

# Invisible People:

The Integration Support  
Needs of Refugee Families  
Reunified in Ireland



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# Nasc, the Irish word for 'link', empowers migrants to realise and fulfil their rights.

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**Fiona Finn, Nasc CEO**

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# Foreword

UNHCR believes that refugees must be at the centre of decision-making concerning their protection and well-being. In order to gain a deeper understanding of the protection problems they face, it is essential to consult them directly and to listen to them. As such, participatory assessment forms the basis for the implementation of a rights and community-based approach. When Nasc invited me to join the Steering Committee for this report, I was therefore delighted to accept and to support this important research which, by design, places the voices of refugees at the heart of its work.

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights states that “the family is the natural and fundamental group unit of society and is entitled to protection by society and the State”. Most international human rights instruments contain similar provisions for the protection of the unit of a family, as does the Irish Constitution, Bunreacht na hÉireann. In the context of forced displacement, the principle of the unity of the family does not only operate where all family members become refugees at the same time. It applies equally to situations where family unity has been temporarily disrupted through the flight of one or more of its members. Many refugees leave behind spouses, children, parents, or other relatives when fleeing from conflict or persecution at home, for a variety of reasons such as the risks and hardship of the journey, or insufficient funds to enable all to escape. This can mean families stay apart for years.

The Executive Committee of UNHCR has long stressed the importance of family unity and exhorted States to “implement measures to facilitate family reunification of refugees on their territory, especially through the consideration of all related requests in a positive and humanitarian spirit, and without undue delay.” Family reunification mechanisms for refugees and other persons enjoying international protection are vital to enable separated families to reunite safely. In the context of irregular and dangerous journeys to Europe, greater use of family reunification channels

would allow more people to travel legally, thus contributing to better management of movements and reducing reliance on smugglers, while at the same time providing pathways to protection and avoiding the need for dangerous journeys.

The separation of families when people flee persecution and conflict can have devastating consequences on family members’ wellbeing and their ability to rebuild their lives. One of the key themes that emerges from the testimonies set out in this report is how family unity is for many a primary dimension of the refugee experience and one which can continue to have a profound effect on the lives of refugees far beyond the recognition of status:

“...there needs to be kind of a recognition that people are—you know, people have this [feeling] that once people get their refugee status then their kind of worries end, but actually it's then like, you know, thinking about their family constantly and family members that they can't bring.”

For case workers who assist refugees, this will come as no surprise as, in the absence of state provided supports, many refugees seek assistance from NGOs to apply for family reunification or with the logistics of actually facilitating travel, once granted. This report vividly draws out the many the challenges that may be experienced during this period which give rise to multifarious support needs.

Reception and orientation supports are not provided by the state for reunified family members. As a result, the burden of responsibility to support new arrivals falls primarily on refugee sponsors, regardless of their age or capacity. Under the International Protection Act 2015 Act, the categories of family members that sponsors may apply for were restricted and new time limits were introduced whereby beneficiaries of international protection must apply for reunion with their family members within one year of their status being granted. Whereas under the



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previous system sponsors had the option to wait until they were better settled or more financially secure to apply for family members to arrive, currently sponsors must apply within a year regardless of their circumstances at that time.

For incoming family members there is little or no coordination that can be set in train prior to arrival and the initial period is clearly one of considerable stress and anxiety for many. The barriers faced by reunified families in accessing suitable accommodation in particular and the consequent very high risk of homelessness are highlighted once more in this report as are other challenges in areas such as health, education, access to income supports and social connection. I hope that the detailed exploration of these issues set out in this report will inform constructive dialogue in the context of a new Migrant Integration Strategy which the current government has recently committed to developing and implementing in its programme for government, “Our Shared Future”. In the context of a national response to COVID-19, there have in fact been a number of recent positive examples of engagement with state services and local authorities prior to arrival in order to ensure that incoming family members can effectively quarantine and observe public health guidelines. There is an opportunity here to learn from such *ad hoc* responses and to consider the development of a more comprehensive state policy to facilitate family reunifications which would promote better outcomes and ease the administrative burden on local authorities, state agencies and beneficiaries alike.

In highlighting these important issues, and facilitating refugees to identify and voice their own protection risks and solutions, I commend the authors for enabling a more holistic, comprehensive understanding and response to the issues concerned which I hope will lead to a more engaged policy discussion on family reunification at a national level and the introduction of more comprehensive policy response to ensure that the principle of family unity can be realised by all refugees in practice.

**Enda O'Neill**  
Head of Office, UNHCR Ireland



# Executive Summary

1

## Research Context

The right to family reunification is a well-established principle of human rights law and is one that has particular relevance to refugees and other beneficiaries of international protection (UNHCR, 2018). Statutory provision for refugee family reunification in Ireland is set out under Section 56 and Section 57 of the International Protection Act 2015. In addition, the Irish government has also provided for limited 'complementary mechanisms' for refugee family reunification through the Syrian Humanitarian Admissions Programme (SHAP) and the Humanitarian Admission Programme (IHAP).



2

## Research Design

This research report is primarily focused on the support needs of families reunified under the statutory mechanism for refugee family reunification. The refugee sponsors whom they were joining had come to Ireland as an adult independently (rather than through a resettlement programme) or as an unaccompanied minor (either independently or through a resettlement programme).

The methods utilised to collect data were semi-structured interviews and focus groups carried out with refugee sponsors, reunified family members and with a range of stakeholders working professionally in roles supporting refugees and reunified families. 39 participants took part in the study. 17 participants were of refugee background (11 refugee sponsors and 6 reunified family members) and 22 of the participants were stakeholders employed in roles relevant to refugee family reunification. Data was analysed thematically, guided by Braun & Clarke's (2006) approach to Thematic Analysis and with the assistance of the software programme NVivo12.

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## Research Findings

### The Family Reunification Process

Participants in the study were critical of the narrow definition of the family set out in Section 56 of the International Protection Act 2015. Some participants of refugee background spoke of the distress and worry associated with ongoing separation from family members who were not eligible for family reunification under the 2015 legislation. Another significant criticism made of the current statutory provisions for refugee family reunification is the 12 month time limit following recognition of status within which refugees are eligible to apply.

Responsibility for administering applications for reunification under the International Protection Act, 2015 rests with the Family Reunification Unit (FRU) of the Department of Justice and Equality. Participants identified a number of areas for improvement in the administration of the application process including provision of a realistic timeframe for when a decision could be expected and provision of information on the various stages of the process and the supporting documents required at the outset of the process.

Service providers noted that while some applicants would require legal representation, all would have support needs in relation to information and advocacy. Free legal aid is not provided to beneficiaries of international protection applying for family reunification. Legal professionals noted the particular complexity and necessity for legal support for refugee sponsors who had come to Ireland as unaccompanied minors.

In addition to practical supports related to the family reunification application the importance of providing emotional support for applicants was emphasised in what was experienced by most as a very stressful period.

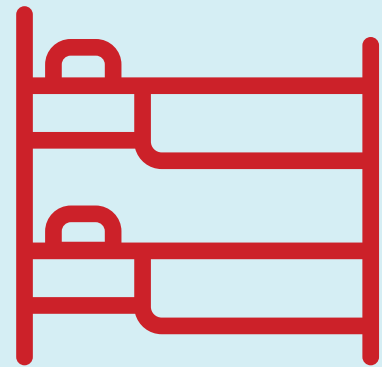
Under the provisions for family reunification set out in the 2015 Act, family members must arrive in Ireland within the time-frame specified by the Minister when permission is granted – in practice this is generally 12 months which can place significant pressures on sponsors and family members. Preparation for travel of family members can give rise to multifarious support needs. Challenges identified during this period included difficulties in obtaining travel documents, and issues in relation to exit permissions and fines in some countries; as well as the cost of travel. Provision of temporary travel documents by the Irish government to family members who needed them to travel to Ireland was identified as a positive aspect of the Irish Family Reunification regime.

The main source of support in relation to travel arrangements and costs for family members admitted to Ireland under Family Reunification is the Travel Assistance Programme administered by the Irish Red Cross. Eligibility for assistance under the Travel Assistance Programme is restricted to those with limited means, and demand for assistance significantly outstrips supply. Stakeholders expressed concern that some refugee sponsors were getting into debt in order to fund travel costs, with personnel working with unaccompanied minors highlighting the financial burden of travel costs on young refugee sponsors.

## Reception and Integration Supports

In the absence of reception and orientation supports for reunified family members the burden of responsibility to support adjustment of new arrivals falls largely on refugee sponsors. While migrant NGOs provide support in this regard this is dependent on geographical location and the capacity to provide support varies across organisations. It was recognised that the Tusla Team for Separated Children Seeking Asylum provides significant support to refugee sponsors who arrived as unaccompanied minors.

Applications for social welfare benefits and services cannot be made until after family members have arrived in Ireland, completed immigration registration and been allocated a PPS number. This created significant challenges. Waiting times for appointments for immigration registration, lack of interpretation support in immigration and PPSN allocation centres, and need for training for front-line officials to deal with the particular needs and circumstances of those of refugee background were all identified as issues.



## Housing and Homelessness

Many refugee sponsors rely on housing supports such as HAP. It is not possible to apply for social housing support to meet the needs of family members in advance of their arrival in Ireland, which can delay the search for appropriate housing until after family members arrive.

Lack of consistency across local authorities in terms of how the needs of reunified families in housing need were responded to was an issue raised in terms of the quality of information provided to families, the demands placed upon families requesting support, and willingness to engage with migrant NGOs advocating on behalf of families.

Participants of refugee background who took part in the study recounted challenges in accessing housing adequate for their families' needs, with some living in inadequate accommodation for long periods after the arrival of family members and some having experienced periods of homelessness.

The high cost and precariousness of private rented sector accommodation along with shortcomings in financial supports for tenants combined with policy neglect of reunified families are key contributory factors in the heightened risk of homelessness for reunified families. Family members arriving to join a current/former unaccompanied minor were reported to be at particular risk of homelessness on arrival.

The necessity for immigration registration and allocation of PPS numbers in advance of registering with local authorities as homeless, creates a barrier for reunified families in accessing homeless accommodation. Families without the relevant 'paperwork' completed may – at best – only have access to 'night-by-night' emergency homeless accommodation. For those accommodated in more 'stable' homeless accommodation the challenges of daily life were also significant.

## Economic Circumstances and Access to Income Supports for Reunified Families

As applications for social protection payments cannot be made until after family members arrive there will be at least some delay in receiving financial supports. The financial challenges faced by families in the period after reunification were noted by stakeholders and participants of refugee background.

Issues were raised around accessing the means-tested Disability Allowance payment. Stakeholders noted that the requirement for medical examination could raise issues for people who had yet to be allocated a medical card. For those recently arrived and with limited English skills issues were raised in relation to fulfilling requirements for Jobseeker's Allowance.

A number of potential barriers to employment for refugees and family members were identified including English language skills, recognition of prior qualifications and experience, and discrimination.

Discrimination in terms of access to financial services on the basis of nationality was identified as an issue in relation to opening a bank account and access to credit in the form of hire purchase.

Participants of refugee background who took part in the study reported that their current financial circumstances were just about – or not quite – adequate.

## Education and English Language Acquisition

A number of issues were raised by participants which may impact upon the realisation of educational aspirations. Firstly, challenges in relation to English language acquisition for those whose first language is not English were identified. Secondly, the education of children, young people and adults of refugee background may have been interrupted. Thirdly, refugee sponsors and reunified family members may be living in challenging circumstances in Ireland which necessarily impacts upon the ability to engage in education. Particular concerns were raised in relation to current/former unaccompanied minors whose educational outcomes could be impacted by their responsibility to support family members upon arrival.

Support needs identified in relation to education included support with accessing school places for children and appropriate educational services for older adolescents/young adults. Children and young people were seen to require support in relation to adjustment to school, English language acquisition and making friends.

Support with English language acquisition is one of the key educational and integration needs for adults of working age. Participants of refugee background reported a need for more extensive provision of English language classes.



## Health

Many reunified family members are likely to have significant health care needs on arrival: there is no state provision for health assessment of reunified family members, unlike refugees who arrive via resettlement programmes. Mental health was raised as a particular area of health care need for reunified family members.

In terms of access to services, challenges in registering with a General Practitioner was raised as an issue, as was delay in the processing of medical card applications. Waiting times for treatment, availability and quality of interpretation services, as well as the need for mental health services appropriate to the needs of those of refugee background, were also raised as issues.

## Family Relationships, Culture and Social Connections

Being reunited with family members brought great relief and happiness to many, often after years of stress, anxiety and loneliness caused by separation. However, significant challenges for relationships were also evident. Long periods of separation (especially between parents and children), the impact of traumatic experiences, changed roles and expectations were all identified as factors posing problems for relationships but so too were the challenges of navigating – with limited support – the stresses of the post-reunification period in Ireland.

Most refugee sponsors and reunited family member participants stated that they were able to maintain culture and traditions from their own country. Some participants identified challenges regarding religious practice, and issues of discrimination and exclusion were raised in *hijab*.

The refugee sponsor played a crucially important role in helping reunited family members to adjust to Irish society. Various professionals and formal supports – including staff of NGOs and educational projects and Tusla aftercare workers – played an important role in this regard also. Informal sources of supports – especially friends – were also significant.

Social isolation of reunified family members was highlighted as a particular issue for women with caring responsibilities and for older family members. A number of different barriers were identified in terms of getting to know Irish people or making new social connections more generally. These included language barriers; lack of time; unemployment; as well as experiences of racism. Participants raised issues in relation to overtly hostile as well as more subtle or ambiguous forms of racism faced by those of refugee background.

The need for provision of culturally appropriate relationship supports and proactive and positive family supports for reunified families was raised by participants as well as the need for local integration projects to support mutually respectful connections between those of refugee background and the wider community.



# 4

## Recommendations

- Amend the 2015 International Protection Act to address concerns about the narrow definition of the family (S. 56(9)) and the time-limit to apply after recognition of refugee status (S. 56(8)).
- A permanent complementary admissions programme should be put in place by the Department of Justice and Equality. This should be in addition to Ireland's existing commitments under the Irish Refugee and Protection Programme.
- Free Legal Aid should be made available for those applying for family reunification under the International Protection Act, 2015.
- The Department of Justice and Equality should produce a comprehensive and accessible guide to the statutory mechanism for family refugee reunification for applicants.
- The necessity for DNA testing should be anticipated and communicated to applicants for refugee family reunification at as early a stage in the process as possible.
- Appropriate guidelines in relation to requests for DNA testing in applications for family reunification under statutory and complementary mechanisms for beneficiaries of international protection should be developed by the Department of Justice and Equality.

- Decision letters from the Family Reunification Unit to successful applicants for family reunification should be accompanied by information on next steps (beyond visa and immigration requirements) and information on sources of advice and support.
- Fees for visas to enter Ireland should be waived by the Department of Justice and Equality in the case of all persons admitted to Ireland under refugee family reunification.
- The Irish government should commit resources to assisting in organising and funding travel of all those admitted to Ireland under statutory and complementary mechanisms for refugee family reunification.
- In the context of the restrictions imposed due to COVID-19 the Irish government should – as a matter of urgency – examine ways to support the travel to Ireland of family members with permission to come to Ireland for the purposes of reunification with a refugee. A dedicated integration strategy for asylum seekers and beneficiaries of international protection and refugee family reunification should be developed by the Department of Justice and Equality as part of the successor to the current migrant integration strategy.
- Consideration should be given to allocating responsibility for driving, overseeing and coordinating reception and integration policy for *all* applicants/beneficiaries of international protection, including all beneficiaries of refugee family reunification, to a single administrative unit within the Department of Justice and Equality.
- *All* applicants/beneficiaries of international protection, including *all* beneficiaries of refugee family reunification should have equal entitlements and access to reception and integration supports.

- In order to facilitate provision of reception and integration support nationally it is recommended that the existing structures and roles put in place by local authorities to support resettlement programmes at county level are made permanent and adapted accordingly to support asylum seekers and beneficiaries of international protection, including all beneficiaries of refugee family reunification. In the initial period after arrival support from integration support workers and intercultural workers should be available to beneficiaries of family reunification to support access to services.
- Relevant actions of the Migrant Integration Strategy should be fully implemented by the end of 2020. In particular government departments should immediately prioritise implementation of Actions 15, 16 and 18.
- An obligation should be placed on all government departments and agencies to ensure that recruitment and continuous professional development of front-line workers takes account of the requisite language skills required to work with linguistically and culturally diverse populations.
- Local authorities should permit registration of housing need in advance of the arrival of family members given permission to come to Ireland under refugee family reunification.
- Increased HAP payments adequate to the needs of the enlarged family unit should be available to refugee sponsors *at least* one month in advance of the arrival of family members in Ireland.
- Responsibility should be placed on local authorities to ensure that temporary emergency accommodation for persons admitted under refugee family reunification is available on arrival where necessary.
- The Department of Social Protection should be allocated responsibility for fast tracking of applications of reunified family members for PPS numbers.

- All actions under the Migrant Integration Strategy for the Department of Social Protection should be implemented by the end of 2020
- As a priority beneficiaries of international protection and family reunification should have access to English language provision through Education and Training Boards of a minimum of 15 hours per week.
- Ensure that English language provision is put in place by Education and Training Boards that meets the needs of reunified family members with childcare responsibilities or in employment.
- Reunified family members must be supported in accessing early years services, school places and other forms of educational provision in the same way that support is currently provided to programme refugees.
- The Health Service Executive should be allocated responsibility for ensuring that reunified family members have access to health assessments upon arrival and for provision of support with accessing primary care health services for reunified families.
- The Health Service Executive should be allocated responsibility to fast track access to medical cards for eligible reunified family members.
- The recommendations of the HSE Working Group to Develop a Model for the Implementation of Trained Interpreters in the Irish Healthcare System should be fully implemented.
- Mental health service providers, including counsellors and psychologists should be upskilled to ensure that their work is cognisant of the experiences of reunified families.
- Tusla should provide or fund proactive family support services to reunified refugee families.

- Particular attention should be paid to supporting young refugee sponsors and their families.
- Ensure that existing relationship, counselling and family support services are adequately resourced to meet the needs of reunified families.
- Training on anti-discrimination and anti-racism in addition to intercultural awareness should be mandated for all front-line workers in government departments and agencies.
- Schools and educational services should be obliged to put anti-racism policies and procedures in place
- Crosscare Refugee Service (2018) have put forward a recommendation for a model of licensing of landlords as part of registration with Private Residential Tenancies Board which incorporated an anti-racism/discrimination charter and we support this recommendation.
- There is a need for longitudinal research to be carried out to track experiences and outcomes over time
- Collection and/or collation of data for the purposes of monitoring integration outcomes must be carried out in way which facilitates assessment of outcomes for beneficiaries of international protection and family reunification
- There is a need for participatory research to be carried out with refugees and reunified families in order to ensure that their concerns are reflected in research and policy.

# 1

## Chapter 1

# Introduction and Methodological Approach



# 1.1

## Background and Context

The right to family reunification is a well-established principle of human rights law and is one that has particular relevance to refugees and other beneficiaries of international protection (UNHCR, 2018). Reunification represents one of the most important of the 'complementary pathways' for refugee resettlement. In light of the growing numbers of refugees globally in need of permanent settlement in safe third countries, and the dependence on complementary pathways to achieve the resettlement goals set out in the Strategy for Resettlement and Complementary Pathways developed under the Global Compact for Refugees (UNHCR, 2019), it is of vital importance to uphold the right of refugees in Ireland to family reunification. This, we argue, necessarily entails ensuring that the support needs of beneficiaries of refugee family reunification are adequately met.

Existing literature highlights that, for refugees, separation from family members is "distressing", can have a negative impact on mental health and "can have long-lasting negative consequences" in respect of integration (Choumanivong et al., 2014; see also e.g. Gambaro et al., 2018; Savic et al., 2013 and, in the Irish context, Hinds, 2018). For minor children and parents, separation can cause considerable distress for both parties. Indeed, while the vulnerability of all refugee children is recognised in the international literature, unaccompanied minors are often viewed as being at particular risk precisely because of their separation from parents and family members (Ní Raghallaigh, 2018).

