

Fianna Fáil Parliamentary Party Proposals on Migration Reform

Urgent, Necessary & Fair

Rapporteur – John Lahart TD

Summary

- **The existing laws should be enforced. For instance, section 11 of the Immigration Act 2004 provides that every person (other than a person under the age of 16 years) landing in the State shall be in possession of a valid passport or other equivalent documentation, issued by or on behalf of an authority recognised by the government, which establishes his or her identity and nationality to the satisfaction of an immigration officer.**
- **Bring an end to tent encampments.**
- **End the profiteering of some private emergency accommodation providers.**
- **Enact legislation to create the criminal offence of destroying identification documentation when entering the country.**
- **Any applicant convicted of a serious crime within the jurisdiction during their application period should be subject to an immediate deportation order.**
- **Any applicant who has already been refused an asylum application in another EU member state should automatically be refused an application in Ireland.**
- **A mechanism should be identified and put in place to examine the number of International Protection Accommodation Services (IPAS) applicants that enter the Republic via the United Kingdom and Northern Ireland.**
 - **Evidence suggests that numbers of those presenting for international protection do not do so at Airports or Ports.**
 - **Perhaps the newly reestablished North South Ministerial Council might have a positive role to play in this regard.**
- **Where an applicant fails to appear for an appeal of the initial assessment the original decision should automatically be affirmed.**
- **Enact legislation to restrict judicial review as an avenue of appeal by limiting the time period within which such challenges can be brought.**
- **Speed up the International Protection process and reduce the numbers seeking International Protection by designating more countries as safe countries under section 72 of the International Protection Act 2015.**
- **Reform processes to ensure that all assessments of International Protection applications are completed within 6 months. It is vitally important that Ireland's system of assessment is seen as being fair and**

compassionate but also as rules-based and timely. This reform will establish Ireland's reputation as a country that is fair but no 'soft touch'.

- **Significantly increase fines for airlines and ferry companies that fail to comply with their obligations (under section 2 of the Immigration Act 2003) to ensure that each person they carry into the country has a valid passport or other equivalent document which establishes his or her identity and nationality.**
- **Provide a clearer and more straightforward pathway for economic migrants who seek work permits and whose skills and services are required in Ireland.**
- **Integrate and support those who have succeeded in their applications for international protection, and immediately deport those who have failed in their applications.**
- **Do not enter into any contracts for the use of properties to accommodate international protection applicants where the properties concerned are providing essential services to a local community – hotels, care homes etc.,**
- **Construct accommodation facilities on disused state lands to provide shelter to international protection applicants whilst their applications are being assessed. This would ideally be done in open consultation with local communities and their public representatives. Office of Public Works to be instructed to immediately identify these.**
- **Make financial contributions under the new EU Migration Pact where we cannot provide international protection applicants with sheltered accommodation.**
- **Ireland's Social Protection system was seen as over-generous. Going forward the support offered to International Protection in Ireland should be more aligned to other states and should not constitute a pull factor.**

This Report

The Fianna Fáil Parliamentary Party considered the challenges posed by this situation at two lengthy parliamentary party meetings held in Leinster House in February 2024.

I was asked to collate the views of parliamentary party members and I have engaged with my party colleagues over recent weeks. Each member stressed the welcome that Ireland holds and should hold for migrants, emphasising how migration contributes greatly to our society and our economy (see later section). This document can be considered to be a ‘living document’.

Background

Ireland has a strong and proud tradition of offering a warm welcome to visitors and has a deep historic connection to and understanding of the plight of emigration from famine, persecution, and economic necessity.

In the past three years, we've witnessed an unprecedented global movement of people, particularly noticeable from Eastern European countries to Central and Western European countries following the Russian attack on Ukraine. Allied to this invasion is a deliberate Russian policy of displacement of peoples on a massive scale in a deliberate bid to politically destabilise the European Union. This policy includes stirring up fear and anxiety among local populations over the movement of peoples across borders.

