



Supporting People in  
International Protection  
Context Paper 2024

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MAY 2024

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## Introduction

In the first quarter of 2024 SSGT gathered a significant amount of valuable data in relation to the current landscape surrounding International Protection in Ireland, the stakeholders involved, and the challenges being experienced ‘on the ground’. This data was collected through desk research, official International Protection Accommodation Service (IPAS) statistics, conversations and meetings with migrant support organisations, and through the testimony given in the reports received from 42 beneficiaries of our 2023 Christmas Voucher Fund<sup>1</sup>. The following paper seeks to present that data and to guide SSGT in relation to the most effective pathways to funding in the context of its strategic goal to ‘Support people in the international protection process to become full members of Irish society.’

## Current Context

At the time this report was generated<sup>2</sup>, there were 301 centres around the country housing 30,757 international protection applicants (IPAs), of whom 7,555 were children. This represents an increase of over 20,000 IPAs since December 2021, a rapid growth that has created a tumultuous environment for statutory and voluntary organisations who are working to support migrants.

Counties Donegal and Mayo have seen the steepest increases in the numbers of families placed there. In 2022, our Christmas Voucher Fund supported 3 centres with a total of 273 children in Donegal and in 2023 that increased to 15 centres with a total of 713 children. In fact, in 2024, one in every hundred people in Donegal is seeking asylum. Similarly in Mayo the numbers jumped from 4 centres with 235 children to 11 centres with 484 children. It is worth noting that these counties are particularly rural, and many areas lack essential transport links, access to specialist support and sufficient opportunities for employment.

The current accommodation crisis and inability of the Irish government to secure housing for all IPAs has meant that there are now 1,939 men who have been refused shelter, many of whom are sleeping rough, and a further 884 adults in tented accommodation. In contradiction to the Government’s pledge in 2021<sup>3</sup> to replace the direct provision system with a not-for-profit and more humane system, we are now seeing a situation wherein direct provision is preferable to the only other alternative, street homelessness.

The chaotic nature of this environment is being felt by all stakeholders in the IP (International Protection) system and, in the context of the Voucher Fund, was also reflected in the data given to SSGT by IPAS in October 2023. The list, which was expected to include all family centres around the country, included at least 11 centres that had either been closed or been repurposed as adult-only centres and was missing at least 13 family centres that were brought to our attention by local support groups.

There were also discrepancies across the board in relation to the numbers of children listed by IPAS and the numbers reported by grantee groups. In our attempt to match all centres to a group within their community,

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<sup>1</sup> In 2022 and 2023 SSGT was approached by Lakeside to distribute Christmas vouchers to all IPA children in accommodation centres around Ireland. In 2023 the Fund was supported by Lakeside, the One Foundation, and the Quinn Family Foundation

<sup>2</sup> IPAS Statistics as at 26 May 2024

<sup>3</sup> White Paper to End Direct Provision and to Establish a new International Protection Support Service!

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we found that, for at least 13 of the centres on the IPAS list, residents had no established connection with groups based locally who could provide support, information, and referrals to community services. This was especially true for standalone houses, apartments, guesthouses and B&Bs as well as smaller centres in very rural areas and, surprisingly, more salubrious urban centres (e.g., Ballsbridge and Leeson Street in Dublin) which may lack requisite support structures for marginalised community members.

Counties Wicklow, Carlow and Louth were particularly lacking in terms of having strong community connections to centres and it took significant research and outreach to our networks for SSGT to engage groups that would distribute vouchers in those centres. Positively, however, the creation of these connections has been valuable for local groups, residents, and centre managers alike and has led to the development of a strong database that links family accommodation centres and community support organisations throughout the country.

A key learning from this process has been that centre managers play a pivotal role in the level of support, development, integration, and autonomy that is experienced by residents. With the dearth of housing available, the Government has engaged private security and property management firms to manage centres. These firms are often disconnected from the issues affecting residents and can also be geographically disconnected from the centres themselves.