Conversely reunification with family members has been found to promote integration of beneficiaries of international protection in a number of ways: for instance Hinds notes refugees' increased motivation and enhanced ability to concentrate on employment and education when reunited with family, as well as reunification promoting a feeling "that Ireland is finally 'home'" (2018: 16). A small-scale study in one organisation in New Zealand suggested that 93% of refugees who were in receipt of mental health supports reported "such abatement of symptoms following family reunification that they were able to be discharged from the service" (Change Makers NZ, 2009, cited in Choumanivong et al., 2014). In addition, research in relation to refugee children and young people highlights "family connectedness" as a key source of resilience (Pieloch et al., 2016), further indicating the importance of family reunification for integration.

Family reunification is not without its challenges. Findings from research point to the need for support both for refugee sponsors and for family members who arrive through reunification. Challenges that have been identified in a review of the literature by Choumanivong et al. (2014) include feelings of "abandonment" and "resentment" coming to the fore in relationships, difficulties in relationships between family members who have been separated from one another for significant periods, changes in "family roles and dynamics", and "intergenerational tensions" due to differences in acculturation between parents and their children. Research suggests that post-reunification obstacles and challenges may extend beyond the initial period after arrival (Rousseau et al. (2004). For instance, in the New Zealand context Choumanivong et al. (2014) highlight the need for "comprehensive, well-targeted support" for families undergoing the family reunification process. In addition to practical supports (e.g. information and support in accessing services and negotiating procedures), psycho-social supports, particularly as regards family relationships, may also be necessary (Choumanivong et al. 2014).

# 1.2

## Family Reunification in Ireland

### 1.2.1 Entitlements and Procedures

There are different mechanisms through which beneficiaries of international protection can make an application for family reunification in Ireland. The most significant is the statutory mechanism set out under Section 56 and Section 57 of the International Protection Act 2015 and this report deals mainly with beneficiaries of this statutory mechanism. The 2015 Act replaced the Refugee Act 1996 and amendments as the legislative framework for international protection and sets out the procedures for recognition of refugee status and subsidiary protection, now (along with permission to remain) dealt with under a 'single application procedure' (Sheridan, 2018). Beneficiaries of subsidiary protection are allocated the same entitlements to reunification as refugees under the 2015 Act (IHREC, 2018). Entitlement encompasses a narrow range of family relationships, which has drawn widespread criticism (see e.g. Hinds (2018) and Groarke and Arnold (2018)) and is a key focus of concern in a recent report on refugee family reunification by the Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission (IHREC, 2018). Under the 2015 Act a 'member of the family' is defined as a spouse; civil partner or child under the age of 18 and unmarried at the time of application. In the case of a sponsor under the age of 18 at the time of application family members include parents and siblings under the age

of 18 and unmarried at the time of application. By contrast, the Refugee Act 1996 made specific provision, albeit subject to ministerial discretion, under Section 18(4) for applications for reunification of a wider range of 'dependent' family members (IHREC, 2018). Provisions for family reunification under the 2015 Act have also been criticised for the imposition of a twelve month time limit for reunification applications following recognition of refugee status/right to subsidiary protection (IHREC, 2018). In their report on the right to family reunification for beneficiaries of international protection IHREC (2018) expressed a number of other concerns, including "lack of sufficient clarity" on the reunification rights of programme refugees. Included in the report's recommendations are amendment of the law in this area in order to broaden the range of eligible family relationships and repeal/amendment of provisions imposing a statutory time-limit on applications as well as clear provision for entitlements of programme refugees to reunification.

Applications which fall outside of the remit of the statutory mechanism for beneficiaries of international protection are dealt with under discretionary procedures administered by the Department of Justice and Equality. Under the guidelines for family reunification of non-EEA citizens (INIS, 2013 & 2016) "dependency" is framed primarily in financial terms, identified by IHREC as a matter for reform (2018: 16).

The Irish government has also provided for limited 'complementary admissions mechanisms' for refugee family reunification. Programmes implemented to date are the Syrian Humanitarian Admissions Programme (SHAP) which ran in 2014 and, as the name suggests, was restricted to those of Syrian nationality and the Humanitarian Admission Programme (IHAP), which provides a reunification mechanism for – Irish citizens; programme/Convention refugees; beneficiaries of subsidiary protection – to apply for reunification of family members with a planned intake of 530 persons. Eligibility was restricted to those whose family members are nationals of ten specified countries (Syria, Afghanistan, South Sudan, Somalia, Sudan, the Democratic Republic of Congo,

Central African Republic, Myanmar, Eritrea, and Burundi). Family members have been defined widely and include parents; grandparents; adult children and ‘vulnerable close family member’. Notably the scheme prioritises families capable of providing housing for reunified family members.<sup>1</sup>

## 1.2.2 Refugee Families Reunified under Statutory Reunification in Ireland

The International Protection Act 2015 has been in effect since December 31st 2016 (Department of Justice and Equality, 2019). Since then applications for refugee family reunification have been made under the provisions set out in S.56 and 57 of the 2015 Act. Since applications made under the Refugee Act, 1996 were still in process at the end of 2016, decisions in the last few years made in respect of family reunification relate to applications made under both pieces of legislation. In 2018, the most recent year for which statistics have been made publicly available, eligible applications for family reunification under the International Protection Act 2015 were made in respect of 419 individuals (Department of Justice and Equality, 2019). Applications were approved in respect of 211 of these, and refused in respect of 102 while decisions had not yet been issued in relation to the remaining 106 individuals by the end of the calendar year (ibid.). Of the 654 individuals for whom applications for reunification made under the Refugee Act 1996 were processed in 2018, 328 were successful and 326 were not (ibid.). In 2017, applications for reunification under S. 18 of the Refugee Act in respect of 729 individual family members were approved; and applications made under the 2015 Act in respect of 62 individuals were approved (Sheridan, 2018).

1. [http://www.inis.gov.ie/en/INIS/Pages/irish-refugee-protection-programme-humanitarian-admission-programme-2-\(ihap\)#:~:text=1.-,Eligibility,IHAP%20\(Frequently%20Asked%20Questions\).](http://www.inis.gov.ie/en/INIS/Pages/irish-refugee-protection-programme-humanitarian-admission-programme-2-(ihap)#:~:text=1.-,Eligibility,IHAP%20(Frequently%20Asked%20Questions).)

## 1.2.3 Integration Supports for Refugees and Reunified Families in Ireland

Current Irish policy in relation to supports for refugees and other migrants is set out in Ireland's first migrant integration strategy (*A Blueprint for the Future*), which was adopted in 2017 by the Department of Justice and Equality, (Department of Justice and Equality, 2017) and is due to run until December 2020. The strategy is informed by the European Common Basic Principles on Integration and grounded in the obligations imposed on the state under Equality and Human Rights legislation (Department of Justice and Equality, 2017: 14–15). The underlying vision is “to enable migrants or persons of migrant origin to participate on an equal basis with those of Irish heritage”, with “ensur[ing] that barriers to full participation in Irish society by migrants or their Irish-born children are identified and addressed” set out as “the primary objective” (Department of Justice and Equality, 2017: 8). The strategy identifies a number of categories of migrant including refugees and beneficiaries of subsidiary protection. The omission of specific mention of asylum seekers reflects a policy logic by which asylum seekers are expected to remain in a legal and social limbo until recognition of status. The failure to specifically name reunified family members of refugees as a focus of integration policy is unlikely to be a deliberate exclusion, but rather the result of the lack of policy visibility of this group of migrants.

The strategy sets out a set of actions aimed at enhancing the capacity of mainstream public services to meet the needs of migrants and those of migrant origin, addressing and setting out specific actions to be taken in relation to access to citizenship and long-term residency; access to public services; education; employment; health; community integration; political participation; intercultural awareness and combatting racism; volunteering; and sport. The strategy also sets out some general actions to be taken, of particular importance here is a commitment to ‘mainstreaming’ of integration by government departments and

agencies and provides for monitoring of progress (through a newly established committee) and review of implementation. A mid-term progress report was published in early 2019 and while the majority of the 46 Actions were reported to be “on track” for implementation, of concern is that important actions related to access to entitlements (including training of staff; accessible provision of information and access to interpreting services) were all behind target (Government of Ireland, 2019).

Less attention is paid in the strategy to services and initiatives targeted at migrants, which to a great extent are provided through voluntary and community organisations. (Actions under the strategy in relation to these relate mainly to funding of “integration initiatives” through competitive processes.) The vital importance of targeted “settlement services” to support migrant integration has been noted by Gilmartin and Dagg who write that “in relation to immigrant integration, settlement services are central to the translation of policy into practice” (2018: 13). Their recent study on settlement services in Ireland – which included a process of mapping availability of settlement services nationally identified significant gaps and disparities:

“Our research finds clear gaps in relation to settlement service provision and availability in Ireland. In particular, the provision of settlement services is reliant on non-governmental organisations, and funded in a short-term and competitive manner. Access to settlement services is often restricted on the basis of status rather than offered on the basis of need. In addition, the availability of settlement services is spatially uneven, and there is no clear evidence that services target issues, groups or regions of highest need” (Gilmartin and Dagg, 2018: 6).

The limited Irish literature which addresses service provision for reunified refugee families points to deficits associated with policy neglect (e.g. Crosscare Refugee Service, 2018; Daly, 2018). There is some evidence to suggest that *ad hoc* supports which may be available to reunified families, vary depending upon the particular protection status of the refugee sponsor.

Inequality of provision for different categories of beneficiaries of international protection in Ireland has been addressed in a recent paper by Arnold and colleagues (Arnold et al, 2019) who examine the contrast between provision of integration supports for “spontaneous refugees” and “programme refugees”. Refugees arriving under resettlement programmes are accommodated in reception centres (EROs) upon arrival and subsequently housed in the community and supported by resettlement and intercultural workers for a period of up to 18 months. Settlement support for beneficiaries of international protection exiting the Direct Provision centres in which they are obliged to reside while claims to protection are assessed, was instituted only in 2019 and is primarily focused on support with accessing housing.<sup>2</sup> Previous research suggests that programme refugees still receiving a programme of resettlement support at the time of reunification with family members are likely to receive at least some assistance from resettlement workers in relation to the reunification (Ní Raghallaigh et al, 2019), although given the length of time required to process applications and arrange travel it is likely that comparatively few such reunifications occur. Another group of refugee sponsors likely to be able to avail of existing supports are those who arrived to Ireland as an unaccompanied minor and are in the care of Tusla or receiving aftercare services at the time of reunification (Ní Raghallaigh et al, 2019).

2. In 2019 the Department of Justice and Equality instituted a programme of support for those exiting Direct Provision, in response to the challenges of moving-on in the context of the current housing crisis. The programme is delivered by two homelessness NGOs (Peter McVerry Trust and de Paul Trust) who employ transition support workers to assist in sourcing accommodation, primarily in the private rented sector, however their remit does not extend to assisting in cases of family reunification. <https://pmvtrust.ie/housing/direct-provision-resettlement-programme/>



# 1.3

## Research Aims and Design

### 1.3.1 Aims and Objectives of the Study

The aim of this study is to examine how the support needs of families reunified under refugee family reunification are being met in Ireland. Given the challenges for a small-scale study in capturing the range of issues associated with different categories of refugee sponsor and different reunification mechanisms the study primarily focuses on (1) families reunified under the statutory mechanism for refugee family reunification *and* (2) in which the sponsor came to Ireland as an adult independently or as an unaccompanied minor (either independently or through a resettlement programme). It is however likely that many of the issues identified in the study have broader relevance, given the lack of formal support programmes and consequent emphasis on the responsibility of sponsors for supporting family members, which to varying degrees is common to all forms of refugee family reunification in Ireland.

Achieving the research aim involves four key objectives:

1. identifying the needs of families arriving under refugee family reunification,
2. exploring how these needs are being met by services in Ireland
3. highlighting good practice in the current provision of supports and services
4. identifying the limitations and gaps in the current provision of supports and services

### 1.3.2. Methodological Approach and Methods

Given the focus on a fairly small and 'hard to reach' population as well as the exploratory nature of the study a qualitative approach was deemed most appropriate. In addition, qualitative research provides greater opportunity for those with direct experience of the issues to shape the focus of the research towards issues of most importance to them. This study could not be said to be truly participatory in that those who took part were not involved in planning, designing or implementing the study, but the aim was to provide a space for participants to freely share their insights and views on family reunification.

The team was made up of two principal researchers (Karen and Muireann), a post-doctoral researcher (Derina) and a peer researcher (Azad) with some direct experience of the issues related to family reunification in Ireland. Azad played an important role in supporting the development of interview schedules, as well as supporting data collection and verification of findings.

The methods utilised to collect data were semi-structured interviews and focus groups carried out with refugee sponsors, reunified family members and with a range of stakeholders working professionally in roles supporting refugees and reunified families.

### 1.3.3 Participants

39 participants took part in the study. 17 participants were of refugee background (11 refugee sponsors and 6 reunified family members) and 22 of the participants were stakeholders employed in roles relevant to refugee family reunification. As is typical in qualitative research, purposive sampling was utilised with selection of potential participants based on their direct personal or professional experience of the research topic. In order to

capture a range of experience efforts were made to recruit a diverse group of participants in terms of gender, country of origin, family relationships and current place of residence in Ireland. Participants of refugee background were recruited either through gatekeepers employed in migrant NGOs or other relevant roles or directly via social media: information about the study and an invitation to contact the researchers was posted to a number of community pages for refugees in Ireland hosted on Facebook. Stakeholders who took part were selected based on their experience in supporting reunified families and recruited via the researchers' professional networks.

#### Refugee Sponsors

- Each of the 11 refugee sponsors was recruited via gatekeepers employed in migrant NGOs.
- 7 of the refugee sponsors were male and 4 female.
- 3 of the refugee sponsors were Syrian nationals and the other 8 sponsors were nationals of Eritrea, Zimbabwe, Afghanistan (2), Somalia, Libya, Sudan, Uganda.
- The length of time for which refugee sponsors had been living in Ireland varied from 3 and a half years to 15 years.
- The length of time since reunification with family members varied from 1 year to 10 years (some refugee sponsors had been reunified with various family members at different times).
- Refugee sponsors had been reunited with various family members including parents, siblings, spouses and minor children.
- A number of the refugee sponsors were living in households with children under the age of 18, in total there were 16 minor children living in the households of the refugee sponsors who took part in the study.
- 3 of the refugee sponsors were living in Dublin at the time data was collected, 5 were living in Cork, 3 were living in a regional town in the Border, Midlands, Western (BMW) region.

#### Reunified Family Members

- Of the 6 reunified family members who took part in the study 4 were recruited through gatekeepers employed in a migrant NGO, while 2 participants contacted the research team directly by responding to a social media advertisement.
- 4 of the reunified family members were female and 2 were male.
- 4 of the reunified family members were Syrian nationals, while the other 2 were nationals of Iraq and Democratic Republic of Congo.
- 4 of the reunified family members had been reunified with a spouse while 2 had been reunified with an adult child.
- In total there were 4 minor children living in the households of the refugee sponsors who took part in the study.
- The length of the reunified family members had been living in Ireland varied from ½ year to 8 years.
- 3 of the reunified family members were living in Cork at the time data was collected, 3 were living in two different regional towns in the Border, Midlands, Western (BMW) region.

#### Stakeholders

- In total 22 stakeholders took part in focus groups or individual interviews.
- 14 of these participants were employed in an NGO or IGO with a specific remit in relation to refugees and migrants and all had direct involvement in supporting beneficiaries of refugee family reunification.
- 8 participants were employed in roles which involved support to current or former unaccompanied minors either as an aftercare worker, youthworker or education professional. (At least some of the participants working in an NGO or IGO also worked with current/former unaccompanied minors but not exclusively).



### 1.3.4 Data Collection and Analysis

#### Data Collection

- Data was collected through a mixture of semi-structured interviews and focus groups. The majority of data collection was conducted face-to-face, with a small number of interviews carried out remotely through phone or video call. One interview with a participant of refugee background was carried out remotely due to restrictions associated with Covid-19.
- All but two of the interviews with persons of refugee background were carried out with individuals, two were carried out with married couples.
- Interviews with persons of refugee background were carried out primarily in English, but with simultaneous translation/interpretation support where necessary. Interviews for which interpretation support were conducted with the assistance of an Arabic-speaker engaged as a peer researcher on this project, while one interview was carried out with the assistance of a French-speaking post-doctoral researcher.
- Interviews with persons of refugee background were carried out either in participants' homes or in the offices of a migrant NGO or family resource centre, with one interview carried out remotely and one carried out in the office of the researcher.
- Interviews with stakeholders were carried out in participants' place of work or remotely.
- Interviews were recorded using a digital voice recorder.

#### Data Analysis:

Data was analysed thematically, guided by Braun & Clarke's (2006) approach to Thematic Analysis and with the assistance of the software programme NVivo12. Three of the authors were involved in data analysis. Following the process of

familiarisation with the transcripts, we then chose one transcript which we each coded individually. These codes were then brought together to form a codebook in Nvivo. After this another transcript was chosen to perform an inter-rater reliability test (coding comparison query). We each coded this transcript blind, using the codebook and making a note of additional codes that could be added. The inter-rater reliability test showed a high level of agreement between our coding. Differences were discussed and decisions made about removing some codes (where there appeared to be repetition), clarifying some codes where the meaning was unclear, and adding additional codes that were not in the codebook. We then divided out the coding between us, with each of us focusing on different interviews. Additional codes were added when needed. We regularly merged our Nvivo files and reviewed the codes being used to ensure ongoing consistency in approach. When doing so at times codes were merged together if different wording was used to mean the same thing. Regular merging ensured that all members of the team had access to the new codes that were being used.

### 1.3.5 Ethical Considerations

Throughout the research attention was paid to ethical issues, something which is deemed to be of particular importance when conducting research in relation to populations who may be vulnerable or when the research relates to sensitive or emotionally charged topics (Block et al, 2013). Giving due consideration to ethics is even more important when such research is being conducted cross culturally and not in the first language of the participants, (Liamputtong, 2008) which was the case in this study. Children under the age 18 were excluded from participation for ethical reasons, as were participants whose family reunifications had taken place less than two months prior to data collection. Full ethical approval for the study was received from University College Dublin's Human Research Ethics Committee (Humanities) (HREC), from Tusla's Research Ethics Committee (REC) and from Nasc who commissioned the study. Conducting the research ethically was considered an on-going process rather than a

once-off event and this necessitated continual reflection by the research team and, at times, adaptations to our ethical procedures. Where necessary, amendments to our ethical approval were sought from the relevant committees. This became particularly relevant during the Covid-19 pandemic when face to face interviews were no longer possible. Approval was sought and granted to conduct interviews via video conferencing software during that period.

In viewing ethics as an on-going process, consideration was given to ethics not only in the data collection phase (particularly in relation to the principles of informed consent and doing no harm) but also in relation to the write-up phase, when particular attention needed to be paid to issues in relation to anonymity and identifiability. Given the small population of refugee sponsors and reunited family members to which the research relates, and the involvement of gatekeepers in recruiting participants, we were very conscious of endeavouring to ensure that quotations would not be attributable to particular individuals. Due to this participants have not been given pseudonyms. Instead quotations are just attributed to a "refugee sponsor", "family member" or "stakeholder".

### 1.3.6 Limitations of the Study

The study has a number of limitations. As a small-scale exploratory qualitative study there is no basis for claims to representativeness in terms of the experiences of beneficiaries of refugee family reunification, however the study does provide insight into the issues likely to be faced and their likely impact on the lives of reunified families. The broad-ranging nature of the study, which addresses multiple dimensions of support need, limits the extent of the findings in relation to particular issues, but does provide an overview of issues of concern to reunified families and those who work to support them. In designing the study we aimed to draw on the experiences of a diverse range of family situations, however, given that the pool of potential participants is small and relatively hard to reach recruitment was

somewhat challenging. A significant omission is that no same-sex couples were included in the study. It was also not possible to recruit a refugee sponsor who had come to Ireland as an unaccompanied minor. We aimed to recruit participants living in various locations around Ireland: in total participants were living in four different cities/towns in Ireland. None were living in a rural area. The majority of participants were recruited through migrant NGOs and therefore had received support of some kind, the report does not capture the experience of those unable to access such support, a significant limitation given the importance of these services and the geographical variation in availability identified by Gilmartin and Dagg (2018). That all but two of the stakeholders who took part in the study were employed in services based in Dublin represents another limitation.

