

***The Needs of Asylum Seeker Men  
Living in Viking House  
Direct Provision Centre,  
Waterford***

**Summary of Findings, Conclusions and Recommendations**

***Waterford Area Partnership  
The Men's Development Network***

**&**

***RAPID***

***November 2006***



# **Summary of Findings, Conclusions and Recommendations**

## **Introduction**

This report will focus on the findings from a survey carried out within one direct provision hostel in Waterford City. The research was carried out between the months of June to October and was funded by Waterford Area Partnership in conjunction with Waterford RAPID and in consultation with The Reception and Integration Agency. The research was conducted by the Men's Development Network. This needs analysis survey is based on the one designed and carried out by Collins (2002) in Cork. This survey was aimed at understanding the needs of asylum seekers in a range of areas.

- Accommodation
- Food
- Work, Training and Education
- Health and welfare
- Information
- Legal
- Interpreter
- Social and Cultural
- Religious

## **Rationale for Research**

Waterford Area Partnership along with other agencies such as the RAPID programme, St. Brigid's FRC, and the Health Service Executive met to discuss issues of best practice in relation to a number of Direct Provision Centres within Waterford City and County. There was concern around applicants receiving status and leaving the area with no tracking system in place or that they may not have been fully equipped to adapt to the Irish system of housing and domesticity. Childcare needs were being met and training was being provided, through Waterford City Childcare Committee. It was agreed that the direct provision centre in Birchwood, which mainly housed women and children, would be targeted in relation to providing basic courses in domestic issues and budgeting. St. Brigid's FRC were exploring how these programmes could best be delivered as there were already groups meeting in that facility. In this regard there was agreement that services were generally aimed at female asylum seekers rather than males. The direct provision hostel, Viking House, specifically houses men of which there were ninety-four residing at the beginning of the research.

This group appeared to have no developmental supports in place and little activities to occupy their time. Living conditions are not ideal. There had been some previous attempts to engage with this group. There has been no detailed research into the needs (emotional and psychological), fears, educational attainment and skills base of this group. The Men's Development

Network was approached by RAPID to address this particular group. In response the Men's Development Network devised an integrated approach to providing a means of identifying and addressing the men's needs.

The concept for the research derived from discussions at the interagency meeting between the Men's Development Network, Waterford RAPID and the Health Service Executive community care section. This meeting was convened to look at identifying the issues which male asylum seekers in Waterford face. It has been recognised that there are little if any services being provided for men who are seeking asylum in Waterford City, especially those housed in direct provision in Viking House.

### Accommodation

- The average length of time a respondent had spent in the asylum process in this research was 18 months, with the longest being 48 months and the shortest being 3 months.
- The average length of time a respondent had spent in Viking House was 15 months with the longest being 36 months and the shortest being 1 month.
- Seventy one percent of respondents were dissatisfied with the condition of their accommodation, with issues such as sleeping space, washing facilities, cooking facilities, activities and social space being particular areas of concern.
- Sixty three percent of respondents stated that staff/ security was either very satisfactory, satisfactory or fair.
- Thirty seven percent of respondents were dissatisfied with staff/ security. The main reason for their dissatisfaction was that some staff could not speak English and therefore communication was difficult. Respondents believed that those staff members who could not speak English were belligerent towards them.
- There was an average of four men to one room. In some case five and six men shared a room.
- Sixty seven percent of respondents were dissatisfied with the level of privacy they had.

### Food

- Almost 53% of respondents were not satisfied with the food served in Viking House, particularly those from African and Asian nationalities.

### Work, Education and Training

- All respondents (100%) expressed the desire to work if they had the right to.

- Sixty seven percent of respondents had undertaken training prior to coming to Ireland.
- Respondents had worked in many different fields before coming to Ireland and had also been trained in many different areas.
- Almost 63% of respondents had a level of education at certificate level or higher.
- Many respondents expressed the desire to undertake training and education in a range of areas. Respondents also stated the need for extra English language classes as those available to them at present were insufficient.