Concern at Increasing Numbers

The majority of parliamentary party members expressed great concern that, at present, Ireland is finding it extremely difficult to accommodate the significant increase in the number of international protection applicants. The statistics reveal that the numbers seeking international protection are increasing at very significant levels. The effects of this are apparent in Dublin City Centre where it is now a common occurrence to see tent encampments around the International Protection Office on Mount Street. The statistics (disregarding Covid years) are stark:

Year	<i>Numbers seeking International Protection in Ireland</i>	<i>Ukrainians granted Temporary Protection since March 2022</i>
2017	2,926	
2018	3,673	
2019	4,781	
2022	13,651	
2023	13,277	
2024 (Jan, Feb +March)	5,237 Estimated to reach over 20,000 this year.	104,870

Migration and Our Economy and Society

All my colleagues generously acknowledged that without continuing inward migration, the economy and society would suffer a significant deficit in the necessary skills required to service many parts of, for example, our health service and tech sector, to name but two.

Without inward migration, the economy would cease to grow and develop. Migrants working in Ireland help increase economic growth, ease labour market shortages, improve output and contribute to reducing earnings inequality. They also engage in lower-paid employment that Irish workers often no longer undertake.

Migrants also bring enormous talents, skills and qualifications, some of which do not exist among our own population – particularly, but not exclusively in the tech, pharma and health sectors.

Migration has contributed richly to diversity and multi-culturalism in our country.

We need to provide a clear and more straightforward pathway for economic migrants who seek work permits and whose skills and services are required in Ireland.

In November 2023, Ireland had some of the most positive attitudes towards immigration of all EU27 countries – ranked fourth most supportive of immigration among EU27 countries and the UK.

Fianna Fáil's approach to the issue of forced migration has always been underpinned by basic humanitarianism and empathy with the plight of the individual seeking refuge and protection. We must remember in times past; many Irish people were met with the same generous welcome in other countries.

This Fianna Fáil conversation might be best viewed as a realistic and honest one bedded in a deep recognition and acknowledgement of the rich contribution that migrants play in this country; a pride in the spirit with which our people responded so openly, willingly and with such characteristic generosity to those displaced from their homes and loved ones thousands of miles away – some arriving to our shores in their primary school uniforms, such was the speed of their necessary evacuation across Europe.

Parliamentary Party members unanimously condemned attacks on individuals based on their race/colour or creed and were equally forthright in their condemnation of those who were associated with any civil unrest, disobedience, arson attacks or any other criminal damage to property or the person associated with the migrant issue.

The Party is also aware of our international (UN) and EU obligations to international refugees.

Challenges as Outlined by Fianna Fáil Representatives

Fairness and Transparency

Ensure equitable treatment for all refugees and asylum seekers, emphasising the necessity for transparency and fairness. It's imperative that there's no perception of preferential treatment

for asylum seekers over Irish citizens regarding access to services and entitlements such as social protection, housing, and public/school transport, especially in rural areas. Failure to demonstrate this fairness can exacerbate community tensions, which are susceptible to manipulation and exploitation.

It's important to note that International Protection applicants do not have access to Social Housing Waiting List, HAP, or RAS. This ensures that those on housing waiting lists are not bypassed in favour of individuals seeking protection. Maintaining this distinction is vital for fairness in housing allocation processes.

Party colleagues have highlighted substantial shortcomings in the commitments made by various departments to support local communities that have generously welcomed significant numbers of refugees proportional to their populations. These supports remain to be delivered in some cases.

Local schools in many communities remain overstretched and under-resourced; the capacity of general practices and health centres to meet this increased demand remains seriously challenged; childcare provision remains under resourced and Garda numbers have remained static. Some of these inequities have given rise to negative reactions to accepting refugees into communities.