As noted above, the study aimed to provide a space for participants to share views and experiences of importance to them. The presence of a peer researcher (Azad) on the research team helped to ensure that interview schedules were developed with sensitivity to the experiences of those from a refugee background and Azad was involved in some of the data collection alongside one of the principal investigators on the study. It is likely that some participants would not have felt comfortable discussing certain issues with the researchers given that one was a female of Irish heritage. In particular, topics such as racialized discrimination, issues related to gender roles and responsibilities and discussion of issues which involved direct or implied criticism of Irish people or organisations might have been difficult to engage in for some participants. It is also possible that the presence of a male researcher might have inhibited female participants in discussing certain topics.



# 1.4

## Outline of the Report

The report is set out as follows:

- 2

Chapter Two provides an overview of international and Irish literature pertaining to refugee family reunification, presenting findings from existing research on issues and support needs arising for refugees and their family members.
- 3

Chapter Three presents the findings from this study relating to the family reunification process, addressing issues related to challenges prior to reunification, entitlements and time-limits, experiences of the application process and support needs arising, as well as issues in relation to organising travel of family members to Ireland following a successful application.
- 4

Chapter Four addresses support needs and access to services after families have arrived in Ireland, examining needs in relation to reception and integration in the immediate post-arrival period as well as needs and access to social services in relation to housing; income; education and health.
- 5

Chapter Five presents findings on the issues and support needs arising for families as they come together again post-reunification and adjust socially and culturally to Ireland.
- 6

Chapter Six presents the final conclusions of the report and puts forward a number of recommendations for policy and future research.



# 2

## Chapter 2

# Literature Review





## 2.1

## Introduction

This chapter brings together insights from national and international literature on the experiences of refugee families in relation to reunification and support needs in relation to integration.

## 2.2

## Refugee Integration

Refugee integration is complex and not easily defined (Castles et al., 2001; Ní Raghallaigh, 2018), although there is a general understanding of integration as a ‘two-way process’ between refugees and their host societies (Castles et al., 2001; UNHCR, 2005). However, criticism of implied notions of homogeneity in either host or newcomer populations and an emphasis on the need for attention to diversity and ‘super diversity’ is a strong theme in recent literature on integration policy and practice (see e.g. Grzymala-Kazłowska and Phillimore, 2018).

While recognising that defining integration is “not straightforward”, McGinnity et al. in their Monitoring Report on Integration for the Economic and Social Research Institute refer to the need for migrants to “‘secure a place for themselves’ – find a home, a job, income, schools, access to healthcare – and also a place in the social and cultural sense.” (2018: 1). In the UK, the Indicators of Integration Framework (Third Edition), utilised by the UK Home Office, identifies 14 key domains “that evidence suggests are of central importance to integration” (Ndofo-Tah et al., 2019: 15). These are employment, housing, education, health, social care and leisure (grouped under ‘markers and means’); bonds, bridges and links (grouped under ‘social connections’); language and communication, culture, digital skills, safety and stability (grouped under ‘facilitators’) and rights and responsibilities (under ‘foundation’). Relatively limited research has been carried out in relation to the subjective views of migrants and refugees themselves in

relation to integration (although consultation with migrants informed the development of the UK Home Office Indicators). A recent Canadian study (Kyeremeh et al., 2019) found that participants – some of whom were of refugee background – placed a strong emphasis on the realisation of personal “pre-migration aspirations” – often related to education and employment – as a means of conceptualising “successful integration”. Given the frequently levelled criticism that integration policies tend to place much greater emphasis on the adaptation of migrants than on accommodation on the part of the host society (McPherson, 2010; Lentin, 2012), the authors’ argument (Kyeremeh et al., 2019:6) that incorporation of the views of migrants into development of policy and monitoring indicators is salutary.

In the Irish context monitoring of integration outcomes is limited by the availability of disaggregated data or longitudinal studies. McGinnity et al. (2018) note Ireland does not have a mechanism for monitoring the integration outcomes of refugees, which they view as particularly concerning in light of research insights from elsewhere (research cited by McGinnity et al. (2018) includes Connor, 2010; Bevelander, 2011) which indicate that in respect of key integration indicators such as employment “refugees face greater challenges compared to other migrant groups” (McGinnity et al., 2018: 100).

## 2.3

## Family Reunification as a Priority for Refugees

While forced displacement can violently tear families apart, the separation “is rarely intended to be permanent” (Jastram and Newland, 2003: 562). Jastram and Newland (2003) highlight the “powerful motivation” of refugees to restore their family units. In Ireland too, Hinds’ (2018) report for the Irish Refugee Council, Nasc and Oxfam, discusses how refugee status is often the first step towards reunification, with the latter being the main goal for many refugees.

The family is considered a hugely important source of support in rebuilding life in exile following traumatic experiences (Rousseau et al., 2001). A recent study from Germany discusses how resettled refugees separated from their partners report poorer psychological and social health than refugees resettled *with* their partners (Georgiadou et al., 2020). Separated resettled refugees not only deal with their traumas alone, but also carry worry and guilt for the safety of loved ones still in precarity or danger (Rousseau et al., 2001; Wilmsen, 2013; Choummavong et al., 2014; Alemi, James and Montgomery, 2016; Hinds, 2018). In relation to the Irish context, Darmody and Arnold (2019) refer to the pressure faced by separated children to obtain refugee status prior to turning 18, while they are eligible for family reunification, so that family members can join them.

Unsurprisingly, research indicates that separation also has an impact on family members left behind. Research in the United States by Rousseau et al. (2001) points to feelings of abandonment among family members. More recent research by Beaton, Musgrave and Liebl (2018) in the UK

reports how, because of a lack of understanding of how challenging the family reunification process is, refugees may experience pressure from family members to do more to secure reunification, with this sense of pressure affecting their ability to integrate. In the Irish context, Moreo and Lentin (2010) also highlight that family members may not appreciate the uncertainties and long processing times associated with the family reunification process, thus leading to strain on family relationships.

Long separations can put a strain on spousal relationships, or exacerbate existing tensions, sometimes leading to marital breakdown (Rousseau et al., 2001). Extended separations from children can leave its mark also: for example, the research by Rousseau et al. (2001) highlighted children's feelings of abandonment. During separation, long distance communication can be financially prohibitive, limited by poor infrastructure, or present risks to family left behind (Rousseau et al., 2001) and meaningful communication by phone can be difficult especially when young children are involved (Suárez-Orozco, et al., 2002).

While trauma related to refugee experiences prior to reaching host countries is commonly acknowledged, much less attention has been given to the trauma of ongoing refugee family separation and the distress of waiting for reunion (Rousseau et al., 2001). Recent research with Afghan refugees in the United States by Alemi, James and Montgomery (2016) highlights separation from family as a cause of depression. The detrimental impact of family separation on the mental health of refugees has similarly been reported in Ireland (Hinds, 2018).

Family unity is considered to greatly facilitate a refugee's effective settlement and social and economic integration into a new country (Jastram and Newland, 2003; Choummanivong et al., 2014; Beaton et al., 2018). Engagement in key integration activities, such as learning the local language, working, volunteering or getting to know people can be undermined by the distress of separation and feelings of guilt and concern for absent family members (Wilmsen, 2013; Beaton et al., 2018; Hinds, 2018).



## 2.4

### Reunification Process

Rousseau et al. (2001) refer to the “Western administrative violence” meted out by States’ prolonged and onerous refugee family reunification processes. Applicants are commonly faced with a lack of information, barrage of delays, uncertainties, complex administrative processes and considerable costs (Jastram and Newland, 2003; Choummanivong et al., 2014; Beaton et al., 2018; van Es et al., 2019). Research in Finland indicates that a refugee's individual financial resources, social resources (e.g. networks) and cultural resources (e.g. language skills and education) are crucial in navigating the commonly complicated family reunification application processes (Hiitola, 2019). Hiitola's (2019) research suggests that these resources are intertwined: those with cultural resources often had wider networks and this in turn related to having more economic resources. Her research highlights that refugees without education and economic resources struggle enormously in the family reunification process. Research for the British Red Cross revealed that 90 percent of research respondents reported receiving assistance to complete the family reunion application, with 9 out of 10 of these indicating that it would have been difficult otherwise (White and Hendry, 2011). Even in jurisdictions where the reunification application is free, there may be hidden costs, such as solicitor and translator fees, and costs of medical or DNA tests (Choummanivong et al., 2014; Beaton et al., 2018) often requiring the sponsor to make significant financial

sacrifices to reunite (Beaton et al., 2018). In Ireland, family reunification applications are not covered by legal aid (Strik et al., 2019).

Criticisms of the Irish process include the short time frame available to the sponsoring refugee to apply for family reunification, the ineligibility of many family members (Hinds, 2018), and the lack of information or support available on navigating the process (Moreo and Lentin, 2010; Crosscare Refugee Service, 2018).

Both internationally and in Ireland delays within international protection and reunification processes are common. For unaccompanied minors such delays can have a considerable impact: if unaccompanied minors ‘age out’ before receiving recognition of refugee status or the completion of the family reunification process they may no longer be entitled to have their family reunified with them (Jastram and Newland, 2003, Groarke and Arnold, 2018). In many western states, including Ireland, family reunification is limited to the nuclear family consisting of father, mother and children who are minors, with ‘scientific’ biometric validation required to prove family relationship when ‘credible’ legal documents are absent (Olwig, 2020). Extended family kinship models or “families of choice and circumstance” (Sample, 2007:51), formed through the adoption, formal or informal, of non-biological children during the turmoil of war and displacement, can fail proofs of acceptable relatedness, keeping families apart (Staver, 2008; Holland, 2011; Olwig, 2020).



# 2.5

## Reunification – Support Needs and Sources of Support

International and Irish literature alike points to the moment of reunification as one of joy and relief (Suárez-Orozco et al., 2002; Mackey, 2013). In Ireland, Hinds (2018) reports that in her interviews with refugees about the moment of reunification, the “elation was palpable” (p.15). At the same time research suggests that reunification can throw up significant challenges and support needs for refugees and their families.

### 2.5.1 Access to Services and Supports Post-Arrival

Research indicates that families require a wide range of orientation and integration support services during the early stages of family reunification (Marsden and Harris, 2015; Adadi, 2019). In the Scottish context, Marsden & Harris (2015) refer to the period immediately after arrival as a “transition crisis point”, a point at which families are at risk of “destitution”, whereby they do not have enough resources to meet their basic needs often due to a lack of information and lengthy processing times for various benefits. The risk of homelessness is also high at this time. The authors point to the fact that families require information on their rights and entitlements, advocacy and assistance in accessing housing and

benefits, as well as advice and guidance on school enrolment for children. They highlight a need for better advanced planning and coordination between the various stakeholders

In Ireland, the lack of post-arrival orientation or integration supports for refugee groups other than programme refugees has been highlighted (Arnold et al., 2019; Becker et al., 2012; Crosscare Refugee Service, 2018). Arnold et al. (2019) pointed to how such a policy is “illogical” and “not justifiable” (p.18), stressing that better integration into Irish society would also decrease the risk of economic dependency longer term. Mackey (2013) discusses the many stressors faced by refugee families upon reunification, including administrative errors on the part of immigration and social services, discrimination accessing employment and difficulties obtaining school places. Social workers for unaccompanied minors report a lack of support for their families following reunification and note that “administrative barriers” impede access to housing and supports when families arrive (Groarke and Arnold, 2018: 18).

Crosscare Refugee Service's recent policy submission to the Minister for Justice and Equality raises similar concerns referring to refugee family reunification in Ireland as a “time of intense stress and trauma” (2018:3). The submission draws attention to the hardships of reunified refugee families caused by issues including complex and protracted immigration and administrative processes, delays in access to essential benefits and services, difficulties accessing accommodation in the private rented sector and risks of homelessness, challenges accessing homeless services and inappropriate use of ‘self-accommodation’ emergency homeless provision, the lack of interpretation services, and absence of support or information in general.

### 2.5.2 Informal Supports

In the absence of formal integration supports, international and Irish research indicates the critical importance of social networks. Members of one's own cultural, linguistic or religious community can

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be valuable sources of information and advice, as well as offering a continued connection with one's culture, facilitating the experience of being “settled” (Choumanivong et al., 2014; Marsden, 2018). In Ireland, Mackey's (2013) research similarly reported the critical supports offered to reunified refugee families through informal networks, acquaintances, as well as NGOs.

Refugee sponsors themselves are of course particularly important sources of support, providing reunified family members with valuable social connection and essential practical and emotional support as they adjust to their new environments (Choumanivong et al., 2014; Marsden & Harris, 2015). Research in Scotland has suggested that support from sponsors can act as a “potential resource to support integration” (Marsden & Harris, 2015: 17) but can also risk creating a sense of dependency on behalf of the family member. In addition, while refugee sponsors are a vital source of support, the research highlights that often other supports are also required, given that sponsors themselves are often not very familiar with the systems and public services, due to having only lived in the country a short time themselves (Marsden & Harris, 2015).

# 2.6

## Reconnecting and Readjusting to Family Life

Upon reunification, re-establishing family relationships is a primary and immediate focus for families and while being reunited brings happiness, challenges are also evident (Marsden and Harris, 2015). Lengthy periods of separation mean that family members need to get to know one another again: this is particularly the case in relation to children who have been separated from parents for significant periods (Marsden, 2018). For some, reunification can be like “meeting a stranger” (Suárez-Orozco, et al., 2002:635). While “contradictory emotions” and “feelings of disorientation” may be present initially upon reunification (Suárez-Orozco et al., 2002, p. 635), the literature points to families readjusting over time (Addai, 2019). Reunification of families with children can take pressure off the ‘single’ parent, with potential positive impacts for children and parents alike (Strik, Hart and Nissen, 2019). Family reunification can also lead to stronger family relationships, with members growing closer together (Suárez-Orozco et al., 2002; Rousseau et al., 2004; Marsden, 2018).

During extended family separation, it is common for roles to adapt and expand beyond traditional and gendered boundaries (Rousseau et al., 2004; Mackey, 2013; Marsden, 2018). In some cases, these endure after reunification, with men assuming more household and parenting responsibilities, and women taking on more activities outside the house (Rousseau et al., 2004; Marsden, 2018). Children too may take on new roles during separation and



following reunification, sometimes leading to parents becoming dependent on them (Marsden, 2018). While at times changed roles are accepted and viewed positively, in other cases, the new roles may pose challenges for family members (Marsden, 2018). Rousseau et al. describe “inflexibility in negotiating social roles” as a “a major cause of family break-ups” (2004: 1104), citing in particular the loss of the male breadwinner role.

Prolonged separation can have a negative impact on parent-child relationships (Strik, Hart and Nissen, 2019), and time is needed to allow parents and children adapt to each other once more (Suárez-Orozco et al., 2011; Addai, 2019). Suárez-Orozco and colleagues (2002; 2011), discussing refugee family reunification in the United States, point to the age at which the child was separated and the length of separation as critical factors in predicting challenges upon reunification. Additionally, a child who is prepared for separation, understands its reason and temporariness, may adjust more easily (Suárez-Orozco et al., 2011). Marsden & Harris (2015: 41) identified “particular challenges” for teenagers when reunited with parents after lengthy periods of separation. Tensions can arise between parents and children particularly when young people “[take] on values that are different to those of their parents” (Choumanivong et al., 2014: 94).

While the long-term developmental, psychological, and relational implications of the experience of separation and reunification remain unknown, most reunified young people are considered to generally adapt well over time (Suárez-Orozco et al., 2011). However, the literature also points to losses and “bittersweet” feelings of some children for whom reunion with their parents means leaving other loved ones behind (Adadi, 2019: 62).

## 2.7

### Conclusion

Existing literature suggests that family reunification can promote refugees’ willingness and capacity to integrate and contribute to their new host societies, but that the considerable strain of the reunification process can undermine families’ ability to move forward upon reunification.

The literature points to the many administrative, legal and financial challenges of the family reunification application process, and how refugees’ financial, social and cultural resources are critical to navigating its complexities. While the moment of reunification is generally one of immense joy and relief, families can benefit from a wide range of information and support services during the early stages of family reunification in order to start their new lives and re-establish their family unit.



# 3

## Chapter 3

# The Family Reunification Process





# 3.1

## Introduction

This chapter of the report deals with the issues and support needs which arise prior to reunification taking place, focusing on support needs during the process of applying for family reunification and in getting family members to Ireland following a positive decision. The chapter begins with a brief discussion of the experiences of participants of separation from family while the main sections deal with the application process and arranging and funding travel of family members to Ireland after a successful decision has been received.

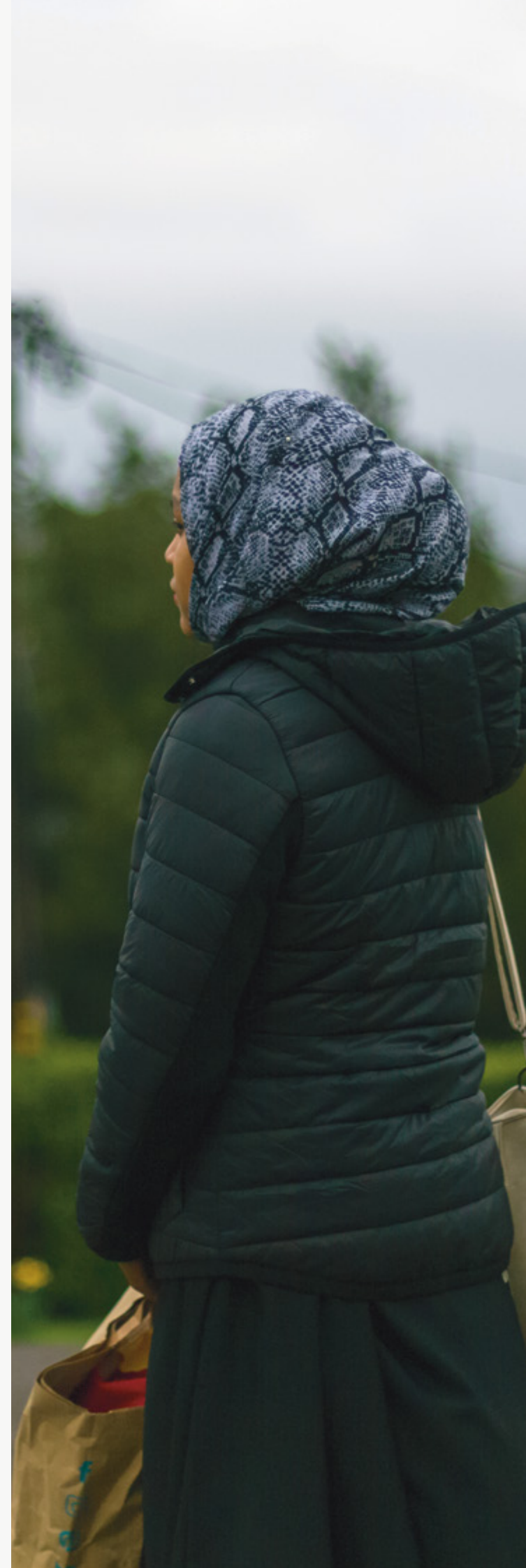
# 3.2

## Life before Reunification

For the majority of the participants who took part in our study, reunification was initiated by a sponsor who had been recognised as a refugee subsequent to arriving in Ireland, the culmination of an often lengthy process, which for some came after a long and difficult journey and periods spent in transition countries. Most of participants had experienced a separation of at least two years prior to family reunification, but some had been apart for a much longer period than this before being reunited in Ireland. While the experiences of family members outside Ireland during this separation was not a direct focus of our study, a number of participants spoke about the dangerous and difficult situations that some of those awaiting reunification had to endure. For those left behind in conflict zones, there was the ever-present danger of injury or loss of life, but even for family members who had moved on to safer countries, life could still be very difficult. For example, one participant of Kurdish background spoke of the challenges of living in Turkey for Kurdish people fleeing Syria:

**“All Turkish citizens they was hating Kurdish .... You know, nobody was supporting them and the life's so expensive.” (Refugee Sponsor)**

For refugee sponsors who took part in the study, life in Ireland before reunification with their loved ones was understandably shaped by feelings of loneliness and anxiety. As one service provider put it, while there may be a common perception that recognition of refugee status marks an end to an individual's problems, in fact, for many their worries about family members – including those it was not possible to bring to Ireland – were their overarching concern:



**“...there needs to be kind of a recognition that people are—you know, people have this [feeling] that once people get their refugee status then their kind of worries end, but actually it's then like, you know, thinking about their family constantly and family members that they can't bring.”**

Refugee sponsor participants spoke of their feelings of distress and isolation during the period spent apart from their family and recounted the worry and fear they felt about family members living in dangerous situations:

**“Yeah, I was so worried my situation. So I feel so painfully my tummy because you're thinking, you're not sleeping. What's happened? Is my family okay there?”**

**“And when I was away from them here, yeah?, I was safe but still I was thinking they were in dangerous, my mum and my family. So still I was sad.”**

Reflecting findings in previous literature (Beaton et al., 2018; Hinds, 2018), this ongoing worry and concern understandably had a big impact on the capacity of refugees to fully participate in life in Ireland prior to their family's arrival. One refugee sponsor spoke of not being able to enjoy ordinary everyday experiences while she was separated from her children:

**“And even when you're going around town and you see something nice, you think, ‘Oh, I wish my kids were here.’ Or if you eat something nice, it doesn't—you don't have peace.”**

Another sponsor recounted how difficult it was to pursue goals such as learning English or improving one's situation while preoccupied with concern about family members and whether an application for reunification would be successful:

**“So in this case, when you applying for family, one of your family there in dangerous and you didn't get decision yet, you don't know if they're going to accept your case or not. So you're thinking all of that you don't forget about your situation. Now you're not developing yourself. You're not studying language. You're not working. Because why? Your mind every time there.”**



# 3.3

## Family Reunification in Ireland: Eligibility and Time-Limitations

As noted in Chapter 1, refugee family reunification in Ireland is provided for under Sections 57 and 58 of the International Protection Act 2015 which sets out conditions in relation to eligibility. The legislation provides that applicants must apply for reunification within 12 months of receiving their letter granting recognition of status as a beneficiary of international protection.