### Health and Welfare

- Ninety percent of respondents used the G.P. as their primary source of health care. Seventy nine percent of respondents were either satisfied or very satisfied with the medical care they had received.
- Some men also expressed a desire for a support group where they could discuss their situation, daily lives and any other concerns they may have.
- All respondents stated that their allowance of €19.10 per week did not meet their needs.

### Information

- Seventy two percent of respondents reported that they were unsure or that they did not have enough information on being an asylum seeker.
- The types of information respondents felt they needed included the length of time they would be in the asylum process, their rights as asylum seekers, their case information and decisions of the government on asylum seekers.
- Asked how their access to information could be improved respondents suggested more computers and internet access in the hostel, a resource/ information centre, and talks and seminars from Department of Justice, Equality and Law reform, Reception and Integration Agency and The Refugee Legal Service. Other suggestions included more English Language classes and providing newspapers in the hostel and support group work.

### Legal

- Ninety eight percent of respondents were registered with the Refugee Legal Service.
- Eighty seven percent of respondents had spoken to a lawyer regarding their case.
- The 13% of men who state they had not spoken to a lawyer about their case had been in the asylum process for 3 months, 4 months, 7 months, 17 months and 48 months respectively.

- Forty four percent of respondents believed that the asylum process was not fair and impartial while 29% were unsure.

### Interpreter Services

- Fifty six percent of respondents had required the use of an interpreter at some point.
- Sixty one percent of those were either very satisfied or satisfied with the service provided.
- Asked how interpreter services could be improved suggestions include the use of men within Viking House who spoke good English and other languages and extra English language classes.

### Social and Cultural

- Eighty eight percent of respondents had Irish friends and acquaintances.
- Fifty eight percent of respondents felt they had integrated with the Irish community.
- Sixty nine percent of respondents felt either welcome or very welcome by the Irish.
- Eighty percent of respondents stated that they would remain in Waterford if they were successful in their application.

### Religious needs

- The majority of respondents (61%) were of the Islamic faith with 13% being Catholics.
- Ninety percent of respondents could practice their religion locally, while 10% could not, these being of the Russian Orthodox and Pentecostal faiths.

The following section will report on the findings of this research along with the recommendations it makes with regard to the needs of asylum seeker men in direct provision in Viking House in Waterford City. While the number of men in Viking House was ninety four at the outset of this research, the number of men who participated in the survey numbered forty one. The low response rate was, in the researcher's opinion, due to a high level of despondency among the men in Viking House due to the situation of direct provision, lack of privacy, social space, unfamiliar and unsuitable food and lack of educational and work opportunities. To a certain extent accessing men in Viking House was difficult and reflects the invisibility of these men in Irish society and their effective marginalisation and isolation from mainstream society.

Despite the fact that those in the survey reported having Irish friends and acquaintances and to feeling that they had integrated with Irish society, the general feeling among the men is one of desperation, boredom and frustration with the situation they have found themselves in. The other reason men did not participate in the research was that they felt nothing would be done to help improve their situation and the conditions of their stay while in the asylum seeker process. It is therefore incumbent upon those responsible for asylum seekers to act upon research findings, as not doing so will further distance this vulnerable group from their local community, mainstream society, the research community and the apparatus of the state i.e. national and local government.

### **Accommodation**

The research found that the longest length of time an individual has spent in the asylum process was four years. The longest length of time an individual in this research has been in Viking House is three years.

#### *Recommendation 1*

*This should be reviewed as a matter of urgency and acted upon by the Reception and Integration Agency and The Office of the Refugee Applications Commissioner. Calls for asylum seekers to be given the right to work after six months in the process, should now be introduced. Asylum seekers who have spent such protracted periods of time in direct provision, such as those found in this study, should be facilitated and supported to leave direct provision and seek private rented accommodation.*

Seventy one percent of respondents were dissatisfied with the condition of their accommodation, while 97.5% of respondents stated that they would prefer to live in private rented accommodation. Some of the areas which were of concern to respondents regarding their dissatisfaction were the sleeping space, washing facilities, socialising space, activities and the food.