In the worst of cases, SSGT were told of an overt distrust of centre management by groups and residents:

*Although it created a significant amount of work for our already overstretched team, we chose not to rely on centre management to distribute vouchers. Our experience of management from centre to centre is incredibly varied. Centres are managed by hospitality workers or security companies who have little knowledge of the complex needs, trauma backgrounds or cultures amongst their residents. Often centre management exhibit a level of control over residents' lives that is far outside of what they are contracted to do. We had very legitimate concerns that vouchers could be used as a punishment or reward and not all residents would receive fair and equal treatment in relation to access to vouchers. Given the large amount of money associated with these vouchers, we were also conscious of keeping the number of touch points to a minimum to reduce the risk of vouchers being misplaced.*

This inconsistency and lack of accountability on the part of centre management is a very real concern. In January 2024, the Health Information and Quality Authority (HIQA) commenced monitoring compliance of permanent accommodation centres with the *2019 National Standards for Accommodation Offered to People in the Protection Process*. The exclusion of emergency accommodation centres from monitoring, however, is extremely problematic as there are currently only 50 permanent IPAS accommodation centres<sup>4</sup> versus 251 'temporary'<sup>5</sup> accommodation centres. This exclusion means that 23,512 residents including 5,344 children are currently living in accommodation not subject to monitoring or inspection in line with the 2019 Standards.

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<sup>4</sup> Including the National Reception Centre

<sup>5</sup> Including Emergency Centres, the Transit Hub in Citywest and four tented accommodation centres

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# Insights and Challenges

Through SSGT's period of data collection, four key areas emerged as being of most concern to the ongoing work of migrant support organisations and to the integration of people seeking asylum in Ireland. These were: the rise of the far right and growth of anti-migrant sentiment countrywide; the current accommodation crisis; a lack of practical supports such as language classes, childcare and transport that lead to barriers to integration; and the insufficient resourcing of support organisations to cope with increased demand.

## Rise of the far right and anti-migrant sentiment

Across almost all of the Christmas Voucher Fund grantee reports submitted, one of the most significant challenges that was identified was the rise of the far-right and the threat it poses not only to the integration of people in international protection but to their perceived and actual safety.

*Our biggest challenge right now is the hate and anger by the far right directed towards our people in various direct provision centres. This is making it hard for people to engage actively with centres as there is that fear that comes from the outside.*

The use and threat of violence has increased exponentially in the last year and, of the 20+ attacks or threats of violence on accommodation for asylum seekers since 2018, about half of them occurred in 2023. Already in 2024, there have been a number of high-profile arson attacks on buildings that were rumoured to have been earmarked for people in international protection.

*Current challenges include ... ongoing protest re potential new IPAS centre. These protests include a 24-hour picket, burning barrels 24 hrs. a day and unsettled residents in 3 centres. One of the centres is directly beside the back entrance to a newly proposed site, which saw a petrol bomb used before Christmas to set alight a transporter belonging to builders on site, in the early hours. Keeping positive lines of communication open with village residents, councillors and residents of the IPAS centres is at times challenging. The organization continues with advocacy, inclusion and actively vocalizes positive stories of asylum seekers living in the community.*

Reports highlighted that a lack of knowledge about refugees and asylum seekers within the community, coupled with sensationalized media reports and poor PR by government departments has led to an increase in fear, resentment, and racist behaviours at a local level.

*The biggest challenge is the spreading of misinformation that is causing fear/concern throughout the community, that is then unfortunately expressed towards families seeking refuge and them not feeling welcomed in the community.*

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It is important to note that despite this marked increase in negative sentiment, when asked about the response to their work by the wider community, the majority of grantee groups described the local community as being welcoming, positive and generous:

*In relation to the community response, (our organisation has) witnessed the generosity of the Irish people in every school, town, city and community in the country that it serves.*

*The general response from the local community has been very positive around the centres themselves with many local businesses showing direct support to the services in the form of donations of food and other perishables. They have shown continued support at trying to integrate those living in direct provision into their community and this effort has been reciprocated by the service users. However, on a wider scale given the negative responses and protests around other direct provision centres this has sparked some unease amongst those within our sectors as they fear a similar situation occurring.*

*In general, the response for the local community has been positive for example local sports groups waiving registration fees to allow children participate, as more centres have opened in the locality, a small minority have been negative about those living in IPA's accommodation.*

The impact of this shift towards the right by a loud and aggressive minority has included increased levels of fear, suspicion, and feelings of isolation among international protection applicants. For the groups that support these individuals and families, it has meant adjusting their ways of working to mitigate or limit the risk to clients and staff. It has also led to the quietening of groups who were once vocal in their communities about the benefits associated with welcoming asylum seekers and refugees and has all but silenced the voices of people with lived experience of Ireland's IP system.

## The accommodation crisis

### Homelessness

Central to, and exacerbating, many of the other challenges for people in international protection, is the wider Irish crisis around accommodation. Ireland now has a situation wherein 1,939 men seeking IP have not been made any offer of accommodation, including the estimated 150+ men who are currently sleeping rough in tents on the streets of Dublin. This particularly vulnerable group has been subject to campaigns of intimidation by anti-migrant agitators and has been demonized by narratives that depict them as predatory. This has been a polarizing tool used by the far-right to breed fear among communities and to mainstream anti-migrant messaging.