Criticisms of the narrow definition of the family on which claims are based (effectively restricting reunification to spouses, civil partners and minor children (IHREC, 2018)) were echoed by service providers who took part in this study. In addition, some participants noted that while the current legislation allows for reunification of same-sex couples, the requirement for marriage or civil partnership was an insurmountable barrier for couples from countries where same-sex relationships cannot be formalised by law.

Beneficiaries of international protection are not necessarily aware of the limitations on eligibility for reunification. One stakeholder working with unaccompanied young people stated that upon receipt of refugee status the young people “imagine they’re going to bring everybody over, but of course it’s limited by new legislation.”

A service provider working in a migrant NGO – who noted a “big gap” between those enquiring to her service about family reunification and those actually eligible to apply – described the restrictiveness of the legislation as

“inherently harmful” and likely to create “a crisis in the family from the beginning”:

**“You’re sending that family out from the position where they’ve lost a family member. They’re listening to someone crying down the phone to them every night. Like how can you expect a family to integrate well in those circumstances?”**

The restricted definition of the family under Irish international protection law can even lead to situations whereby family members who *are* eligible may be unable to join the refugee in Ireland as this would mean separation from other – potentially vulnerable or dependant – family members. The service provider quoted above referred to a particular situation where family reunification between spouses did not occur as it would have resulted in an older relative being left without care:

**“... her husband can’t come because the [older relative] just can’t live alone and there is literally no one else who can look after him. So without being able to apply for family reunification for the [relative] she can’t apply for family reunification for her husband. So we’re making—forcing families into these really, really, really difficult decisions all the time.”**

Some participants of refugee background spoke of the challenges in relation to ongoing separation from family members who were not eligible for family reunification under the 2015 legislation. One couple spoke of the distress at the contrast between their own relatively comfortable situation in Ireland and the situation of family members living in a refugee camp in conditions of deprivation:

**“So we are happy [in Ireland], we don’t have problems. But, you know, it’s the burden of sending the money and things like that...”**

For these participants worry and concern about family members was an ever-present preoccupation which was inhibiting the ability to enjoy life in Ireland. Another participant – reunited with a spouse – recounted her distress about leaving behind family members in dangerous situations in Syria:

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**“You’re sending that family out from the position where they’ve lost a family member. They’re listening to someone crying down the phone to them every night. Like how can you expect a family to integrate well in those circumstances?”**

**“The first time when I came here I was always crying because of my mum and dad.”**

Another significant criticism made of the current statutory provisions for refugee family reunification is the 12 month time limit following recognition of status within which refugees are eligible to apply. Service providers remarked on the pressures this more restricted time limit placed on refugee sponsors who will not have had time to establish themselves in Ireland before making an application for reunification:

**“So there’s been no policy response to the changed legislative requirements. So by definition, if you’re required to apply within the first twelve months, you’ve barely had an opportunity to settle yourself. ...So whatever assumption there may have been before, whether correct or incorrect, that people would get settled, get set up, and then bring their family members over—and I know from meeting people that that hasn’t been the circumstances in some instances. Nowadays, with the legislative framework that we have, by definition people will not be well settled by the time that they’re being joined by their family members.”**

Another service provider noted that the restrictions associated with the time-limit “don’t take account of the fact that refugees and their lives are inherently complicated and their family’s lives are inherently complicated” referencing issues such as eligible family members going missing or being uncontactable during the window for application or being undocumented

or in an otherwise precarious situation in their country of residence. The lack of provision in the legislation for flexibility where delays were outside of the control of the refugee sponsor was noted as a further weakness in the legislation.

The time issue was of particular relevance in the case of unaccompanied young people whose entitlement to reunification with parents and minor siblings was dependent on the application being made while they were still under 18. Concern was expressed about the tendency for Tusla to sometimes delay applications for asylum until they had “a good sense of the child’s needs more generally”. This stakeholder was of the view that, from Tusla’s perspective, the legal process was secondary to “social care aspects”. She was concerned that, given the length of time that the asylum process can take, these delays can mean that children do not receive status until after they turn 18, thus meaning that under the letter of the law, they do not have an entitlement to be reunited with parents. While she acknowledged that Tusla are of the view that these young people “are facilitated”, thus suggesting some flexibility and use of discretion in relation to the law, she nonetheless highlighted the importance of early legal advice, saying that “obviously there are, you know, potentially serious consequences if certain things aren’t done in a certain time.” (See Groarke and Arnold, 2018 for discussion on the issues arising).

The COVID-19 pandemic raises additional issues in relation to the statutory-limit. For individuals whose status has been recognised, one stakeholder noted that the initial application letter must still be submitted within the 12 month period following recognition of status prescribed by the 2015 legislation, despite the pandemic. This was seen as concerning given the impact of the current situation on refugees and more limited access to support and information:

**“People don’t really have a mental space to think about it at the moment. People think that you might have to have all documents in to be able to apply or they can’t get access to [migrant NGOs] or to a lawyer in the same way that they would have been able to before.” (Stakeholder)**

## 3.4

## Administration and Cost of the Family Reunification Process

Responsibility for administering applications for reunification under the International Protection Act, 2015 rests with the Family Reunification Unit (FRU) of the Department of Justice and Equality. The application process begins with a letter to FRU, following which applicants will be requested to complete a questionnaire and supply relevant supporting documentation. The process ends with a decision letter: successful applicants will be informed of the time-frame within which their family members must arrive in Ireland and provided with information on visa and immigration registration procedures.

In terms of the administration of the family reunification process some personnel working in migrant NGOs were broadly complimentary, noting that the applications forms were “quite simple to fill” and that staff in the FRU were responsive to queries and willing to be flexible about deadlines where required. Others had different views, with one highly critical of the length of time taken to process applications and the limited information provided to applicants at the outset.

A number of participants of refugee background emphasised the importance of assistance during the process, in light of language barriers and the perceived complexity of the process. Two participants who had completed the process without assistance cited issues in relation to communication with FRU, one having sought assistance from a local TD with an enquiry about the progress of his case.

Participants – both service providers and those from a refugee background – identified a number of areas for improvement in the administration of the application process. For refugee sponsors in the present study, uncertainty about when a decision would be received was one of the most stressful parts of the process, with one refugee sponsor suggesting that provision of a realistic timeframe for when a decision could be expected would be really helpful. Related to this was the need for information on the various stages of the process and the supporting documents required. Another refugee sponsor suggested that a comprehensive guide on the application process be provided to applicants.

The importance of clarity – and timeliness – of communication in relation to requirements for supporting evidence was emphasised by service providers. For instance, for some applicants it is impossible to obtain the necessary supporting documentation to prove evidence of relationship and in such cases DNA testing may be requested. A legal professional commented that requirements for DNA testing – which s/he observed is often arduous and time-consuming to organise especially in countries with ongoing conflict or unrest – can cause significant delays to the application process. This participant reported that even in cases where a requirement for DNA testing was evident from the point of application, the request from the Family Reunification Unit would likely be made many months later:

“So much more could be done to communicate what documents will be expected of family members who will be part and parcel of the process. Even then, like, increasingly we would see, for example—and I can see it from the very beginning—this particular nationality they won’t have identity documents, they won’t have this, it’s going to be DNA. And the DNA test is not asked for about twelve or eighteen months after the application has started. ... but I can assess on Day 1 that there’s going to be a DNA test in this application... So where there’s no documents available to prove a familial link ... And instead of just cutting to the chase when you write the initial letter, going, ‘None of this stuff is available. It’s not going to be available.’ ...Just cut to the

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So it's a big, big shock when people's applications are declined. A big shock. I remember when mine, the first one I had made, was declined I was very angry ... And it was all dark. My life was not good at all...”

chase and do DNA and save everybody—they go through the whole lot—’Please provide the birth certs’. You go, ‘They’re not available,’ blah, blah, blah. ‘They’re not going to be available,’ blah, blah, blah. They’ll come back and go, ‘It’s a fundamental thing to have a passport,’ blah, blah, blah. Always. And then eventually they go, ‘In your case it will be necessary to do DNA.’”

Another issue raised by stakeholders was the financial costs involved in the reunification process:

“And my huge concern for that in terms like, from the applicant’s point of view, is the amount of money that it’s costing people. Because there’s so much—like, you know, in places where it’s difficult to get a passport or a birth certificate, a way around that might be to pay an amount of money, or it might be particularly expensive to get a passport, or, you know, there’s a lot of DHL goes back and forth and I don’t think there’s any consideration given to that by the Department at all about like the cost that they’re putting people to ...”

Given the limited time window for application for family reunification, applicants are bearing these costs within a very short time of receiving recognition of status and are unlikely to have much by way of a financial reserve to draw on.

The end of the application process comes with the eagerly-awaited decision letter. A criticism

which has been made previously in relation to the letter announcing a positive decision is that it provides very little information on “next steps” or available supports (Crosscare Refugee Service, 2018). This was raised by participants in this study, with one refugee sponsor noting: “They just gave me some information in relation to applying for a visa, you know, how to apply for a visa. That’s it.” This participant recounted the stress felt after the initial happiness of receiving a positive decision:

“...so now that I knew my [family member] would be coming and stay with me, I started thinking of how I would get him into Ireland in terms of the ticket, how I would pay for the ticket. But there was nobody, any services to tell me, look, you have these options or these options. I had to go and look for options.”

For some, the decision letter brings the devastating news that their application has been unsuccessful. While the study was focused on reunited families, some participants had experience of an unsuccessful application and one in particular eloquently recounted the emotional impact:

“So it’s a big, big shock when people’s applications are declined. A big shock. I remember when mine, the first one I had made, was declined I was very angry ... And it was all dark. My life was not good at all. ...I feel very, very sad for those whose applications are not successful, because they just get so desperate. And that trauma that they already have starts to impact them physically. ...And I know a devastated family here in Ireland, a devastated family, because their applications have been declined twice. They’re completely devastated and they have to send their family a lot of money all the time, every year send them.”

Given the distress caused by a negative decision this participant made the point that applications should not be refused solely on the basis of insufficient documentation. Another issue raised by participants in relation to unsuccessful applications was that the reasons for the decision may not be fully comprehensible to the applicant, underlining the need for sensitive and clear communication of the outcome.



# 3.5

## Support Needs in relation to Family Reunification

### 3.5.1 Access to Information and Legal Advice

Given the complexity and time-sensitivity of refugee family reunification, being able to access reliable information and support in navigating the application process is essential. Service providers noted that while some applicants would require legal representation, all would have support needs in relation to information and advocacy.

While free legal aid is available for applications for international protection, it is not provided to beneficiaries of international protection applying for family reunification. The literature indicates how this can have serious financial consequences for families seeking to reunite (Beaton, Musgrave and Liebl, 2018). In this study, the lack of free legal aid was flagged as a “huge issue” by service providers. Reflecting this, a participant from a refugee background spoke both of the importance of legal advice and of the financial strain associated with accessing advice from a solicitor privately:

“And what the problem we had from the beginning, the family reunification is about a lot of the legal advice. ....That we have no much awareness of the requirement on how to fit within the system ... many of my friends and the people I work with sometimes it was so hard for them and challenge— to get their case through

because, firstly, they didn’t know how the system works, how the legal advice they got was not very much. Some people they go to through [migrant NGO]... But many of the people they go for solicitor as well and the solicitor is money. It's very huge... So that's the lack of assistance of when you're applying family reunification. You need to have very proper family—understanding how to go through the system. Actually, that will let you down if you don't understand that.”

A service provider commented that lack of access to legal advice meant that over the years some refugees had missed out on their entitlements to family reunification, something which had become apparent from the experience of applicants to the complementary reunification mechanism, IHAP:

“I think in the course of IHAP it became really clear that a lot of people who had had a right to family reunification never exercised that at the right time because ... they couldn't afford the solicitor fees and/or, you know, they all encountered some problem and they didn't know to overcome that... And, yeah, I mean, that's completely devastating, like, because there are people now who had come twenty years ago. So, you know, you're talking about entire lifetimes spent apart from their family because of the absence of legal advice or the right intervention at the right time.”

In the absence of free legal aid for refugee family reunification applications, migrant NGOs attempt to fill the gap. Of course, not all migrant NGOs provide a legal service and for those who do, capacity may be limited. For instance, one NGO could only provide legal assistance where there were “particular vulnerabilities”. In addition, due to geographical variability in availability, at least some applicants may not have access to the assistance of a migrant NGO. Most of the participants who took part in our study were recruited with the assistance of migrant NGOs but even within this cohort some participants reported paying for private legal advice and two participants reported completing the application without any formal assistance.

Legal professionals noted the particular

complexity and necessity for legal support for refugee sponsors who had come to Ireland as unaccompanied minors. Legal representation was deemed essential for this group for a number of reasons. These included the fact that difficulties can emerge around “ageing out and family members ageing out” (turning 18), and in relation to this, a necessity to keep up with emerging case-law at the international level. Another legal professional referred to nationality or identity issues relevant to the countries of origin of unaccompanied minors and also referred to Department of Justice officials seeking copies of Tusla screening interviews in relation to children who had arrived via relocation / resettlement programmes. On account of these complexities, a new partnership has been established between Kids in Need of Defence (KIND), the Immigrant Council of Ireland (ICI) and the Irish Refugee Council (IRC)<sup>3</sup> which means that Tusla can now refer all unaccompanied minors for pro-bono legal support in relation to their family reunification application. Prior to this arrangement, social workers and after care workers for unaccompanied young people navigated the family reunification process themselves, in the main without any legal support.

### 3.5.2 Practical and Emotional Support Needs during the Application Process

The support needs of those applying for family reunification as they navigate the application process go beyond the legal and administrative aspects of the process. Personnel working in migrant NGOs reported providing assistance in relation to various aspects including providing advice on eligibility, completing the application, assisting with communication with the Department of Justice Family Reunification Unit

3. More information available here: <https://www.immigrantcouncil.ie/news/universal-childrens-day-new-partnership-helps-refugee-children-ireland-reunify-family>



The actual family reunification application process can often involve a lot of handholding. People have genuine concerns about the safety of their family during the application. There can oftentimes be devastating news, like a death, or there might have to be sudden evacuation from where they are...”

(FRU), helping to access and forward relevant supporting documents and even addressing envelopes, as well as dealing with queries while applicants were awaiting decisions on their applications. They also referred to the importance of providing emotional support for applicants in what was experienced by most as a very stressful period. A stakeholder working in a migrant NGO referred to the complex support needs which could arise:

“The actual family reunification application process can often involve a lot of handholding. People have genuine concerns about the safety of their family during the application. There can oftentimes be devastating news, like a death, or there might have to be sudden evacuation from where they are. During the process people go missing. And it's learning to be able to—I suppose to work with people throughout their process. ... With DNA testing there's the possibility that people might find out that the biological relationship they thought existed doesn't exist as well. So there's also kind of making sure that you're able to find supports for a person who has been blindsided by something during the process.”

Tusla Aftercare workers played a crucially important role in supporting unaccompanied minor sponsors in similar ways. While the



establishment of the new KIND/ICI/IRC project meant that they were no longer “doing everything” in relation to the application, they continued to attend legal appointments with young people, provide young people with information about what to expect, provide emotional support and, as one worker put it, “harping on” at young people trying to get them to get documents: “ ‘Did you ring your mum?’ ‘No, I didn’t.’ You’re like oh, Jesus Christ, I need you to get this!’”. It should be noted too that for some young people eligible to apply for reunification the decision *whether* to do so may not be straightforward and require support. Stakeholders working with unaccompanied minors noted that while family reunification was an important goal for some, others with eligible family members may ultimately decide not to apply for various reasons including, the onerous responsibility involved when family members arrive, young women being afraid of losing their freedom and having to revert to cultural expectations, difficult family situations, and family members not wanting to come to Ireland. For those who do apply, as with other refugee sponsors, unaccompanied minors may find themselves having to deal with unexpected challenges during the process. In this regard, a stakeholder spoke about a young person whose DNA test came back as negative, which had a devastating impact: learning that there was no biological tie between herself and the person she regarded as a parent had reportedly “destroyed” the young person.

An important aspect of “minding people throughout the process”, noted by one legal professional who took part, had to do with warning people that the process could be lengthy. Refugee sponsors are of course not just dealing with their own anxieties while going through the application process and waiting for a decision, but often with the understandable anxieties of family members. A stakeholder working with unaccompanied minors referred to family members asking the young people “when are we coming? when are we coming?”, with this stakeholder making efforts in such situations to counter “expectation[s] that the family will come quickly”.

Personnel working in migrant NGOs noted that the length of time from application to decision varied according to factors such as the complexity of the case and availability of supporting documentation “at an early stage in the process”. Participants with personal experience of the process had widely disparate experiences with some reporting that the process had been relatively quick, while others had waited a number of years for a decision. In one case a refugee sponsor recounted that a family member for whom an application had been made had passed away – years after an application had been made – before a decision had been received.

