracurricular and integration supports for children.
- Ensure DP contracts facilitate meaningful access to extracurricular activities – while facilities within centres, including access to crèches, playrooms, and child-friendly spaces, should improve with the introduction of the new standards, centre management contracts should include budgets and mechanisms to measure meaningful participation of children in extra-curricular activities. As a matter of urgency, this would include dramatically improving access to transport provision during evenings weekends and holidays for children to attend activities.

² Henderson, N., 12 Feb 2019, *What are the alternatives to our broken direct provision system*, The Irish Times Online, Available at: <https://www.irishtimes.com/opinion/what-are-the-alternatives-to-our-broken-direct-provision-system-1.3790078>