The following quotes from a range of submissions made to me by colleagues accurately reflect the comments and concerns of parliamentary party members:

- *“Sometimes, minor issues can cause a lot of tension, such as school transportation. When local families see their own children refused a ticket on their school route due to it being at capacity, and yet they see Ukrainian children getting access to the school bus. It is wrong that it is so difficult for families to get access for their own children after years of using a service. This is not the fault of the Ukrainian children moving into the area, but rather a lack of provision of appropriate services to cater for all who need transport”.*
- *“Housing is another obvious example, where we saw (some) rapid-build modular houses being provided for Ukrainian families but those waiting on housing lists for one- or two-bedroom bungalow properties are still waiting and cannot understand why a similar method cannot be followed to provide them with a home”.*

The parliamentary party fully accepts that the State rightly aspires to the highest form of housing for people on our social housing lists but also acknowledges the tensions that can be caused when accommodation, no matter the type, is provided for refugees.

- A number of parliamentary party members highlighted concerns around the *“dispersal of significant groups of male migrants to rural towns and villages; that this distribution of large groups is causing tension in communities, whether warranted or unwarranted. To deal with this the government has to establish numerous, large retention centres where people can be accommodated until they are vetted and then see them allocated to multiple locations across the country”.*
- Members expressed the view that *“retention centres located on a national basis across the country are essential to removing some of the fear and tensions, again, whether they are warranted or otherwise, that people might feel. They are also essential in stopping*

the enormous profits being made by the private sector out of the migration crisis across Europe that we are currently experiencing”.

- Reduction in payments from the Department of Social Protection to Beneficiaries of Temporary Protection was seen to harmonise us more closely with our EU counterparts. Some parliamentary party members believe that *“payments for those already in Ireland have to be re-examined also. The public need to be aware that while we are providing help and support for those most in need, we do expect people who arrive here to contribute to our society. Needless to say, we have to show compassion in cases also, such as single or alone parents here without their partner who are trying to take care of their children”.*
- There should be zero tolerance of false claims for asylum.
- All measures that bolster public confidence in a system that is seen to be fair to legitimate applicants, and robust to those who do not qualify, need to be considered. Public confidence in our system of processing refugees and those seeking protection, is paramount to maintaining confidence and solidarity.

Impact on Cities, Towns and on Business & Tourism

Fianna Fáil parliamentary party members from across Ireland outlined genuine concern regarding the impact on local businesses in their cities, towns, and villages due to the utilisation of a significant amount, and in many cases the only available, hospitality venues and premises for accommodating refugees and migrants. This situation is untenable and unsustainable in certain areas, while many parts of the country remain largely unaffected by the consequences of such a rapid influx of migrants.

Members raised concerns about the economic impact on their local towns due to the closure of hospitality venues. The duration of this loss was unforeseen, as many initially assumed it would be temporary.

In cities, it was noted that the loss of a significant volume of bed nights could be invisible to the public. Despite the government's quick negotiations with hotel owners at the onset of the crisis, local city economies experienced substantial declines in trade and activity. This impact was felt across various sectors, including local transport, catering, venue availability, tourism, major events, and conferences. Additionally, there was a loss of sustainable, high-quality employment opportunities and amenities within these communities.

Deputies and Senators have highlighted the devastating impact of tourism decline in their constituencies, describing it as a "decimation." The loss of hospitality jobs has also affected the migrant community. In towns and villages, representatives report individuals who, due to inefficient processing, are unable to secure employment or fully integrate into their new communities. Consequently, much of their daily time is unproductively wasted.

Some local communities are losing cohesion; There is a fear that society will ‘break down’ with this problem – in those parts of society that are affected.

Requests were made that IPAS system was not used to rent homes in private estates because of the knock-on impact on rental values locally.