The anxiety experienced while waiting for a decision was described by many of the participants of refugee background as all-consuming, with nervousness about the outcome of the decision compounded by uncertainty as to when a decision would arrive. One refugee sponsor described “checking the mail everyday”. Another described the emotional toll of waiting for a decision while dealing with worry about the difficult situation of family members and being unable to provide answers to those family members about when or whether they would be able to join them in Ireland:

**“So you stay at home. Some people I know they lost their mind. This is drinking and smoking because they don’t know what they do. It’s very, very difficult. They should do—like the Government they should give deadline or timetable, whatever, this case. So accept or not. So if not, you know you’re not going to do anything. All you can do is work and help them by money, send them some money for their survival. You know what I mean. So if you get decision yes, you know you can bring them after one month or two, whatever. You get the answer. But now you don’t know you will get it or not.” (Refugee Sponsor)**

While personnel in migrant NGOs spoke of their efforts to support individuals during the waiting process, one noted the challenge of providing adequate support to individuals for whom the stresses of the process and worry about family members were potentially causing or exacerbating mental health difficulties. This service provider noted the difficulties in identifying these needs given the lack of expertise of migrant NGOs in this

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**“People go missing. Travel document applications are refused. Securing the means of travel can be incredibly tricky. For Syrians inside the border, trying to get across the border to somewhere that they can apply from is incredibly difficult, particularly in circumstances, for example, where the person might be a civil servant and you need express written permission to be able to leave the country. You know, or someone who is, you know, in a refugee camp and has no documentation whatsoever.”**

area, as well as the lack of appropriate services to which refugees who appeared to be in need of mental health support could be referred.

In discussing the stresses of the waiting period, service providers working with unaccompanied minors mentioned the lack of trust the young people had in organisational bodies; this led to young people questioning how the process was taking so long and why others were getting applications approved before them. One stakeholder noted that “this extra stress” was experienced by young people who already had experienced trauma:

**“Yes. And it’s almost like—I mean, there’s a lot of cases of undiagnosed PTSD coming in as well and they’re getting all this extra stress on top of them and then it’s spilling over, and the anxiety. And then when they’re trying to communicate with their families what’s going on, they’re probably getting it all wrong. It can be a real mismatch of dynamics.”**

## 3.6

### Funding and Organising Travel of Family Members

Receipt of a positive decision while obviously an occasion for great joy, at the same time brings a whole new set of concerns for refugee sponsors and their families, the most immediately pressing of which is organising travel of family members. Arranging travel of family members to Ireland, particularly where the family members are in countries with ongoing conflict or otherwise dangerous conditions, can be both challenging and expensive. There can be a strong sense of urgency in relation to travel – as one refugee sponsor put it, family members “could die at any moment”. In any case, as noted above under the provisions for family reunification set out in the 2015 Act, family members must arrive in Ireland within the time-frame specified by the Minister when permission is granted – in practice this is generally 12 months: time is therefore of the essence.

Preparation for travel of family members involves a number of tasks which vary in complexity depending upon the country of travel and situation of family members, giving rise to multifarious support needs. Personnel in migrant NGOs and stakeholders working with unaccompanied minors reported assisting with applications for travel documents and visas and in other ways providing support with travel arrangements.

One stakeholder noted “the range of difficulties” which can arise in the period after permission to join a refugee sponsor in Ireland is granted:

“People go missing. Travel document applications are refused. Securing the means of travel can be incredibly tricky. For Syrians inside the border, trying to get across the border to somewhere that they can apply from is incredibly difficult, particularly in circumstances, for example, where the person might be a civil servant and you need express written permission to be able to leave the country. You know, or someone who is, you know, in a refugee camp and has no documentation whatsoever.”

Some of the participants in the study recounted the difficulty – and high cost – of obtaining passports from countries such as Syria for those living in other countries, when permission for reunification was granted. In circumstances where it is not possible to obtain a passport, the Red Cross can assist by issuing temporary ICRC travel documents free of charge and three of the participants noted the assistance they had received from the Red Cross in this regard. A stakeholder noted that since 2015 the Irish government will issue temporary travel documents to family members where necessary, which was viewed as a very helpful development. Another stakeholder noted these normally take 16 weeks to process. Additionally, the cost of visas at €60 per individual family member can represent a significant burden.

Another potential complication raised by a stakeholder related to general challenges in acquiring exit permission in some countries. An example provided was Lebanon, where people fleeing the conflict in Syria were in the past able to cross the border relatively easily, but restrictions since 2015 have prevented registration of refugees by UNHCR and created difficulties for unregistered individuals, who will be requested to pay a large exit fine in order to gain permission to leave. In countries like this, the UNHCR advocates – not always successfully – on the issue of exit permissions and fines, negotiating to have fees waived in individual cases where possible.

The cost of organising transport to Ireland obviously varies considerably depending on the country of departure, the number of family members travelling, and whether passengers have additional support needs. The main source

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**So I think when the Government makes a decision and it is successful, maybe they should pay for the ticket as well and make sure that that person gets into Ireland very quickly, because some of them could die, believe me.”**

**Refugee Sponsor**

of support in relation to travel arrangements and costs for family members admitted to Ireland under Family Reunification is the Travel Assistance Programme administered by the Irish Red Cross and funded and implemented in conjunction with UNHCR and the International Organisation for Migration, the latter having responsibility for organising the logistics of travel. Through this Travel Assistance Programme the Irish government (via the Irish Refugee Protection Programme (IRPP) who decide on who to fund on a ‘case-by-case’ basis) has underwritten the travel costs for some family members reunified under the complementary mechanism, the Irish Humanitarian Admissions Programme (IHAP). No state funding for travel is provided in relation to beneficiaries of statutory family reunification availing of the Travel Assistance Programme. Eligibility for assistance under the Travel Assistance Programme is restricted to those with limited means, but there is no set income threshold and because demand for assistance significantly outstrips supply, not all who are eligible will receive assistance. In general, family members should be ‘travel ready’ (i.e. have already organised travel documents and other administrative requirements) and resources might have to be reallocated over the course of the year if, for example, a family encounters a problem in accessing travel documents.

Funding for the programme varies annually and as the budget runs across the calendar year, individuals allocated funding must travel within that calendar year. Eligible applicants who cannot be funded at the time of application are placed on a waiting list and will generally be prioritised when funding becomes available. On occasion the Red Cross has to negotiate with FRU in cases where travel under the scheme has not been arranged within the twelve month window allotted: the perception of a relevant stakeholder is that once a clear timeframe for travel has been provided then extensions will be permissible but that without this an extension might not be granted.

At least some eligible applicants on the waiting list will have self-funded travel before funding is available from the Travel Assistance Programme. As one participant in this study explained, concern for the safety of family members created an imperative to organise travel as quickly as possible, even though this represented a significant financial outlay:

**“... they were at risk, so I was—I couldn’t wait. I want to go through Red Cross. ... So as I was just in hurry, as quick as they can to just leave...”** (Refugee Sponsor)

Another participant who lacked the financial resources to fund the travel costs of a family member noted that “getting the Irish Red Cross for pay for my [family member] delayed arrival for up to six months”. This participant was of the view that the Irish government should pay the travel costs of those granted permission to come to Ireland under refugee family reunification, given the likely urgency of organising travel:

**“So I think when the Government makes a decision and it is successful, maybe they should pay for the ticket as well and make sure that that person gets into Ireland very quickly, because some of them could die, believe me.”** (Refugee Sponsor)

For those not eligible for support or who choose to self-fund travel, the costs involved can be considerable. A number of participants in this

study spoke of the expense involved in paying for flights, with those self-funding drawing on savings and current earnings with some having to supplement this with loans from friends or family:

**“I didn’t have enough money, so one of friend of mine he working ... so he borrowed me some money. So I paid for flight because flight too expensive.”** (Refugee Sponsor)

One refugee sponsor noted that the expense of paying for flights created considerable financial pressure given that she had previously been drawing on a relatively small income to send remittances for living expenses:

**“I paid all my travel expense of my family members, yeah... You have to pay your travelling. It's not easy. Travel arrangements even, you know. You're helping the person also to organise himself or herself or family members... Remember to buy some clothes. Like they want something to get their flight and all that stuff. So little bit shopping expenses. That's adding up— ... And already you have been paying their bills, their rent, and all the things. So it's added pressure for your little income you have.”**

On top of the cost of flights, as noted above, additional costs such as visas to allow entry into Ireland must be paid for. The three month time limit on the visa creates an additional time-pressure and one stakeholder (working with unaccompanied minors) recounted having to reapply for visas in a case where it had not proved possible to arrange travel for family members within the three months after the visas had been granted.

Stakeholders expressed concern that some refugee sponsors were getting into debt in order to fund travel costs:

**“I mean, I know that for people where funding isn’t always available that they do borrow money, you know, from time to time. From moneylenders with obviously big interest rates on those.”**

Another stakeholder commented on the practice of informal lending within communities as well





**The travel documents go out of date. So if someone's got a passport, they may have to go back to their country of origin to try and get a passport renewed. If it's a Red Cross travel document, there's a whole process that can be quite complicated in getting those reissued."**

**Stakeholder**

as the "more worrying" use of money-lenders, noting that "people will generally do whatever it takes to get their family here as soon as possible". This stakeholder expressed concern that families are getting into debt in relation to travel costs just at a point in time when financial demands – particularly in relation to accessing suitable accommodation – are likely to increase.

Stakeholders working with unaccompanied minors discussed the financial burden of travel costs on young refugee sponsors and the discipline and sacrifice involved for those funding the costs of getting their parents and/or siblings to Ireland, noting that in addition to saving for flights, some were also sending remittances towards their family's maintenance.

**"...understandably sometimes, like the family could be in a situation where they can't buy their own food or there's medical expenses and for safety or whatever they might need to travel somewhere or whatever, and, you know, it's very difficult for the young person to keep on sending money there, at the same time save, you know, just some money to pay for the tickets... So it's quite stressful. And it really affects their life here. Some of them—you know, I have a couple of cases where young people had to, you know, just repeat their year in college. Healthwise, like**

**mental health, like so much stress. And, you know, even though they are delighted that there is like, you know, it is granted, but, like, you know."**

Unsurprisingly the level of sacrifice and organisation skills was reported to be too much for some young people who are faced with an extraordinary level of responsibility at a young age. Unfortunately, given the limited windows within which applications must be made and within which travel must occur following a successful decision, the opportunity to reunify with family may be lost unless young people display a level of maturity and far-sightedness significantly beyond that generally expected of people their age.

### 3.6.1 Travel in the Context of COVID-19

The COVID-19 pandemic and the policy measures adopted by governments around the world to contain the spread of the virus have had far-reaching economic and social effects, the extent of which is not yet fully understood. What is known is that persons in need of international protection have been affected in multiple ways from the impact of travel restrictions, which has left significant numbers of refugees and migrants trapped in dangerous situations, including at borders.

For those whose applications for reunification in Ireland have been approved but family members have yet to travel, the effects of the pandemic and responses have brought a huge amount of stress and uncertainty. One stakeholder referred to the "awful impact on a lot of people, people who were ready to travel" noting the immediate impact of travel restrictions and cancelled flights, and uncertainty as to when – or whether – normal flight schedules would be resumed. As of June 2020, the Red Cross Travel Assistance Programme reports 6 cases of family members approved for funding under the scheme whose travel was delayed, with travel not expected until August 2020 at the earliest. In this context the Department of Justice is reportedly taking "a pragmatic

approach" in relation to the 12 month window in which family members must travel to Ireland following approval of a reunification application.

It was noted that family members may have difficulty obtaining travel documents in the context of COVID-19 restrictions, while those who had already obtained travel documents such as Red Cross travel documents or temporary travel documents from the Irish government, would likely have to reapply as the validity of these was time-limited:

**"The travel documents go out of date. So if someone's got a passport, they may have to go back to their country of origin to try and get a passport renewed. If it's a Red Cross travel document, there's a whole process that can be quite complicated in getting those reissued."** (Stakeholder)

Referring to the situation of family members who had obtained Irish travel documents but were now unable, to travel a stakeholder noted that the process of reapplying could take time:

**"So there's no flights, so they're not going to get ... to Ireland. So what's probably going to happen is the family member will have to reapply for travel documents all over again, which takes up to at least sixteen weeks."**

In addition, actually obtaining the documents could be very complex in the context of COVID-19 restrictions which are hampering communication and movement. One stakeholder noted that in some countries online applications for travel documents were not possible:

**"...there is the difficulty in like for people trying to get documents in other countries. ... here, .. a lot of stuff can still be done online. That's not the case in other places. ... So, you know, it's not unusual for someone to have to go to a public office several times and queue, and those are things that people just don't feel safe doing—you know, if public offices are open."**

Another stakeholder recounted the challenge in getting Irish travel documents to family

members in certain countries and the potential risks involved in travelling to an Irish embassy to complete paperwork or collect documents, risks now heightened in the context of the global pandemic.

In addition, the financial cost of organising or renewing travel documents was raised as an issue:

**"And all of these things cost a lot of money. Whether it's, you know, a travel document in places that might cost—or an Irish travel document—all these maybe cost like eighty euro, but actually the cost of having stuff couriered to a person, having someone sign off on stuff, having things translated, getting the person from a city that could be miles and miles and miles or hours away from the embassy that they need to be at, like all that costs a lot of money."** (Stakeholder)

Challenges in relation to exit permissions and fees represent further issues exacerbated by the current crisis, as family members in countries like Lebanon may need to organise replacement exit visas and "may also become liable for more residency fees".

It was highlighted that the additional costs borne by families awaiting reunification come at a time when sources of income may have been lost due to the refugee sponsor or family members losing their jobs in the context of pandemic "lockdowns". In addition, the point was raised that the pandemic has likely increased the need for remittances to family members, who could be living in very precarious circumstances and experiencing difficulties in protecting themselves against the virus. This was noted as a huge source of worry for refugees living in Ireland.

The need for reassurance on the part of those awaiting reunification – and the enormous difficulty in doing so in a time of such uncertainty – was an important issue raised:

**"We can't predict what state the world will be in in a month's time or even two months' time or three months' time. Very hard to give someone reassurance about what will happen or when their family are likely to come."** (Stakeholder)



## Chapter 3: Summary of Key Points



Previous research has highlighted that for many refugees, family reunification is a key priority (Hinds, 2018; Jastram and Newland, 2003). The findings from our study – while limited to those who had applied and were successful in gaining permission for reunification – further demonstrate the impact of separation from family members on refugee integration and the importance of upholding the right to reunification.

In the Irish context, eligibility for family reunification is restricted to a narrow range of family relationships, which can have the effect of splitting up family units or preventing reunification between eligible family members due to concerns about leaving other family members behind.

Applicants seeking refugee family reunification do so under quite significant time pressures. The limited window for application can mean that applicants have had little time to settle in Ireland before initiating the application process.

Findings from the study provide an indication of the complex support needs which arise in relation to the application for family reunification and the subsequent process of bringing family members to Ireland. In addition to advice on rights and entitlements and support with the application process, applicants may require additional supports in order to navigate the stresses and challenges thrown up by the application process.

Participants made some suggestions for improving the administration of family reunification, in particular the provision of clear and detailed guidance to applicants as to the steps involved and supporting documentation required, as well as reforms to streamline the process so that requests for supporting documentation or DNA testing are made as early as possible in the process.

Funding and organising travel of family members following a successful application represents a significant challenge and while the Travel Assistance Programme is of enormous benefit to those who successfully receive funding, the limited capacity of the scheme and necessity of operating a waiting list mean that many families are left with no choice but to self-fund. There is an equality issue here too between reunifications under the statutory mechanism and under complementary mechanisms for which the Irish government may fund travel costs through the Red Cross/ UNHCR/ IOM Travel Assistance Programme.



# 4

## Chapter 4

# Access to Reception and Integration Supports and to Mainstream Social Services





## 4.1

## Introduction

This chapter addresses orientation needs and supports in the post-arrival period as well as access to housing, income supports and health and education services. As discussed in the next section, these supports and services were identified by participants working with reunified families as vital to supporting integration in the post-arrival period and beyond. The largest section of this chapter is given over to issues related to housing, due to its recognised central importance to initial adjustment and longer-term integration, and because it was raised as the most significant support-need by participants in the study.

## 4.2

## Access to Supports and Services as the Foundation of Integration

With the arrival of family members in Ireland, processes of adjusting and settling begin, but as stressed in the literature, this requires significant support (Marsden and Harris, 2015; Adadi, 2019). As discussed in the introduction and literature review, reflecting European and international policy, migrant support policy and provision is conceptualised in Ireland in terms of integration. Participants in the study – both stakeholders and persons of refugee background – were explicitly asked about their personal understanding of what is involved in integration. While not all were familiar with the concept, participants of refugee background most commonly spoke of integration in terms of community and/or societal *membership*, involving *rights* as well as *responsibilities* and underpinned by values of *equality*, *reciprocity*, and importantly, *mutual respect* in the context of cultural difference:

“Integration means to me to be with the community who live there. We are living with them. To respect them, respect you, to like respect their idea, respect their idea to accept you as a human being, you know. Yes, yes. To join them with their activities.” (Refugee Sponsor)

“So integration for me means to know my rights as one of the citizens of this country, to feel that I am one of the members of this society, even that I am different in my religion might

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So integration for me means to know my rights as one of the citizens of this country, to feel that I am one of the members of this society, even that I am different in my religion might be different or my culture is different, but I am one member of this society.”

Refugee Sponsor

be different or my culture is different, but I am one member of this society.” (Refugee Sponsor)

The reciprocal nature of integration was emphasised by participants of refugee background with rights seen as inextricably intertwined with duties:

“...you’re same to the Irish citizen. Same rights. But you have to do something as well. Respect their law and you’ll be fine.” (Refugee Sponsor)

“We have obligations. What are obligations? We have societal obligations and we have national obligations. And also in terms of rights we have societal rights and we have national rights. So what I have to do I also get.” (Refugee Sponsor)

Stakeholders emphasised the very individual and personal experience of integration of the families they worked with – “it means different things to kind of every family that comes here” – but emphasised strongly that the foundation of *any* integration pathway lay in access to services and other basic entitlements.

Echoing the literature on integration (McGinnity et al., 2018; Ndofo-Tag et al., 2019), one stakeholder referred to housing, employment and education as the “three primary integration routes”. Another similarly noted that for most

reunified families she worked with, integration goals centred initially on employment, “a safe home for their family” and “their children to get an education”. Only later, once these goals had been achieved, would there be concern with matters such as “political rights and socio-political rights”. Integration was thus conceived as a developmental process, growing in complexity over time, but dependant on having fundamental needs met. Another stakeholder, reflecting on the relational and social dimensions of integration, also referred to a staged process, involving firstly, the (re)integration of the newly reunified family as a unit, followed by integration into the wider community, but with both stages depending upon access to social services, in particular housing:

“I suppose you could break it down into a number of different areas. Like, you know, like initial integration into the society by having access to services, and the first thing that people come across is the issue of houses ...”

Stakeholders who took part in the study reflected on Irish integration policy and provision as it pertains to meeting the support needs of reunified refugee families. In relation to the current migrant integration strategy, one stakeholder noted that the strategy was relatively unproblematic in terms of how it conceptualised integration, but pointed to a gap in terms of mechanisms for practical implementation:

“...my sense of it is that what integration is generally isn’t a contentious thing in Ireland. So, you know, the migrant integration strategy basically just picks up on previous statements and, you know, there’s not much problematic you would, you know, be able to point out in the general conception of it from my point of view — ....But what’s probably more of a challenge in Ireland is translating all of these nice words into something practical that can be identified, measured, reported on, tracked over time.”

With reference to the particular question of integration of reunified refugee families, this stakeholder noted that from a policy point of view the needs of beneficiaries of international protection generally were neglected, something

attributed to the “silo culture” which had led to different categories being dealt with through different units. Noting that “the migrant integration strategy includes refugees and people with permission to remain, but it has no specific targeted actions for their benefit. ...It doesn’t include asylum-seekers. It has nothing specific to issues of family reunification...”, this stakeholder commented that “the beneficiaries of family reunification are essentially invisible”.

From the perspective of stakeholders the result of this policy invisibility seemed to be the absence of planning and allocation of resources to meet the particular needs of this group, the subject of much criticism in the context of the “tiny” numbers involved and the predictability of support needs:

“...it's clearly, you know, not planned at all and not part of the general programming. ... They know who they're granting. Why are they not planning for it?”

“...the Government, like, they are, they're obviously giving out the permissions to bring people in, but they don't seem to think beyond that. They're not thinking of how are these people going to be housed, you know, the length of the permission.”

“...OPMI and the Department of Justice and other Government departments have a responsibility to actually reflect on what is happening, like the access to the emergency services, and to go, ‘If we provide for family reunification, how do we actually do it so that it actually doesn't all go horribly wrong post-arrival?’ ... At the end of the day, the numbers who actually come through family reunification are tiny, you know, and like it could be done better and resources need to be provided.”