*To hear phrases like 'unvetted males' and 'men of fighting age' popularised by the darkest fringes of the internet being used on the national airwaves is a sign that some local politicians in mainstream parties seem happy to be playing with fire.<sup>6</sup>*

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<sup>6</sup> Vice quoting Mark Malone of Hope and Courage Collective [Asylum Hostel Torched As Anti-Immigrant Unrest Spirals in Ireland \(vice.com\)](https://www.vice.com/en/article/uk/asylum-hostel-torched-as-anti-immigrant-unrest-spirals-in-ireland)

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The State has also neglected its duty of care to this cohort and in a case taken against the State by a group of 40 asylum seekers in 2023 the High Court ruled that the Minister for Integration was in breach of EU (Reception Conditions) Regulations of 2018 and the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union. Despite this, however, the numbers of homeless IPAs have increased by almost 150% since April 2023 when the ruling was made. Even in the face of this this ruling, and the vulnerability of the individuals involved, State actions continue to dehumanize these men.

In advance of St Patrick's Day celebrations (2024), the group sleeping rough outside the International Protection Office on Mount Street was 'cleared' from the city by IPAS staff and bussed to a former nursing home at Crooksling in rural Dublin where they were told to pitch their tents 'anywhere you want on the mountain'<sup>7</sup>. Poor conditions including cold, and a lack of adequate sanitation forced most of the men to return to Mount Street where many found their tents had been destroyed. Since this incident, tent clearances have become a regular occurrence in the city, with metal barricades being erected as deterrents in certain areas and with Taoiseach Simon Harris threatening the removal of Government funding for homelessness charities who provide tents and sleeping bags to asylum seekers<sup>8</sup>.

## Direct Provision

For those who have been offered accommodation within the direct provision system the wider accommodation crisis has meant not only an inadequate supply of housing for IPAs, but also inconsistencies in terms of standards and delivery that is extremely problematic. As discussed above, centres are being opened in increasingly rural and isolated areas and there is no guarantee that either IPAS or centre management will ensure that residents are informed about local support services, or that local support groups will be informed when new centres are established in their catchment area.

*We see the ongoing difficulties for families living in Direct Provision (lack of autonomy, space, food, poor standards, etc.). The situation in emergency/temporary centres is worse than in the 'permanent' Direct Provision centres in many cases.*

SSGT is hearing about overcrowded centres where there are no cooking facilities for families and no communal areas or spaces to run workshops or homework clubs. In some cases, local support organisations have attempted to establish contact with residents, but management have either made it prohibitively challenging for them to do so or have refused them entry outright. The uncertainty around the sustainability of 'emergency' centres has also resulted in residents being moved at short notice from one centre to another, often to other counties.

*Major issues with a lack of sufficient suitable IPAS accommodation for families seeking accommodation. Many people are placed in hotels or emergency services which are not necessarily suitable for these families' needs.*

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<sup>7</sup> [Asylum seekers told to pitch tents 'anywhere on the mountain' in Crooksling return to Dublin city centre – The Irish Times](#)

<sup>8</sup> [Taoiseach indicates asylum seeker tents to be cleared from Dublin's Grand Canal this week \(thejournal.ie\)](#)

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*This is further exacerbated by the fact that those seeking asylum will receive transfer instructions with little to no notice and be forced to give up any engagement or progress they have made within their community and move to a new community. These transfers happen very frequently which makes the communities built within services accommodating them disjointed as both those who are being transferred and those who remain have to adapt to individuals being moved around so frequently. This further disturbs any roots which families have put down within a community such as having to pull kids out of schools when transferred or for parents to give up any work or studies they have commenced in their local area. Similarly, we feel that extra support is necessary to support children seeking asylum as they are often living in hotels or other environments that are not suitable for their development in their formative years. These environments can negatively impact these children mentally and physically as they are confined within these hotel rooms with little room for movement as well as the social issue of not being able to bring friends home from school or other areas of the community due to the environment, they are living in.*

Alongside the issue of substandard accommodation is the equally concerning matter of the poor management of centres and insufficient safeguarding for residents. One extreme example of this in practice is the video that was made public on 21 March 2024 of security guards at the Citywest Transit Hub<sup>9</sup> holding down a resident and assaulting him. Anecdotally, however, there are many more stories of neglect, racism and withholding of provisions for leverage by staff and management. This is particularly concerning for organisations like Doras in Limerick who are currently undertaking a survey of direct provision residents including IPAs and Beneficiaries of Temporary Protection (BoTPs) with a view to establishing some baseline data on the issue. They are also working with the Children’s Rights Alliance to build a case for the government to impose a set of basic but essential standards in ‘non-permanent’ accommodation centres that would adequately safeguard children and families.