### *Recommendation 2*

*Some of these areas can be rectified immediately and include the improvement in washing facilities (both laundry and bathrooms) and should be initiated by the owner of the Hostel at the request of the Reception and Integration Agency and the HSE. Local bodies such as Waterford Area Partnership could provide funding to local organisations such as Community Development Projects to improve the level of activities (sport, health and fitness, outings etc.) available to the men in Viking House.*

### *Recommendation 3*

*It is also recommended that a reduction in the number of men sharing a room be introduced immediately. With an average of four men to a room, and in some cases five and six men per room, the tension, irritation, depression and lack of sleep makes for a desperate situation. At a minimum it is recommended that two men per room or at a maximum three men per room be introduced as policy forthwith at the behest of the Reception and Integration Agency and the HSE.*

The objective of maximising profits at the expense of a person's mental health should be stopped. Reducing the number of men per room would have a beneficial effect both for the individual and for relations among residents and staff. Many of the men within the centre spoke about the fact that they were being prescribed anti-depressants and sleeping tablets. A reduction in the number of men per room would go some way to improving this situation. Asylum seekers are a very vulnerable group of people in our society and as such the policy of direct provision should reflect this fact.

Sixty four percent of respondents stated that they were satisfied with staff and security in the centre. However 37% stated that they were not satisfied. The reason for this was mainly due to the fact that some staff did not speak English. Those respondents who were dissatisfied with staff felt that the staff that they could not communicate with were belligerent towards them. Such situations are a cause of great tension and irritation for the asylum seekers in Viking House.

### *Recommendation 4*

*Further research into this finding would be useful to determine if such situations exist in other direct provision hostels around the country.*

### *Recommendation 5*

*It is also recommended that staff of direct provision centres be given training in dealing with asylum seekers such as communications training, listening skills, anti-racist training and multi-cultural training. It is also recommended that the RIA should give consideration to the employment of staff in direct provision centres and that a minimum standard of English be introduced for staff working in such centres.*

## **Food**

Almost 53% of respondents were not satisfied with the food served in Viking House.

### *Recommendation 6*

*It is recommended that chefs working within direct provision centres be trained to cook for various nationalities (in particular Asian and African dishes). This would enable them to cook food which is culturally appropriate and cooked in the correct manner. The provision of food which is acceptable to all and of sufficient quality (particularly in relation to the use of oils) would have the effect of reducing tension between staff and residents. The conduit for change in this regard should be directed from the HSE as they have responsibility for the health of Asylum Seekers living in direct provision.*

## **Work, Education and Training**

All respondents in this research expressed the desire to work if they had the right to work. As Collins has pointed out, "The right to work is a basic human right, and a persons personal dignity, self-esteem and familial security is dependant on it. Forced unemployment has a negative effect on physical and mental health" (Collins, 2002, 66). Respondents had a large range of skills acquired before coming to Ireland. Sixty seven percent had also undertaken training before coming to Ireland, again in a range of skills.

### *Recommendation 7*

*As asylum seekers do not have the right to work while in the asylum seeker process it is suggested that the skills these men have be utilised through a labour exchange system such as that outlined by Brady (2003).*

### *Recommendation 8*

*The capacity of the voluntary sector to offer meaningful voluntary work to the men of Viking House, and indeed other asylum seekers in Waterford, who wish to work, should be enhanced. The further development of Waterford Area Partnerships volunteering section is recommended with emphasis on work for asylum seekers and the utilisation and enhancement of their skills. Engagement with asylum seekers in this manner will strengthen the understanding of community and voluntary bodies to the needs of intercultural minority communities (Faughan & O'Donovan, 2002).*

### *Recommendation 9*

*Organisations such as Community Development Programmes and Area Partnerships should also involve asylum seekers in volunteering to actively campaign for the improvement of their own living and quality of life conditions.*

"The State Parties..... recognize the right of **everyone** to an adequate standards of living for himself and his family including adequate food, clothing, and housing, and to the continuous improvement of living conditions"

(Article II of the International Covenant on Economic and Cultural Rights 1966)

There was a high level of education among the respondents with almost 63% having a level of education at either certificate level or higher.