# 4.3

## First Steps: Navigating Systems Post-Arrival

### 4.3.1 ‘Nothing Starts until the Family Arrives’

The moment at which family members arrive in Ireland – usually long-awaited and generally reported by participants as an occasion of great happiness – is also significant as the point from which the wheels of bureaucracy can be set in motion and efforts can begin to arrange access to essential benefits and services. There are some key administrative tasks which newly arrived family members must complete – immigration registration (with the Garda National Immigration Bureau (GNIB) or the Registration Office of INIS) and obtaining a personal public services number (PPSN). These have a degree of urgency as the PPSN is a prerequisite for applying for social protection payments and other social services such as healthcare and social housing supports. That applications for benefits and services cannot be made until after a family has arrived in Ireland creates significant obstacles to efforts to prepare in advance.

Lengthy delays in accessing appointments for immigration registration was highlighted by participants as a particular problem in the cities of Dublin and Cork, with significant implications for those waiting to register:

“...if they intend to reside in the Dublin area, trying to get an appointment to register their immigration status, you're waiting months. And then your access to a PPS number. So

everything—everything links to your registration ....delays in your registration of your immigration impacts everything else. ... So with the difficulty of registering —not just in Dublin but it's also in Cork as well—you know, delays in your registration of your immigration impacts everything else....It impacts your access to housing, PPS number, social protection, health, everything.” (Stakeholder)

One participant noted how a long delay in immigration registration had impacted on his son's ability to access a grant to support participation in further education: in this case a migrant NGO had provided financial support so that the young man could pursue his studies.

Service providers also raised issues in relation to requests for supporting documentation in order to complete immigration registration or obtain a PPS number. This was referred to as “a bit of a trauma for people who don't have any documents” by one service provider while another emphasised the need for requisite training for officials:

“...it's quite possible for someone to be granted family unification with a husband but not actually produce a marriage certificate. So with a husband and children but not produce a marriage certificate because, for example, they may be Somali and there may not be any way for them to get that document in place, but the Department of Justice have accepted that they are married, but then be refused permission to register by the GNIB because they can't produce a marriage certificate... Or someone who arrives and they come with a Red Cross travel document and not a passport. ... The Red Cross takes back those travel documents at the airport and gives the person a copy. But arriving to a local GNIB office or to a PPS office and ‘Where's your proof of identity?’, showing them a photocopy of something and a letter from the Red Cross doesn't always work. ...So I think having people who are kind of maybe non-specialists in this role or people who weren't trained about what documentation someone who comes here in family reunification or someone who is a refugee might have is problematic, because someone who's new and is looking at a standard list of

documentation is looking at it, going, ‘You don't have any of the standard documentation that I'm expecting someone to have.’” (Stakeholder)

In order to obtain a PPS number in addition to proof of identity; applicants need to provide proof of address and proof of need. Service providers noted that providing proof of address could be a challenge for those recently arrived who had yet to source appropriate accommodation. Service providers also noted that the requirement for ‘proof of need’ of a PPS number could cause problems for those unused to Irish systems and represented a particular burden on those who were not Irish citizens:

“...‘Why are you apply[ing] for a PPS number?’ If people don't know what to say, they can be refused. ....As in you have no reason. You can say, ‘Because I need the Jobseeker's Allowance’ or ‘because—’But if people don't know how to say that—like we've had people that were turned away and they were like, ‘They're not giving us a PPS number!’ and really stressed out.” (Stakeholder)

“I would have heard from [my work] as well individuals applying for PPS numbers required to produce documentation as to why they need PPS numbers. So they would have had to provide a letter from a doctor to say that they need a PPS number to access healthcare services. And, you know, an issue that is not arising for Irish citizens.” (Stakeholder)

Participants from a refugee background recounted mixed experiences in registering with immigration registration and applying for a PPS number. While some reported no problems, for others, for example those with little English language skills or limited computer literacy (the initial application for a PPS number is made online and a face-to-face appointment is then arranged), these processes were challenging and required support:

“Yeah, first I get difficulties in especially to get—for the paper—for them ... I mean, the PPS number and a letter of document is here and there. I face—because today everything is online. Most thing is you have to apply online. And I have problem in any—I don't have any background with computers.” (Refugee Sponsor)



In respect of those with language barriers, service providers noted that from their experience interpretation services were not generally offered to reunified family members when registering with immigration or in PPSN allocation centres.

### 4.3.2 The Burden of Responsibility on Refugee Sponsors and the Need for Formal Support

There is no formal programme of orientation for reunified families, which can mean that refugee sponsors have a high degree of responsibility for supporting family members in the period immediately after arrival and assisting them with registration and applications for benefits and services. The busyness and stress of the post-arrival period was recounted by some of the refugee sponsors:

**“So they came here. So I had to do so many works with them, had to do medical card, all the social welfare for them. Like, you know, it was very, very messy. So I had like to take two weeks off from work to do this, all this things. That's all after like looking for apartments. So this is the next stage, like, you know, after they came here. So yeah, so I was looking for a GP for them...”**

**“Yeah, and first few months I was bit in stress and also I was missing some of my classes because of them, because they had no English, and run with them to this office for interview or an appointment or hospital or doctor. So it was bit busy, like.”**

That not all refugee sponsors have sufficient knowledge of systems and/or capacity in English language to support their reunified family members in this way was an issue raised by participants. One refugee sponsor noted that she had helped her family members with numerous tasks after arrival, but speaking from experience of helping others in her community, she had concerns that others might struggle:

**“But many, many people from my country they're not able to do that. And many other people from different countries who doesn't speak English and doesn't know how the system works and who have very less support. So it's very so hard for them to go and get PPS number, how to talk to the social welfare, how to get registered with the Gardaí and all that things. So the settlement problem we have it's so huge when it comes to the family reunification.”**

A participant employed in a migrant NGO commented on the pressure on refugee sponsors and the geographical variability of support:

**“Yeah, it's very much—like the refugee who may themselves not have been in Ireland for that long suddenly has to take responsibility for integrating two, three, four family members ... There's no support network at all. Once a refugee family arrives in, it is on that refugee to do everything. They can access a service like ours and get information and advice and that's great, and there could be services in other areas that will do similar work, but that's very geographically dependent on where you live.”**

Where available, migrant NGOs play an important role in supporting many reunified families in the post-reunification period, for example, helping to book appointments for immigration registration and PPSN allocation centres (one service provider noted booking appointments in advance of family members' arrival in order to minimise delays). However, there will not generally be a support worker in place who can work closely with families or attend appointments with them. Two service providers noted that their service had previously had funding available to employ a support worker but that this funding had been time limited and not renewed.

The intensive support needed immediately after family members are reunited with a sponsor who had entered Ireland as an unaccompanied minor was a key issue raised by Tusla Aftercare workers. Although not strictly speaking part of their role, aftercare workers provided various kinds of support to families including booking appointments for PPS numbers and attending

appointments with families. The period after a family arrived was seen as their busiest period:

**“Once a family comes over, because there's so much organisation involved and there's so many appointments to be booked, and it's—like I could work with a family every day for a whole week and not see any other of my clients, yeah, because there's just so much work that goes into it. And then the quicker you are done with it, the quicker you can kind of go back to your other clients.” (Stakeholder)**

Like other sponsors, despite the crucial role played by aftercare workers, young people were also heavily involved supporting their family members. Sometimes, the support they needed to provide became too much for young people. Aftercare workers described the challenge in helping to manage situations when young people with whom they were working understandably needed to take time out from responsibility but there were important tasks that their family members needed support with:

**“And then I'm like, ‘Yeah, but I need you to bring your mum to—’—and she's like, ‘Okay, I'll do it tomorrow.’ It's a real conflict.”**

One aftercare worker described a strategy employed to help young people cope with the role reversal of having to support parents in adjusting to Ireland: jokily encouraging a young person to see himself as a “social worker” for the family helped to alleviate tension. However, it underlines the heavy burden placed upon young shoulders.

In criticising the lack of formalised support for reunified families which places responsibility for orientation and settlement support on even very young refugee sponsors, some participants made an explicit comparison between the reception, orientation and integration supports made available to programme refugees and the dearth of provision for reunified families despite similar support needs. This reflects criticisms frequently in the Irish context regarding disparities in provision to different categories of international protection applicants/beneficiaries (Arnold et al., 2019; Becker et al., 2012; Crosscare Refugee

Service, 2018). As discussed in Chapter One, programme refugees are accommodated in an Emergency Reception and Orientation Centre (EROC) upon arrival and are subsequently housed in the community where individualised support is provided by resettlement and intercultural support workers in getting oriented and settled. An inter-agency committee is in place at county-level to facilitate access to social services. Service providers noted that reunified families deserved equivalent attention from government agencies in relation to planning and resourcing services:

**“... when people come in through resettlement, there are so many additional protections in place for them. They're having a resettlement worker. Really important. There's a budget for interpretation. Those things make a massive difference in people's lives. And having something like a resettlement-type worker, like a family reunification-type worker. Even if that's kind of projects that are funded and hosted by NGOs, they can do that work for people who need it. ...Some people won't. Some people are completely capable of doing it themselves and have the resources, but some people absolutely aren't.” (Stakeholder)**

While stakeholders working with unaccompanied minors framed support needs in the period after arrival in terms of *family* support rather than *settlement* support, a similar line of reasoning was evident – families need *formal* support – including quality interpretation support – in the post-arrival period in navigating systems and getting oriented. Stakeholders working in migrant NGOs and with unaccompanied minors also noted that as part of a more planned approach to supporting reunified families on reception at least some families would require temporary accommodation upon arrival. Service-providers working with unaccompanied minors referred to the need for a “safe house” while a participant in a focus group of migrant NGO personnel suggested that placing reunified families in EROCS on arrival as a form of “supported temporary orientation” would support initial adjustment and avoid homelessness, which, as discussed in the next section, is a particular concern in relation to reunified families.

# 4.4

## Housing and Homelessness

### 4.4.1 Background and Context

As has been well documented (see e.g. Hearne and Murphy, 2018; Healy and Goldrick-Kelly, 2018), for the last number of years there have been serious issues in relation to access and affordability across the Irish housing system, reflected in inflated rents in the private rented sector, growing numbers on waiting lists for social housing and, most concerning, rising levels of homelessness (9,907 individuals were counted as homeless in Ireland at the end of March 2020<sup>4</sup>). Responsibility for social housing rests with local authorities and those unable to meet housing needs from their own resources must register with a local authority (some form of ‘local connection’ is required in addition to satisfying income and housing need criteria). The limited public social housing stock in Ireland has resulted in heavy reliance on the private rented sector to meet social housing needs (Hearne and Murphy, 2018). The main housing subsidy for tenants in the private rented sector until recently was the much-criticised Rent Supplement, ostensibly a short-term income support for tenants dependent on social protection but relied upon by many for long periods of time, with numbers of claimants growing considerably from the 1990s and again following 2008 financial crisis (Hearne and Murphy, 2018; Norris and Coates, 2010). At the outset of the most recent ‘housing crisis’ in 2014,

4. <https://www.focusireland.ie/resource-hub/latest-figures-homelessness-ireland/>

a new Housing Assistance Payment (HAP) was introduced to be administered by local authorities as part of their social housing remit (Hearne and Murphy, 2018). Indeed HAP has effectively become the central strand of state social housing policy as it is envisaged as the primary mechanism for meeting the needs of those registered with local authorities as in need of housing (Hearne and Murphy, 2018). In contrast to public social housing, responsibility for finding and organising a tenancy rests with claimants (Hearne and Murphy, 2018). Payment is made directly by local authorities to private landlords, but tenants pay a contribution based on income and are permitted to pay an additional ‘top-up’ to the landlord, provided no more than 30 per cent of income is paid in rent (Threshold and SVP, 2019). Some of the problems with HAP have been documented in previous literature (Hearne and Murphy, 2018; Threshold and SVP, 2019) including unrealistic rent thresholds leading to tenants paying top-ups over the permitted amount; weak security of tenure in comparison to public social housing (recipients are removed from public social housing waiting lists) and the reluctance of many landlords to accept the payment. Deficits in protection and supports for tenants, in the context of wider issues in relation to high demand and inflated rents in the private rented sector, are key factors in the increased numbers of people – especially families with children – entering homelessness for the first time in recent years (Hearne and Murphy, 2018).

The crisis in housing supply and affordability has of course impacted on beneficiaries of international protection, causing difficulties for those granted status in Ireland in moving on from Direct Provision centres (as of March 2020 there were 1,024 individuals with status resident in Direct Provision centres<sup>5</sup>) and leading to extended stays in Emergency Reception and Orientation Centres (EROCS) for programme refugees (Ní Raghallaigh et al, 2019). In the absence of formal reception assistance for persons arriving under refugee family reunification mechanisms, responsibility for organising accommodation

5. <https://www.thejournal.ie/direct-provision-650-new-beds-5063304-Mar2020/>

to a large extent falls on refugee sponsors. The enormous challenges faced by reunified families in accessing accommodation and the consequent very high risk of homelessness for this group has been highlighted by Crosscare Refugee Service (2018) and with specific reference to families reuniting with an unaccompanied minor, by Groarke and Arnold (2018), and are reflected in the findings of this study.

### 4.4.2 Access to Housing and Housing Supports: Issues for Reunified Families

In general the ability of refugee sponsors to arrange suitable accommodation in advance of their family members’ arrival is very limited. Given the time constraints imposed by legislation and the urgency of getting family members in dangerous situations to Ireland, sponsors may have had limited time and opportunity to get settled prior to their family members’ arrival and in some cases may not have even been able to move on from Direct Provision. Reunified family members are not permitted to stay in Direct Provision centres with refugee sponsors and a service provider who took part in the study referred to a situation where a refugee sponsor, unable to access accommodation for family members, was “sneaking them into the room at night”. This service provider noted that persons in Direct Provision with status who wished to move away from the area in which the centre was located might experience difficulties registering with a local authority as being in need of housing. This was due to the necessity of establishing a ‘local connection’ when making an application. Generally speaking, those exiting Direct Provision will be relying on the private rented sector as a source of accommodation.<sup>6</sup>

6. The Irish Refugee Council initiated a housing project in 2018 to support beneficiaries of international protection by providing temporary housing; although limited in scope a small number of reunified families have been assisted through this project.

A stakeholder noted that those exiting Direct Provision will generally “jump at” whatever accommodation they can find and afford, accommodation that is unlikely to be suitable if they are subsequently joined by family members.

As has been highlighted previously by Crosscare Refugee Service (2018), many refugee sponsors are unlikely to be able to afford rental accommodation suitable for themselves and their family without state assistance. As noted above, it is not possible to apply for social housing support to meet the needs of family members in advance of their arrival in Ireland, which can delay the search for housing until after family members arrive and have completed immigration registration and been allocated PPS numbers. The onerous process of registering with local authorities as in housing need was recounted by personnel working in a migrant NGO:

**“You have your social welfare slip, your GNIB, your PPS number, your filled-in application form for housing. You also need to get an affidavit as proof that you don’t own property in your country of origin, or else they tell you to actually contact your country of origin to get this document. You can get an affidavit but they don’t say that you can do that. So you need that. You need your birth certificate. If you don’t have a birth certificate you need...an affidavit ...”** (Stakeholder).

It was noted that in some cases reunified family members had been asked to supply English-language translations of documents such as birth certificates, an additional expense and source of delay for families in urgent need of assistance.

Lack of consistency across local authorities in terms of how the needs of reunified families in housing need were responded to was an issue raised in terms of the quality of information provided to families, the demands placed upon families requesting support, and willingness to engage with migrant NGOs advocating on behalf of families. The need for training for those employed in local authorities so that they could become attuned to the needs and circumstances of those from different cultural



backgrounds and/or coming from countries with ongoing conflict was emphasised.

One worker commented on how staff responded differently when NGO staff accompanied families than if families were dealing with housing issues alone:

**“I feel like if I go up with someone to the Council, you get a different response than if somebody goes—and like it shouldn’t be that way, you know, but it definitely, definitely is.”**

It was noted that families are not generally provided with access to interpreters. Poor communication with applicants was cited as an issue in a local authority singled out by two service providers as particularly unhelpful:

**“...it's trying to shut an interaction down rather than trying to facilitate a person who may not be able to, you know, as easily as you or I can communicate their needs.” (Stakeholder)**

The importance of clear and respectful communication was stressed by a participant of refugee background who recounted a request made during a difficult encounter with an employee in a local authority housing office as to how she would like to be dealt with:

**“...you know, sometime you talk in word I do not understand. I told her I not understand everything, you know. And this difficult for me. I need somebody when you talk you talk slowly and you give me, you know, easy word for me. I don’t know anything. Just I want you help me with the house.” (Family Member)**

Another issue that can arise in relation to applications for social housing relates to family size and composition – large families or families which do not fit the standard model of a family unit may be required to make separate housing applications. In addition, if there are a number of adults in a household, the combined income of its members may bring the total household income above the threshold of eligibility for HAP forcing families to separate or lose out on supports.

These challenges in accessing housing supports take place in the context of severe shortages of rental accommodation in many Irish urban areas, which particularly disadvantages those without knowledge of the Irish system and/or proficiency in English or who have a relatively large family to accommodate. As one service provider put it:

**“...people who have large families and who don’t speak English are going to find it so much more difficult to access housing than everyone else.”**

In addition, refugee sponsors and their families may face discrimination in accessing accommodation in the private rented sector. This could be due to racism, the preference of many landlords for tenants who are in employment, or reluctance to accept tenants reliant on HAP or housing benefit, even though discrimination on any of these grounds is prohibited by Irish law (see Hearne and Murphy, 2017; Threshold and SVP, 2019). A service provider working in a migrant NGO discussed the difficulty in proving discrimination and the understandable reluctance of individuals to challenge perceived discriminatory practices:

**“...it's very hard to... know whether it's racism or what. ... maybe they wouldn’t get a house because they’re not working or—... when they phone up about accommodation, I think when people hear their accents or their poor English, I think—well, I would imagine, yes, people are being discriminated against, but it's very hard to name that... Even the HAP... Landlords refusing people the HAP, which technically they’re not allowed to do. ...And we will be saying, look, we will help you to challenge that, and then people don’t want the hassle, you know, of that either so they mightn’t challenge it.”**

Similarly, a refugee sponsor recounted the difficulty of accessing housing as a HAP claimant even though landlords usually did not explicitly refuse to accept the payment:

**“Yeah. So trying to get accommodation then that accepts HAP is really difficult because they don’t tell you they don’t accept it but, you know, you just don’t get it!”**

“

**Yeah, at that time we are living in apartment, very small apartment. You know, it's two bedroom. So I have to look for a big house first thing, because after I received them, the agency sent me a letter that I'm not allowed to receive my family here because that apartment is only for one person... And there are stairs. It's not safe for the kids.”**

**Refugee Sponsor**

This participant had initially sourced accommodation while in full time employment but subsequently became eligible for HAP. After months of delays on the part of her landlord in filling out the forms she had no option but to begin looking for alternative accommodation.

Personnel working in migrant NGOs reported assisting refugee sponsors and family members in relation to housing in a number of ways, but capacity to provide support varied across organisations. One service provider noted that information was provided on HAP for clients to give to landlords, while guidance (through role-play) on communicating with landlords was another form of support provided. Another service provider noted that assistance with searching for housing was provided in the past by the migrant NGO she worked in but the organisation no longer had the capacity to do this as funding to support this had been short-term. This provider also commented that due to the current housing crisis, housing NGOs were too occupied with assisting “people who are immediately homeless or who are immediately at risk of becoming homeless” to have the capacity to offer housing-search assistance to anyone not currently in that situation.