As well as families seeking protection, the crisis is also having a profound effect on the 6,000+ people in direct provision who have been granted leave to remain (LTR). In meetings with several groups, SSGT was told that their clients had received letters granting them leave to remain with a transfer order stating that they must leave their current accommodation within six weeks. Anecdotally, it has been intimated to support organisations that, where people with status don’t find suitable housing within that timeframe they may be transferred to less desirable accommodation, for example, the tented centre in Knockalisheen, County Clare or to Kilbride Army Camp<sup>10</sup> in the Wicklow mountains. Similarly, groups reported that clients who must travel to other counties for work purposes were under threat of eviction from IPAS due to not spending enough time at their accommodation centre.

*The housing crisis continues to have a severe impact on families seeking asylum. There is a sense that even on getting status, there is almost no chance of beginning life in the community in a private home. Accommodation in centres is increasingly crowded and lacking in any facilities for children. As spaces in centres are taken over for bed spaces, children are missing on spaces to play, study and interact with their peers. We are deeply concerned at how this impacts on children’s development.*

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<sup>9</sup> [The Irish Times \(21 March 2024\) - Security guard at asylum seeker accommodation suspended after alleged assault on resident](#)

<sup>10</sup> Kilbride, in the Wicklow mountains, was reported by the Irish Times in December 2023 as having “prison-like” conditions with no hot water, no transport links and a constant backdrop of gunfire due to its status as an active military training base.

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*We have over two thirds of our residents who have been granted LTR but cannot access accommodation. They all end up staying far too long, some over 10 years, or the lucky ones end up moving far away and uprooting their lives, work, schools, community.*

*Housing is absolutely critical. We have about 20 families with refugee status/right to remain still living in DP because they can't find a place to live.*

*Since many of the residents have secured status and have secured employment they want to live locally and finding accommodation locally is a huge challenge. For some there is a long time wait for cases to be processed/answered.*

*The biggest challenge at the moment is housing. There are many families in the hostel who have their papers and cannot move out as they cannot find a place to rent. There are very few properties available for rent or that take HAP. Some families are in DP 8+ years.*

*Biggest challenge is with the limited amount of housing available in Ireland. Many families and single individuals have to spend a great amount of time within their IPAS accommodation before being moved to a more suitable accommodation.*

Outside of the IP system, the wider accommodation crisis affecting the Irish public has become a hot topic of discussion and debate. Demand for housing from all sectors of society, and a resultant culture of competition that pits one community against another, has shaped negative attitudes to asylum seekers and migrants, and added fuel to the rhetoric of the far right.

## Inadequate practical supports to ensure effective integration

In submissions from, and conversations with grantee groups, many reported a lack of adequate practical supports for the individuals and families they worked with. Most common was the huge need across all counties for English language support. In many counties, there are hundreds of people on waiting lists for classes and, though the regional Education and Training Boards will provide these classes for free, it is usually contingent on the individual having a work permit, which can only be applied for after 5 months of living in Ireland and there are currently waiting times of 145 days (about 5 months) between applications being submitted and permits being issued. Coupled with the fact that many ETBs close for 2-3 months of the summer, it is not an impossibility that an individual could be in Ireland for over a year before they have access to these classes.

*At present, there are over 200 people seeking English language training, which is in constant demand. Also, the (local Education and Training Board) closes for the summer months, which greatly exacerbates the situation, particularly when large Accommodation Centres open in June for example. Another issue requiring attention is the requirement from (the ETB) that clients need a work permit to access their courses. This proves problematic for us as we work intensely with new arrivals who all wish to work, but they need to wait until they get their permits. Also, our clients have the time to*



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*undertake training while waiting for work permits. A mobile childcare unit is needed to assist parents to attend events, knowing that their children are being cared for*

Other key challenges reported by grantees which are not limited to, but which disproportionately affect rural areas are issues related to inadequate transport links, lack of childcare, inadequate health services and the absence of opportunities in relation to education and employment.