*Recommendation 10*

*It is recommended that residents of Viking House be offered training to improve or upgrade their own skills or to acquire new skills. While asylum seekers do not have the right to engage in mainstream education, organisations such as NGO's, local authorities, voluntary groups and other local organisations could provide training courses of benefit to the men in Viking House and other direct provision centres. It is suggested that a plan to target this particular group for training be designed as they are the only adult group in Irish society denied access to full time education education.*

*The Edmund Rice International Heritage Centre will provide training and educational opportunities to asylum seekers and refugees in Waterford. This should be enhanced with funding targeted at the areas of interest expressed by the men in this research.*

Many men also expressed a desire to take extra English classes and stated that those available at present were insufficient.

*Recommendation 11*

*The Edmund Rice International Heritage Centre will be running English Language Classes five days a week, which will go a long way towards meeting this need. However it is suggested that this be reviewed on a regular basis (six monthly) to see if the classes are sufficient to meet the needs of all those who wish to participate in the classes.*

**Health and Welfare**

Ninety percent of respondents attended the G.P. as the primary source of medical services. The majority of respondents were also either very satisfied or satisfied with the medical services provided.

*Recommendation 12*

*Some residents also expressed a desire to have groups where men could meet and discuss their situation, daily lives and any other concerns or issues which they may have. This could be provided by the Men's Development Network subject to the provision of funding to run such a group and would*

*have great benefit in relation to the men's mental and physical health and would have the effect of reducing tension in the men's lives.*

Invariably respondents stated that the allowance of €19.10 a week was not sufficient to meet their needs. As with other calls in the past (Collins, 2002, O'Mahony, 2003, Irish Refugee Council, 2004c) it is recommended that the allowance be increased substantially. This allowance has remained almost static since its introduction in 1999, despite increases in similar payments such as unemployment benefit and assistance.

*Recommendation 13*

*As asylum seekers are not given the right to engage in paid employment an increase in the allowance would go some way towards meeting personal needs such as purchasing newspapers, books, cigarettes, food stuffs and entertainment.*

*Recommendation 14*

*It is also recommended that asylum seekers who have been in the process for protracted periods be given the right to leave direct provision and seek private rented accommodation and that in order to facilitate this they also be given the right to work and support themselves forthwith.*

**Information**

Many respondents stated that they did not, or were unsure if they had enough information in relation to being an asylum seeker. This finding indicates that there is a need for an information point where asylum seekers can go and find accurate information regarding their rights and entitlements as asylum seekers. Despite being given information regarding the asylum process at the time of application, asylum seekers are still not fully informed about the process and time it will take to go through the system.

On the 16<sup>th</sup> of November an Information Support Unit was opened in the Edmund Rice International Heritage Centre which incorporates information for asylum seekers. This will also include a clinic one day a week run by the Refugee Legal Service (to be discussed below).

*Recommendation 15*

*It would also be useful to design a step by step guide for asylum seekers about the length of the process and the rights held at each stage of the process, from application, to receiving status, leave to remain, or being refused status, to appeals and changing the grounds of ones application. One of the problems the men had was the length of time they found themselves in the asylum application process. This guide should detail the minimum and maximum times a person is expected to spend at each stage. There is also a need for an outreach worker from this Information Support Unit to go into Viking House to deliver the Information the men require and to inform them of the supports the services can offer.*

#### *Recommendation 16*

*It is also recommended that other means to improve the men's access to information be implemented such as funding for extra computers and internet access in Viking House, talks (or question and answer sessions) from the RIA and ORAC, and more English language classes (as discussed above).*

#### **Legal needs**

A significant difference was found between this research and the Cork needs analysis (Collins, 2002) in relation to asylum seekers registering with the Refugee legal Service. In Cork only 50% of respondents were found to have registered with the service, whereas here 98% of respondents had registered in this research.