#### 4.4.3 “Something is better than nothing”: Housing Situations of Reunified Families

Of the 11 refugee sponsors who participated in this study, all had been living in private-sector accommodation prior to their family members’ arrival, but in the majority of cases this accommodation was not appropriate to the needs of their family. While a minority had been in a position to source more spacious accommodation in advance, most had not. A number had remained living in cramped or otherwise unsuitable accommodation for some time after their family members had arrived in Ireland. One participant noted that the urgency of organising travel had taken priority over the search for accommodation leading to a family of four spending three months in a one-person studio:

**“I don’t make any preparation because I don’t have a chance. I must get my kids from the bad situation what they are there. And I bring them here very—I face very bad difficulties living as house. At that moment I am alone, I am single, and I have one, I mean, studio. I bring them four person, we are in a studio for three months.” (Refugee Sponsor)**

Another participant had received notice to quit a small apartment after her family's arrival but had to remain there for a further five months due to difficulties in sourcing alternative accommodation:

**“Yeah, at that time we are living in apartment, very small apartment. You know, it's two-bedroom. So I have to look for a big house first thing, because after I received them, the agency sent me a letter that I'm not allowed to receive my family here because that apartment is only for one person.....And there are stairs. It's not safe for the kids.” (Refugee Sponsor)**

While some families had seen a significant improvement in their housing situation since the post-arrival period, for others housing difficulties were ongoing:

“I’m in the house that I’m in. It’s a house very small and the kids they want to play, they want to move here and there, and they can’t. When you see them in that situation even it feels—because we are four persons, and four persons in one room... because the house ground and very—it’s cold with winters now. It’s very hard. But I don’t have any chance to do anything. Only what I do is I tell to the authorities this is my situation. But as I tell you, house situation is very bad.” (Refugee Sponsor)

“And the main things we are in struggle with it—all of us, not just me—are in stress with is the house... Especially for my mum because she’s disabled and she can’t go up stair and down stair. Twice she fell down from the stairs. That is the things make us worry. ... Yeah. I still am trying every day through online to get somewhere, house... But very difficult to find a house.” (Refugee Sponsor)

“There are four people and it’s very small.” (Family Member)

“Even the house we live at it is not suitable for us because we are nearly six people and the house is only three-bedroom.” (Refugee Sponsor)

“It’s very good, but small for us, a couple, like... So after maybe in future we have child, it’s small, and it’s difficult to find another apartment.” (Refugee Sponsor)

In addition to difficulties with the size, quality, and/or suitability of accommodation, the burden created by rent payments was also an issue for some of the participants:

“We don’t have saving. The money go through—even as we are in HAP, yeah, still we give some rent from our pocket.” (Refugee Sponsor)

“The week of the renting payment, like, every the 30th we pay the rent, that week’s little bit difficult for us because we have to pay the rent. So everybody have to give the rent. That weeks is difficult for us. Little bit.” (Refugee Sponsor)

“So I pay one thousand and then my [family member] with his saving money things he pay like seven hundred. And then my other eight hundred I pay like I pay bills, I pay for like food as well, transports.” (Refugee Sponsor)

One refugee sponsor noted that in the context of the current housing situation even unsuitable barely affordable housing was something to be thankful for .... “something is better than nothing. That’s what I believe... house situation is very bad...”.

#### 4.4.4 Homelessness as an Issue for Reunified Families

The high cost and precariousness of private rented sector accommodation in Ireland, along with shortcomings in financial supports for tenants combined with policy neglect of reunified families are key contributory factors in the heightened risk of homelessness for reunified families. This section examines experiences and issues for reunified families in relation to homelessness and engagement with homeless services.

##### Paths into and Experiences of Homelessness

While some family members arriving in Ireland to be reunified with family members are faced with the prospect of living in cramped, unsuitable accommodation in the short to medium term, for others there is no accommodation available to them and they are effectively homeless upon arrival or shortly after arrival in the state. As noted above, this could be an issue because the refugee sponsor has yet to exit Direct Provision or it can also arise where a refugee sponsor living in private rental accommodation is not permitted to accommodate family members and has been unable to source an alternative tenancy due to some of the factors described earlier. As one service provider put it, a refugee sponsor “could be going from being in stable private

rented accommodation into homelessness” upon the arrival of family members. This was the case for one refugee sponsor participant in the study whose existing accommodation (a small studio) was not appropriate for the significantly enlarged family unit post-reunification:

“The landlord wanted us out because of the room is not insured for four people, but it’s insured only for one, one person.” (Refugee Sponsor).

While not evicted immediately, this refugee sponsor and dependent family members were effectively homeless post-reunification due to the precarity and unsuitability of their living situation. This family received support from a housing NGO in negotiating access to temporary homeless accommodation which involved presenting the notice to quit received from the landlord to the local authority. The family remained in homeless accommodation for almost two years before being allocated social housing.

Where the refugee sponsor is an unaccompanied minor (or former unaccompanied minor), accessing accommodation in advance of family members’ arrival is a particularly onerous task. Stakeholders working with this group noted how challenging it would be for a young person to find and pay for suitable accommodation with the result that it is seen as almost inevitable that family members will be presenting to homeless services on arrival:

“So it is well-known, like, that it’s going to be on arrival emergency homelessness”.

“... I’d almost advise children at this stage that [emergency homelessness] that’s expected.”

While some reunified families are homeless upon arrival, others may fall into homelessness at a later stage. One participant in our study had become homeless some years after reunification in Ireland. For this participant, an eviction (accompanied by threats of legal action and possible imprisonment by the landlord) and subsequent difficulties in accessing suitable affordable accommodation in the regional town s/he was living had ultimately led to homelessness.

This participant remained homeless with a minor child at the time of the study and had spent a number of years relying on friends and family for accommodation. The participant had not accessed homeless accommodation, but was engaging with the local authority in an attempt to obtain social housing. In this case – in which there were some complicating factors – dealing with the local authority in trying to access assistance with housing was described as a frustrating experience, involving continual phone calls or visits to local offices to request updates on the situation. According to the participant, the stress of dealing with the local authority was exacerbated due to the language barrier, the participant’s discomfort with “putting anybody under pressure”, as well as having been met with a hostile attitude from a local authority employee who had reportedly shouted at the participant causing significant upset.

The experience of homelessness had impacted upon the health and well-being of this participant – currently neither in employment or education/training or attending English classes – to the extent that life was somewhat on hold. The priority for this participant was to remain strong to minimise the impact upon the children:

“If I go tired, my kids go tired. If I goes strong, I just go strong. You know, all way I push, push, push my kids. No, no, no. Need you go be strong. But inside in myself, no, I’m not happy.” (Family Member)

##### Homeless Services

Persons who are homeless are prioritised on local authority waiting lists for social housing, however, as has been the experience of the participants discussed above, the limited supply of public social housing and difficulties accessing private rental accommodation can mean long delays in being housed and for some extended periods living in homeless accommodation. Homeless services vary around the country and the discussion here will focus mainly on the Dublin region (comprising four local authority areas) which accounts for the large majority of persons experiencing



homelessness in Ireland. Provision of homeless accommodation in the Dublin region relies largely upon a mix of not-for-profit and for-profit service providers accessed through various mechanisms, but generally requiring initial registration with the local authority placement unit. Persons experiencing homelessness in the Dublin region are entitled to access 'Homeless HAP' which includes a deposit and two months advance rent paid to the landlord and has higher upper thresholds than the regular HAP payment, however this necessarily depends upon the applicant being able to source a tenancy in the private rented sector (Hearne and Murphy, 2018).

The necessity for immigration registration and allocation of PPSN in advance of registering with local authorities as being 'in housing need' or homeless, creates a barrier for reunified families in accessing homeless accommodation an issue highlighted previously by Crosscare Refugee Service (2018). A service provider reported that it is sometimes possible to work with homeless services in advance of families' arrival and secure a placement in homeless accommodation but this did not always work out. In general, families without the relevant 'paperwork' completed may – at best – only have access to 'night-by-night' emergency homeless accommodation:

**"... if they're not registered and they don't have a PPS number, then they're not able to go into a housing list. So then they're not able to access like regular homeless accommodation as opposed to emergency homeless accommodation. So that's how people end up in that scenario of being in the emergency situation of having to re-register every night and we'd be calling the local homeless service."** (Stakeholder)

Service providers reported that sometimes reunified families without 'paperwork' complete were denied assistance even from emergency homeless services. It was noted that, in certain local authority areas at least, accessing services without support and advocacy from an NGO could

be very difficult for families, with one provider referring to a situation where a family had ended up sleeping rough due to difficulties in navigating a complex system:

**"... before they came in to us... like they weren't getting access to like anything, to homeless services, to—like, you know, barriers every way and they just didn't know how to get around it."** (Stakeholder)

Emergency homeless services are accessed in Dublin through a freephone service operated by Dublin City Council's Central Placement Unit. A service provider spoke of the daily grind of calling the number each afternoon in the hope that a bed for the night will be allocated. For those unsuccessful there is a second window of opportunity after 10:30pm if some of those allocated beds that night did not take them up. This would be a stressful process for anyone but poses huge difficulties for those recently arrived and who do not speak English. This service provider recounted experiences of a reunified family member who regularly walked miles late at night to sleep on a floor of a relative's accommodation having been unsuccessful in securing emergency accommodation in the city centre.

Alternatively, homeless families in Dublin could be provided with the option to 'self accommodate' which involves sourcing accommodation from a list of private hotels and B&B's:

**"...if you phone a hotel and you say, look, I've my wife and five kids, 'can we get a room or a couple of rooms for the night?', and if the hotel says yes, then you have to get back on to Dublin City Council to get them to phone the hotel to agree to pay with their credit card."** (Stakeholder)

None of those of refugee background who took part in this study reported accessing 'night-by-night' emergency homeless accommodation, but the stresses endured by reunified families living in these circumstances were discussed by personnel working in migrant NGOs. One issue

“

**... they're in emergency homeless accommodation that they're not able to stay in, so they're required to leave the housing during the daytime. So they've come from a poor country and this is the scenario that they're being reunified into. So in terms of their integration, their initial integration into the society is one of absolute rejection."**  
Stakeholder

raised was the hardship caused for families of having to vacate the accommodation during the day and the impact this was having on their initial integration into a new society:

**"... they're in emergency homeless accommodation that they're not able to stay in, so they're required to leave the housing during the daytime. So they've come from a poor country and this is the scenario that they're being reunified into. So in terms of their integration, their initial integration into the society is one of absolute rejection."** (Stakeholder)

For those accommodated in more 'stable' homeless accommodation the challenges of daily life were also significant. The participant in our study who had spent an extended period of time living in homeless accommodation spoke of the challenges involved in establishing and maintaining family life. This participant had spent about half the period in homeless accommodation living in 'family-hub' type accommodation with shared self-catering facilities. (The challenges of living in family hubs

have been examined by, among others, Hearne and Murphy (2017; 2018) and Ombudsman for Children's Office (2019)) Initially the family of four shared a bedroom but were later allocated a second room. For the remainder of their time in homeless accommodation the family were accommodated in a hotel where breakfast but no other meals were provided. Providing adequate food to the family and carrying out essential tasks such as laundry in this situation posed significant challenges. At the same time the children in this family were attempting to adjust to life in Ireland, finding the climate difficult, while attempting to navigate a new school system and make friends. During this period the refugee sponsor put education and career plans on hold in order to support the family during what was experienced as a very stressful time:

**"Everything was very stressful for them, very stressful for myself."**

One of the children became ill during this time, something which the participant felt could be attributed in part to the stress of the situation.

During the period spent in homeless accommodation this participant had been allocated a key worker employed by a homeless service but also required ongoing assistance from a migrant NGO. At one point the migrant NGO acted as mediator between the participant and the key worker as the participant felt insufficiently supported. This participant also reported that while some local authority staff were very helpful, accessing the offices of homeless services to seek information was very stressful. Reporting being "chased out" or "sent away" on a number of occasions, the participant felt that in this regard those of migrant background were treated differently to Irish nationals.

# 4.5

## Economic Circumstances and Access to Income Supports for Reunified Families

### 4.4.1 Financial Precarity Post-Arrival

The immediate post-reunification period is a time of financial precarity for many: as discussed in the previous chapter families may already have exhausted any savings and even gotten into debt in order to meet costs accrued during the application and in funding travel to Ireland. After families arrive there may be significant outlays required in order to equip family members for life in Ireland. As applications for social protection payments cannot be made until after family members arrive there will be at least some delay in receiving financial supports:

**“The period when the family arrives first is incredibly expensive. You’ve got no social welfare supports potentially, you don’t have child benefit, but you have to try and get uniforms or books, even simple things like, you know, finding appropriate winter clothing for your children, you know, the extra heating bills that are going to come in because people aren’t used to the damp and the cold in Ireland and you’re just genuinely going to have to turn on the heating a bit more for the first while. These are all huge financial challenges for**

**people and they might not have any extra financial support coming in.” (Stakeholder)**

As noted above, in order to access social protection payments family members must first obtain a PPS number so there could potentially be a period of some weeks before an application can be made and then a further wait while applications are processed. One participant in this study was waiting over three months to be allocated a PPS number with consequent delay in making applications for a social protection payment and other benefits. After making an application for a social protection payment applicants can apply for a temporary payment – Supplementary Welfare Allowance – but this will only be paid from five days after the primary application has been made resulting in a “waiting period ... where the families are without money” (Stakeholder). In this interim period the burden of responsibility to financially support the family will generally fall on the refugee sponsor, even where the sponsor was a current/aged-out unaccompanied minor.

**“The young people would pay for the family until they are getting some sort of payments. So financially the young people would be the main provider for the family.” (Stakeholder)**

A stakeholder working with unaccompanied minors commented that during the period after reunification while family members were awaiting payments, she had noticed that young people accessing this service were hungry:

**“I was talking about the young people who are hungry, who are with us... I think that would have been one of the main reasons. There was no money to buy food. ... Until the money was coming in, which took a few weeks.” (Stakeholder)**

Some of the refugee sponsors who took part reflected on the financial challenges of the period post-reunification. One noted that all savings she had accrued previously had been exhausted and making ends meet after family members arrived was a challenge:

**“... in the first few months when they arrived we were a bit struggling—with all the things like house and this type of things.”**

Twelve months after the arrival of family members another refugee sponsor also commented on a significantly worsened financial situation following the arrival of family members:

**“It's really been tough year. ... 2019 has really been really, really tough year. ... by the end of the month I’m like zero money. I’m really zero money, like.”**

### 4.5.2 Accessing Social Protection

Of the participants of refugee background who took part in the study, in each case either the participant or someone in their household was in receipt of a social protection payment at the time the research was conducted. Most of these participants reported no significant issues with accessing social protection payments after obtaining a PPS number, some had received support from migrant NGOs in figuring out entitlements and completing applications, while others had obtained assistance from Citizens Information. A stakeholder working in a migrant NGO noted the complexity and culturally-specific nature of applications for social protection payments:

**“Like for Jobseeker's alone you might have a bundle of about six different forms to fill in for Jobseeker's, one of those being a habitual residence form ...So you’d have about twenty pages. So, you know, you’ve somebody sitting in front of you, doesn’t have English, trying to fill in the form. ...even for people who do have English, you know, they wouldn’t have the confidence always in filling out forms, you know... forms are very cultural. Like your mother's maiden name.”**

Particular issues were raised around accessing specific social protection payments. An issue raised by one participant – a reunified family member – and reflected in the findings from interviews with personnel in migrant NGOs, related to difficulty in accessing the means-tested Disability Allowance payment. This participant had experienced a three-year wait for this payment to be approved

(receiving Supplementary Welfare Allowance during this period). In order to access Disability Allowance medical certification is necessary, to be provided by the applicant's own doctor, which could pose a challenge for recent arrivals:

**“So that's another additional hurdle that people have to get over. And that could create a problem in terms of if the sponsor has money to pay for a GP appointment—if they don’t, then you’re looking at a medical card. Then that's another period of time in order to be able to apply for the medical card before the [applicant] can attend the GP to get that form filled.” (Stakeholder)**

A stakeholder working in a migrant NGO commented that accessing Disability Allowance appeared to have become more difficult than in the past with increasing numbers refused at first instance only to be successful on appeal:

**“Some of them would apply for Disability Allowance. You know, and again I think it was maybe easier to get those things in the past, where sometimes people are being refused payments when, you know, it's blatantly obvious that they’re entitled to the payment. ...that's where they would come in to us and we would do an appeal. Like we’d be very successful in a lot of our appeals, particularly for Disability Allowance.”**

Service providers also raised issues in relation to applications for Jobseekers Allowance, noting that reunified family members sometimes had difficulty satisfying the criteria in relation to ‘available for and actively seeking work’:

**“So you’ve somebody with no English and no education and no work experience and no CV and, you know, it's like—I don’t know, maybe they’re applying a rule and a criteria which would be for probably Irish people, you know, who may have been to school, who do speak English, who may know how to do a CV. But we’ve reunified family members coming in who’ve never ever—in some cases some of them have never been to school, they don’t speak English, and then there's all this hassle with Jobseeker's, of being refused a payment because you’re not genuinely seeking work. ...”**



Participants of refugee background who discussed their experiences of dealing with staff in local social protection offices were generally positive with a number referring to ‘helpful’ social protection staff. Personnel working in migrant NGOs, while noting that some frontline staff were very responsive to the needs of refugees and reunified families, nonetheless expressed concerns about varying levels of knowledge and cultural competence among front-line staff in the Department of Social Protection. Some personnel recounted incidents where reunified family members had met with obstructive or even hostile attitudes. The need to ensure that front-line staff received appropriate training was emphasised. It was also commented that at least in some social protection offices necessary interpretation services were not made available.

### 4.5.3 Employment

Of those from a refugee background who took part in the study, labour market status varied. Four of the participants were living in jobless households at the time of interview. Some participants discussed their eagerness to find paid work and improve their situation – some were engaging in education or training in order to boost employment prospects. The experience of being out of work was difficult for some. One participant noted feeling “embarrassed and shy” about relying on social protection payments. Two female refugee sponsors whose husbands had been unable to find employment since joining them in Ireland referred to how difficult their spouses were finding the experience of being unemployed due to feelings of boredom and isolation.

One service provider suggested that it can take a very long time – estimating seven years based on experience – for individuals from a refugee background to establish themselves in stable employment. A number of possible barriers to employment were identified by stakeholders working in migrant NGOs: unsurprisingly a key issue raised related to English language acquisition, which is dealt with in more detail in the next section. Difficulties in relation to

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“...it's just hard when you face racism, like especially in work. You then—well, you know you can maybe report it or something, but then you're waiting for your [family] to come; you don't want anything to affect that. ...So at the end of the day you don't know if you're going to report it how it's going to affect your [family] coming or how it's going to affect you maybe trying to get another job or if it's going to be on your records. So then you can't report it anyway because you then feel I have a lot to lose...”

Refugee Sponsor

recognition of prior qualifications and experience was an issue also noted by stakeholders as a barrier for refugees and reunified family members. This was reflected in the experience of a participant of refugee background who had found difficulty accessing employment in the field worked in before coming to Ireland:

“... they told me, ‘We can't give you a job now because you don't have certificate from Ireland. So go to the college and study and after you finish study back to us.’” (Refugee Sponsor)

An important issue raised by one service provider was the possible impact of displacement and forced migration on the skills and confidence of those from a refugee background:

“...they could be living in camp situations or they could be living outside of their own country or with other relatives or in hiding. And so they

may... have lost their skills and sort of their confidence also before they arrived, and trying to navigate something new here, you know.”

Assistance from social contacts in relation to employment opportunities was something that was raised by stakeholders and participants from refugee background. One refugee sponsor recounted having found work through a friend, while others were attempting to leverage social contacts for assistance with finding work. A service provider noted that the “social capital” of the sponsor “how integrated they are and how many links they have to possible jobs” was an important factor in the opportunities available to the family, but reflected on how difficult it was for sponsors to build up such links in advance of reunification.