*The main challenges that we ... currently face in our work with families in (the accommodation centre) is sourcing free educational courses, accessing the work force/employment, transport is a major issue, food poverty and accessing childcare places for preschool and afterschool children.*

*Access to transport and childcare for families living in the (centre) is the biggest barrier to inclusion.*

*A particular issue/challenge for IPAs in centres across (our area) is access to public transport. IPAs residing in remote centres have no access to public transport networks. Those with access to services are impeded by the cost. A solution this could be the administration of Leap cards. In the past (our organisation) has provided bikes along with visibility and safety equipment to help address this gap. Another issue is that of mental health. While we provide Wellness Recovery Action Plan (WRAP), a HSE approved training programme designed to improve self-awareness and mental health, there is a huge need for greater, more intensive supports for those who have experienced direct exposure to trauma. Unfortunately, we cannot address this due to both a lack of expertise and/or budget. The lack of expertise in this field has resulted in long waiting list for support.*

*One of the biggest issues facing us at the moment is support in finding school placements for special needs children. Some children are out of school for over 1 year as there is no school placement available for them. Additional support is needed for special needs kids to ensure there is no unnecessary regression while they are in wait. We also have a lot of parents with health issues and disabilities. Due to the proximity to the hospital, they are usually accommodated in our area. We have several parents undergoing cancer treatment or end-of-life care and many parents with other barriers such as blindness etc. Childcare and support are major issues for these individuals who have very little support structures around them and generally no family to help out. Also, many IP parents of small children (especially single parents) are not able to start working/attend professional courses full time as they need to look after children and collect them early from schools and day-care places in case they are entitled. This aspect restricts them from integrating into the community gradually and smoothly.*

Although this need for practical supports is not new to IPAs, it creates barriers to integration that must be removed if we are to realistically expect people to move on from Direct Provision and become full members of Irish society. There are huge efforts being driven by support organisations, local communities, and volunteers to provide these services but given the exponential increase in demand, it is an issue for relevant State agencies to provide these services in a way that is flexible, person centred and leads to positive integration outcomes for the greatest number of people.

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## Increasing pressure on support organisations to cope with demand

The groups supported by the Christmas Voucher Fund are diverse in terms of how they are structured, how they are run and how they are funded. Some are volunteer led while others are in receipt of significant Government funds and/ or the European Commission's Asylum, Migration, and Integration Fund (AMIF). Regardless of how they are resourced, however, there is consensus that the approach to funding and resourcing in the current emergency/ crisis context is insufficient for most services to meet existing levels, not to mention the inevitable rise in demand in the coming years.

*We are a volunteer led network and this is not sustainable in the long term as all members work in full-time positions elsewhere. Our current Chair and founding member will be resigning at our next AGM in February. We will continue to run the network with volunteers, but our capacity might be reduced going forward.*

*Securing adequate funding poses the most significant challenge for our organization when working with individuals in international protection applications. Despite the pressing needs and impactful projects, financial constraints limit the scope and scale of our initiatives. Exploring diverse funding sources, engaging in strategic partnerships, and effective communication about our mission can help address this challenge and ensure sustained support for our vital work.*

For some groups, this has been coupled with the fact that a significant amount of funding has been ringfenced specifically for Ukrainian BoTPs to the exclusion of IPAs.

*Sourcing funding can be a challenge because most of the recent funding is being targeted specifically for Ukrainian refugees.*

*One of the notable challenges we are navigating pertains to a perceived double standard in government procedures, specifically in the context of asylum seekers from Ukraine. While we understand and empathize with the urgent circumstances surrounding this migration, the disparities in the treatment of Ukrainian migrants compared to those who have been in the country for an extended period have posed significant challenges for us as a Migrant community organisation.*

Further to this, the increase in IPA numbers has naturally coincided with additional complexities in the level and types of supports they need. In several cases, specialist supports are required that fall outside the skillset of the support organisations, creating an even greater need for additional resourcing and funding.

*The need for services is complex and as such, more nuanced intentional support needs to be administered to best meet the needs of the clients, and their needs. However, capacity does not often allow to render these nuanced supports, given the influx of individuals in the areas in which (our organisation) operates. Thus, collaborative efforts are essential in continuing to do the work we do in the inner city of Dublin.*

Many of the groups interviewed by SSGT were frustrated that a more strategic, long-term approach was not being taken by government in the face of increasing demand and felt that, interpreting these upwards trends

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as an 'emergency' suggests that crisis measures might facilitate an end to the need. The likelihood, however, is that the number of people seeking international protection in Ireland will continue to rise and more sustainable resourcing must be provided for vital support organisations in a way that will build their capacity in line with the demand for their services.

## Next Steps

With this information in mind, SSGT acknowledges its role in supporting people in the IP process to become full members of society. We believe that a more humane asylum system is needed in Ireland with more effective community-led approaches to the integration of vulnerable migrants. Our current programme is focused on supporting the most vulnerable women and families in the IP process and providing more opportunities for their voices to be heard, particularly in relation to issues which affect them.

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