Suggested Actions

- End the use of tents on streets and assign the responsibility for moving anyone setting up in tents to a single agency if necessary.
- Local Authorities should carry out an audit of all local hospitality capacity which has been lost to local economies non-hospitality accommodation to establish the economic impact of the loss of hospitality on local economies.
- It is essential that as soon as an applicant is processed successfully, they are permitted to join the workforce enabling them to contribute positively and productively to society.
- Continue to enhance the employment-based immigration system that attracts talent and meets the needs of our economy. Ensure that critical skills are identified at IPAS applicant stage, and they are actively engaged with to ensure recognition of qualifications is done without delay and that they are encouraged and assisted to upskill and supported into work, having met other necessary criteria.
- Ministers present at our meetings noted that in many cases, departments of state didn't seek out providers of premises, but that business-owners approached government offering their premises for use. If a hotel or hospitality venue is offered by its owner, then government should do its best to ensure that hospitality facilities remain available to the local public/community in terms of meeting rooms, restaurants, and function rooms etc. This would particularly be the case if the venue is the primary venue in a town or village.

Other Steps

- Prioritising family reunification by reducing visa backlogs and enhancing the process for family-based immigration, ensuring that family members can be reunited in a timely manner.
- Promoting integration and social cohesion by supporting new and existing best-practice programs that assist immigrants in learning English, accessing education and job training, and integrating into their communities.
- Appointment of Integration Officers at local authority level to coordinate interagency efforts and for communication with elected members and the public.

Communications and Transparency

The following contribution best illustrates the frustrations felt by parliamentary party public representatives on the part of the people they represent:

"As you know I am fully supportive of all people who find themselves in need of such supports, but I am genuinely appalled at the lack of communication and information on the

plans for xxxxx county. XXXXX community has been very much at the forefront being utilised for accommodation and due to lack of transparency from the department perhaps more utilised than the public know. I have had numerous discussions with the Department to request information regarding plans for the placement throughout XXXXX county. I have concerns regarding placing a large number in one area, or one main street. There is no plan when a premises is selected and how many others in the same street are being used and how many tender providers are used. This puts a strain on services. When accommodation becomes available, we are not told until the contract is already signed. From my conversations with the community engagement team, there will not be any communication with the community until after contracts are signed and decisions are already made.

Communication is the key here and we need a strategic plan. These points need to be considered”.

The majority of parliamentary party members lament the poor communications from some departments when it comes to information concerning planned locations for accommodating asylum-seekers. Most public representatives, be they local or national often discover after-the-fact that decisions have been made regarding locating asylum-seekers in their constituencies. What the public perceives therefore is a process where decisions are made behind closed doors and in relative secrecy.

There is a general unhappiness around how wildly inaccurate information or ‘fake news’ is allowed to circulate, unchallenged, across popular social media channels.

There can be frustration between public representatives and their constituents as members of the community often appear to be aware of information regarding the possible use of venues in their communities as emergency accommodation well in advance of the local representatives.

Countering Misinformation and Disinformation

Fianna Fáil Parliamentary Party believes that false information; fake news; vacuum-filled rumour and deliberate media manipulation poses a threat to the cohesion of our society and has been completely underestimated by government, certainly in terms of any visible government response to the ongoing and growing threat.

- The ONLY effective counter to rumour and fake news, is fact, information and effective communication from trusted sources.
- The government needs to create a vehicle/mechanism/system of response that has the flexibility and agility to counter false claims with regard to refugees and asylum-seekers on social media channels.
- The government needs to wake-up to the misinformation circulating; that this is fed by rumour caused by lack of transparency and poor communication of policies or intentions of government departments or its agencies in many cases.
- The government must address the spread of misinformation, which often stems from rumours fuelled by a lack of transparency and ineffective communication regarding

government policies or intentions within various government departments and agencies.

- The government should consistently provide accurate information about the reality of asylum-seeking in Ireland, addressing the challenges while also acknowledging and addressing the fears, anxieties, and concerns of communities that have not been previously expressed.
- As more citizens rely on social media for news and information, it's imperative for the Department of Justice and the Irish Immigration Service to establish a strong social media presence. This presence should include an educational program aimed at distinguishing between asylum and migration, outlining the respective processes and Ireland's legal obligations. Furthermore, the program should highlight the significant benefits that migration brings to Ireland, thus fostering a more informed and supportive public.

John Lahart TD

**Fianna Fáil,
Dublin South West**