However of concern is the fact that five respondents (13%) stated that they had not spoken to a lawyer regarding their case. The length of time these men had spent in the process was three, four, seven, seventeen and forty eight months respectively. This is a worrying finding as it indicates that some asylum seekers may not have an equal opportunity to gain refugee status if they do not have a lawyer.

#### *Recommendation 17*

*The above finding should be considered by the Refugee Legal Service when it introduces its clinic in Waterford and an effort to seek out other asylum seekers who have not discussed their application with a lawyer should be made.*

Asked if they felt the asylum process was fair and impartial 44% said no and 29% said they were unsure. Some of the reasons for this was the time spent in the system and the inconsistency they saw in the deliberation of cases and the time taken to go through the process, with some getting status relatively quickly while others took years. Others felt that religion played a part and that if one was a Muslim they had less chance of gaining status.

#### *Recommendation 18*

*Regardless of the reasons, the need for dialogue with asylum seekers and those deliberating on their fate is required. Asylum seekers need to be able to ask the questions they believe are important in a safe way, so they can be better informed of the process they are going through.*

#### **Interpreter Services**

Sixty five percent of men in this research had required an interpreter at some point. Sixty one percent of those were satisfied or very satisfied. Suggestions as to how to improve Interpreter services ranged from the provision of extra

English language classes (in process as discussed above) and using men within the hostel who already spoke good English and another language.

The need for interpreter services within Waterford City and County exists and will perhaps increase, not just for asylum seeker groups but also from other immigrant groups also.

*Recommendation 19*

*It is recommended that an Interpreter service be set up on an interagency basis which will be available to all groups, asylum seekers, minority ethnic communities, NGO's, local authorities, voluntary groups and other local organisations.*

**Social and Cultural needs**

A large number of respondents (88%) replied that they had Irish friends and acquaintances; while 58% stated they felt they had integrated with the Irish community. In Cork it was found that only 53% of respondents stated they had Irish friends and acquaintances (Collins, 2002). This finding is interesting and warrants further research, especially in the light of a recent report commissioned by the steering group of The National Action Plan Against Racism. This report found that there has been a significant drop – nearly 20% - in those who view Ireland as racist and that the main trends across key measurable statistics have moved in a positive direction over the past three years. It was also reported that experiences of racism in Ireland have fallen and there has been a shift in understanding and awareness of non-Irish nationals and their contribution to society since 2003 (Gaffney, 2006).

Such findings may be a reflection of the findings in this research, that 88% of respondents had Irish friends and acquaintances and that 58% felt they had integrated with Irish society. It may also indicate why many of the respondents stated that they would remain in Waterford if they were successful in their application for asylum.

*Recommendation 20*

*Further qualitative research would ascertain why the men feel well disposed towards Irish people, and indeed Waterford, and would inform us about how best to integrate with new minority communities.*

Eighty one percent of respondents were dissatisfied with the activities which were available to them.

*Recommendation 21*

*One area which would be of great benefit to the men in Viking House and other centres in Waterford would be the development of other activities, such as sports and health and fitness activities (swimming, soccer, tennis, basketball, snooker and pool, etc.). A drop in centre being set up by the Edmund Rice International Heritage Centre could act as a base where such*

*activities could be organised, with the provision of sufficient funding. An outreach worker would be of benefit to inform and encourage asylum seekers in Viking House and other direct provision centres in the city of activities on offer.*

### **Religious**

It seems that the majority of respondents could practice their religion locally, however some men stated they could not. Those who could not were of Russian Orthodox and Pentecostal faiths.

#### *Recommendation 22*

*This should be examined to see if there are others in Waterford city or county who are of similar faiths and provisions made to allow them to practice.*