Another barrier to employment raised in the study was discrimination. One participant reported that an adult daughter had felt that wearing the hijab was impacting negatively on her employment prospects and had abandoned the practice for that reason. Another participant's experience of workplace discrimination throws up some of the challenges faced by refugees in reporting racism due to the felt precarity of their situation. This participant reported that in a former job she was treated less favourably and held to a different standard by her manager than her colleagues. The participant had tried to resolve the issue but had been met with a “defensive” attitude and ultimately decided to leave and find another job due to the stress of the situation. At the time this occurred, this participant's application for family reunification was in train and anxiety that reporting the discrimination experienced might affect the outcome of the application meant that the participant felt unable to report it. Concern about the impact on future employment prospects was also a consideration:

“...it's just hard when you face racism, like especially in work. You then—well, you know you can maybe report it or something, but then you're waiting for your [family] to come; you don't want anything to affect that. ...So at the end of the day you don't know if you're going to report it how it's going to affect your [family] coming or how it's going to affect you maybe trying to get

another job or if it's going to be on your records. So then you can't report it anyway because you then feel I have a lot to lose...” (Refugee Sponsor)

### 4.5.4 Discrimination in relation to Financial Services

Discrimination in terms of access to financial services on the basis of nationality was identified as an issue by two participants (a married couple) of Syrian origin. One of these participants reported being turned down in applications to open a bank account with Bank of Ireland on two separate occasions on the basis of nationality. This participant had subsequently been able to open a bank account with another banking institution but understandably the experience had caused “upset”:

“...we tried to open an account with Bank of Ireland. They said, ‘Syrian, no.’ .... they said, ‘Come here and we will take all your details and stuff, and document. We will give to them, they will open account for you.’ She took my passport and after she get in and back she said, ‘Okay, we are so sorry. We can't open account for Syrian people.’” (Family Member)

The same family had had the experience of being refused the option to purchase a computer through a hire-purchase scheme on informing the company of nationality:

“...it's one company here online. I didn't have enough money to buy a laptop .... So there was one company doing you pay weekly or monthly a little a month. So they're asking for your details. I went to the shop. ... ‘Call this number and give them your details. Then they will give you one code. You can apply for the device you want.’ So he asked me a few questions. When did you come Ireland and where your nationality? I said from Syria. He say, ‘No good.’ So he just told me in the tough way. So I can't remember all words what he told me, but I remember he say, ‘Syria, no, we can't give you it.’” (Refugee Sponsor)

### 4.5.5 'Just about Managing': Financial Situations of Reunified Families

Participants of refugee background who took part in the study were asked about their current financial situation – the majority reported having just about enough to get by on a daily basis but with little in reserve to cover occasional larger expenses:

“...we have enough to go like day by day.” (Refugee Sponsor)

“[We] can survive, but it's a small amount” (Family Member)

“But to be honest, sometimes not enough. The renting and everything.” (Refugee Sponsor)

One participant noted that meeting living expenses while reliant on social protection was very challenging:

“Jobseeker's Allowance it's like just for your food. It's not enough, you know. ... If you pay bills and that kind of—some rent you're paying, your phone bill, your internet bills, your refuse bill, and transportation, food, medicine, some specific food... So clothes, you know, everything. It's not enough.” (Refugee Sponsor)

Participants spoke of particular difficulties in relation to specific expenses – one refugee sponsor noted the strain on the family on the week the monthly rent payment was due. Another refugee sponsor referred to the pressure caused by high electricity bills, while the necessity to borrow money occasionally (from the credit union) in order to pay for school expenses and car insurance was reported by a reunified family member, who reported sometimes going without so that her children did not lack items which might impact on their status among their peers.

## 4.6

### Education and English Language Acquisition

This section presents findings in relation to how the educational needs of reunified families are met in Ireland. The broad-ranging nature of the study limited the extent to which any of the wide range of educational issues could be examined. A particular limitation is in relation to the needs of pre-school children in reunified families: needs of and services for this age-group were not much discussed and only in relation to childcare needs of parents rather than language and learning needs of the children, which is an important issue for future research. Another limitation is in relation to education and training for working-age and older adults – the key issue discussed here is support in English language acquisition, however, given the particular challenges for persons of refugee background in relation to employment, this is an issue which should be explored in future research.

#### 4.6.1 Educational Aspirations, Needs and Challenges

Interviews with participants of refugee background and stakeholders reflected findings in existing literature in relation to the high value placed upon education by refugees and other migrants and its perceived role in aspirations for a better future (Dryden-Peterson, 2011; Evans et al., 2013). A number

of the participants of refugee background who took part had commenced a course of education since arriving in Ireland and were evidently eager to improve their employment prospects.

Some of the participants who were parents or guardians of children or young adults reflected on the importance of education for the young. As one sponsor put it “the education is key for everything”. A stakeholder working in a migrant NGO noted that many of the reunified families s/he works with place a high value on education and are keen to ensure that their children are able to access educational opportunities. An education professional who took part in the study expressed concern that in some cases high parental expectations might be unrealistic or out of step with their offspring's own inclinations and thus result in undue pressure being placed on children and young people. This stakeholder noted that many of the young people she works with tend to have high ambitions for themselves – a key concern for this participant was that, given the significant disadvantages borne by some of these young people, realising their ambitions might be very difficult or even impossible.

Diversity among refugees and reunified families in terms of social background, available opportunities in countries of origin and/or transition countries, individual experiences, circumstances and dispositions means that generalisations in relation to educational needs and challenges is not possible, but there are a number of issues raised by participants which may impact upon the realisation of educational aspirations. Firstly, for those whose first language is not English, acquiring or improving English language skills is a prerequisite for participation in education or training and, given the dominance of English in all aspects of Irish life, for participation in Irish society more generally. For some participants of refugee background, language barriers were seen as one of the most serious challenges they were dealing with in relation to adjusting to life in Ireland, and learning English was therefore a key goal.

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The children who came through family reunification they need more assistance, they need more support... there are a lot of children who are 14 or 15 who had never gone to school sometimes came sitting with a child who's in their age but they started from Junior!

Refugee Sponsor

Secondly, children, young people and adults of refugee background may have experienced gaps and interruptions in their educational careers due to conflict and displacement giving rise to complex additional support needs, and this was evident to a certain extent in our study. For instance, minor siblings reunified with one participant had been out of school for five years before arriving in Ireland. Another participant of refugee background noted that reunified children who have never gone to school are typically in classrooms with children with many years of formal education behind them:

“The children who came through family reunification they need more assistance, they need more support. ... there are a lot of children who are 14 or 15 who had never gone to school sometimes came sitting with a child who's in their age but they started from Junior!” (Refugee Sponsor)

Thirdly, as is evident from the findings discussed above, refugee sponsors and reunified family members may be living in challenging circumstances in Ireland which necessarily impacts upon the ability to engage in education. Precarious housing situations or financial exigency can and do prevent or delay adults from pursuing education or training and impact



on engagement and achievement of children and young people. For instance, an educational professional spoke of the stress on reunified school-age children living in ‘night by night’ homeless accommodation having to “carry all their belongings on their back into school every day” as well as the challenge of getting to school when living in different accommodation each night. A recent study for the Children's Rights Alliance has highlighted the impact of homeless on children's education (Scanlon and McKenna, 2018). For refugee sponsors, responsibility for supporting reunified family members shapes their choices and opportunities in relation to education. This is a particular issue in relation to young sponsors who arrived in Ireland as unaccompanied minors. Stakeholders working with this group expressed concern that the responsibility which falls upon young people in relation to paying for travel costs of family members and for supporting the family in the post-arrival period necessarily impacts upon their education. Stakeholders referred to young people working in paid employment or even holding down two jobs while studying as well as young people missing classes in school or college in order to bring family members to appointments such as PPSN allocation.

**“...when the family has come, because they have to go with them *everywhere* to translate and they have to be *everywhere*—GPs, hospitals. And then worst is when somebody comes sick. Then they lose a whole year of school.” (Stakeholder)**

In some cases the extra responsibility led to tempering of ambitions or putting educational plans on hold:

**“And I’ve seen in cases as well ... where aged-out minors who—you know, and they’re applying for family unification have deferred their education. So they’ve come—you know, they’ve finished their Leaving Cert, but they’ve deferred their third level education purely on the basis of making as much money to support the family ...” (Stakeholder)**

## 4.6.2 Education of Children and Young People of School-going Age

For children of school-going age, support for English-language acquisition is provided in school settings in parallel with academic education and therefore language and learning needs and supports are discussed together in this section following discussion of issues in relation to access.

### Access to Schooling

None of the families involved in the study reported being unable to secure school places for their children. Parents either found a school on their own, enlisted the help of family or friends, or received assistance from Migrant NGOs. Stakeholders noted that responsibility for finding a school place for reunified siblings could fall to the young refugee sponsor in cases of reunifications with an unaccompanied minor. Occasional delays in school enrolment due to school capacity were reported, with one Dublin-based stakeholder noting that many schools were “bursting at the seams”. Geographical location, timing during the school year, and willingness of schools were all reported as significant factors impacting on access.

Stakeholders mentioned that while a school can generally be found, it may be difficult to find one in the family's local area, meaning that for some “they might have to travel a bit of a distance to get in”. The period between February to May was considered by one stakeholder to be the most difficult time to secure a school space; those arriving during this time may be told to wait until the start of the following school year:

**“The schools sort of say, oh, wait until September. But that's a long wait when you are, you know, 15 or whatever.” (Stakeholder)**

One stakeholder pointed to how the school system is poorly set up to accommodate support needs of children arriving midway through



**[The parent] brought them to the local schools to try and register them and all the schools said, no, that they were full. And we know that not to be true, that there are spaces available. But these children had never been to school before. It was February maybe, January, February. So the schools didn't really want to take on how difficult it was going to be.” Stakeholder**

the school year, an issue raised in previous research on the needs of resettled refugee children in Ireland (Ní Raghallaigh et al, 2019):

**“It would also be a particular challenge then, even if they got a place, for the school to be able to provide the necessary supports, particularly if it's EAL resources...if things change during the year, there's very little opportunity to then apply for the resource that might be needed.”**

Amid such resource challenges, successful accommodation was often dependent on the disposition of individual schools. An education professional elaborated on this issue, citing the example of a parent who was informed by several schools that there were no available spaces. This participant attributed the school's response to a lack of willingness to undertake the challenge of working with children who had never been to school before:

**“[The parent] brought them to the local schools to try and register them and all the schools said, no, that they were full. And we know that not to be true, that there are spaces available. But**

**these children had never been to school before. It was February maybe, January, February. So the schools didn't really want to take on how difficult it was going to be.” (Stakeholder)**

This stakeholder noted that parents in this situation might be unaware of the importance of receiving a letter from a school in relation to lack of places in order to receive formal support (“if you get three letters to say the school is full, then Education Welfare Board will find a place for the child.”), and emphasised the importance of “knowledge of the system and experience and contacts” in navigating these kinds of issues.

### Adjustment, language and learning in school

While children and young people with significant gaps in education will have particular needs, even those with uninterrupted educational careers will require support in adjusting to school in Ireland. Participants spoke of a number of initial adjustment challenges for children and their parents in relation to school: adapting to a new school system and culture, and managing a new curriculum and subjects – including the Irish language. First and foremost, however, mastering the English language was frequently mentioned as the key to children becoming more comfortable and confident in school. One refugee sponsor spoke of his children who, had recently begun school in Ireland:

**“They’re good now. They accept it. They don’t have—but the first time they shook because they want to speak, they can’t. They want to tell something, they can’t. And this hard for them, for the three months especially. After three months now it's good. They have no problem.”**

The majority of children and adolescents arriving under family reunification will begin mainstream school without having received any kind of reception/transition educational programme. In Dublin, the YES project provides transition education (Migrant Access Programme) for young people between the ages of 13 and 16 (10 of the 87 young people accessing the service

in 2019/20 academic year were reunified family members). Families with young people arriving under reunification can self-refer (siblings reunited with refugee sponsors who were unaccompanied minors and had accessed the service themselves are likely to be referred in this way) or could potentially be referred by a school or other educational service. The service will not necessarily have capacity for all those referred in which case young people may access mainstream schools or second-chance education options. No other equivalent service exists in Ireland.

Summer camps and other extracurricular programmes can offer opportunities for children to improve their language skills outside of the school environment. This was noted as a source of support for children who arrived at the end of the school year and wouldn't be starting school until September. Referring to such a case, a stakeholder working in a migrant NGO noted that the support provided by their organisation in facilitating access to summer camps and English language classes “made a big difference” to a young person: “when she started school she wasn't again on the back foot”. Without any formal programme in place for young reunified family members to support them with the transition to school access to this kind of provision is *ad hoc* and generally dependent on voluntary initiatives.

Once children begin school they will need to be supported with language acquisition and academics, but also in relation to adjusting socially and making friends. Parents who took part mentioned a number of ways in which schools were supporting families during the adjustment period, these included extra English classes, in-class assistance, as well as broader advice on extra-curricular activities to help children improve their English and become more socially involved. Some parents also spoke of their own efforts to support their children's adjustment, from helping with homework, joining local libraries, to themselves becoming more involved in their child's school. One woman delighted in supporting her son adapt to Ireland:

**“He's very happy. So happy. He loves the school every day! He has his own friends, his**

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**She was so happy when she did her project on [our country]. She didn't grow up there. She doesn't understand it. But she is asking me more about it and I tell her in [our country] what [it] looked like, what is the beautiful hills—you know, something good... Not always the wars, not always bad! It is like your child would feel represented when they feel like they're part of the school system.... So that's really important—in terms of how schools respect diversity and include people.”**

**circle. He has—I got to his part of school as I talked to—when he was in primary I talk to the parents and teachers. I was getting involved the school and council, parent council. The reason was that I wanted him to fit in, to bring his friends over to play together, inviting them on playdates and all that.”** (Refugee Sponsor)

School staff were identified as key supportive allies for some families during adjustment. Parents spoke warmly of teachers, principals and school secretaries who were welcoming, approachable, and sensitive to the circumstances and needs of their children:

**“This school and staff are very nice. Yeah, especially the secretary. Yeah, she's [a] very good lady.”** (Refugee Sponsor)

**“...like the people from the school are very nice.... Yeah, it was—well, at first it was—she didn't really make friends so quickly because I think**

**just trying to get used to the new environment and everything. But then the teacher they had said if there's any problem just talk to us. So I kept on giving her support that, you know, it takes time.”** (Refugee Sponsor)

Some parents mentioned their appreciation of schools' efforts to address cultural diversity and refugee issues. One parent spoke of when her daughter was able to undertake a project on her country of origin for her schoolwork:

**“She was so happy when she did her project on [our country]. She didn't grow up there. She doesn't understand it. But she is asking me more about it and I tell her in [our country] what [it] looked like, what is the beautiful hills—you know, something good... Not always the wars, not always bad! It is like your child would feel represented when they feel like they're part of the school system.... So that's really important—in terms of how schools respect diversity and include people.”** (Refugee Sponsor)

While some schools clearly are taking steps to provide a welcoming and supportive environment for children of refugee background, disparities between schools in provision of supports was raised as an issue by one sponsor, with extensive experience in providing voluntary support to refugees and reunified families:

**“Some schools they have additional support teachers who are able to help. Some schools do not have. But at the same this is not only language, it's about other subjects who need to be supported, because they are not obtaining that from the family and the house they are in.”** (Refugee Sponsor)

English-language support provided to children/young people within the Irish school system is limited to two years in general, which is recognised as insufficient to gain competency for academic learning which can take up to seven years (Cummins, 2000). In relation to inclusion the “yellow flag programme” to support equality and diversity and address racism in schools is not implemented in all schools in Ireland, but depends upon individual schools taking the

initiative to adopt the programme. An education professional who took part in the study referred to difficulties encountered by some young people in relation to discrimination and bullying in schools, noting that this could be a particular issue for Muslim girls who practice *hijab*. This was reflected in the experience of the daughters of one participant who experienced this kind of bullying in secondary school.

### 4.6.3 Education for Young Adults

In relation to young adults, families and stakeholders expressed concern about the lack of alternative, dedicated educational pathways available to those who had been out of any education system for several years. As was the experience of one young person reunified with parents in Ireland, those over the age of 18 who have not completed second-level education will not generally be accepted into schools. In this case the young person – who came to Ireland proficient in English – obtained a place on a Youthreach course and was able to progress to Further Education before subsequently obtaining a place on a Higher Education programme. For young people with gaps in education and without English language skills, mainstream second-chance education might not be appropriate to their needs although previous research has found that some Youthreach services have put in place programmes to cater for such students (Ní Raghallaigh et al, 2019). The YES migrant service in Dublin has put in place a ‘Step-Up’ programme for young adults not yet ready to progress to mainstream education or training. Guidance for young reunified family members on navigating a path through the complex and unfamiliar system is essential and in some areas programmes for migrant young people (such as the Connect Migrant Youth Project run by Nasc in Cork) provide such support.

Young people can fall through education cracks in other ways. One young woman who arrived through family reunification, was



accepted into university, but was unable to secure a SUSI grant due to not being resident in Ireland the requisite three years. Such disappointments for ambitious young people can be a bitter pill to swallow:

“I think that thing of getting into third level's maybe harder for people because they might come in with their family member and, you know, some of the kids might be, you know, eligible, you know, to get to university but they wouldn't meet the three-year residency rule yet. And they don't always know that. Then, you know, they're really, really disappointed when you say. ...unfortunately you have to say to them, but, look, you know, you can't for another three years.” (Stakeholder)

#### 4.6.4 English Language as “the key if we want to live here Ireland”

While some adult sponsors and reunified family members were engaged in education courses up to university-level, for the most part, the initial educational focus of those arriving through family reunification was on English language learning. Proficiency in the English language in general plays a critical facilitating – or impeding – role in terms of many aspects of everyday life in Ireland from accessing services to making friends. English language classes can represent more than language tuition, offering structure and routine as well as social opportunities.

For adults, English-language classes are provided throughout Ireland by Education and Training Boards (ETBs). In addition, migrant NGOs and other community or non-profit providers provide classes at no or low cost in certain areas. For-profit language schools are another option for those who can afford it. Refugee sponsors who took part reported supporting family members in enrolling in classes. Some sponsors were aware of available English classes from their own experience,



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There should be more option for teaching English. Like most people who came here there is no free school except [classes provided by migrant NGOs] it's not full-time. ... The full-time is—that's you have to pay more than three, four thousand euro per six months to learn English. But some people can't. Some people are here and they're getting money from social.”

while others learned of classes through NGOs. One reunified family member reported being referred to English classes as a condition for accessing a social protection payment.

While English classes accessed by participants were either free or considered affordable, the quality of provision reportedly varied. One participant – who was attending formal English classes through the ETB as well as volunteer-led informal conversational classes – spoke about his experience of a wide variety of teachers, and the range of teaching experience and training among them:

“Last year I had English teacher. You know, I think we didn't get any benefit last year because she wasn't know how to teach. She teach us like we are Irish, not we Arab. Yeah, and now I have as well—every Thursday they have English class conversation, but all of the teachers is volunteering teacher. They don't know how to teach.... Most they are not teacher. Most of them retired and they have nothing to do, so they came to teach us English.... You know my teacher, I don't remember any word I learned from him because every day he teach us about his

self. He didn't teach us. Every Thursday, every Thursday three hours, from 10. Yeah, two hours. Two hours from half-ten to half-twelve. Just he speak about himself.” (Refugee Sponsor)

The quantity of instruction available also varied considerably. Some participants expressed disappointment in the number of classes available to them, and the prohibitive cost of classes beyond the free or accessible ones:

“At least it should be 15 hour. I think at least. But not six-hour weekly. And, you know, not every week six hour, because most of the—maybe one time or three times monthly the teacher will be absent.” (Refugee Sponsor)

“There should be more option for teaching English. Like most people who came here there is no free school except [classes provided by migrant NGOs] it's not full-time. ... The full-time is—that's you have to pay more than three, four thousand euro per six months to learn English. But some people can't. Some people are here and they're getting money from social.” (Family Member)

Access to classes was reported to vary according to location. An education professional who took part noted that some ETBs around the country can be “quite rigid” in terms of restricting intake to certain times of the year meaning that some individuals may have a lengthy wait to enrol. This participant noted that while this was not as big an issue in Dublin with more options available, demand often exceeded supply and individuals might have to avail of piecemeal provision “one hour here, one hour somebody somewhere else, maybe two hours in another place”.

Gender and age barriers to participation in English classes were apparent. New mothers, or those without access to childcare, could be excluded from the ability to improve their English skills, while some older people felt they were “too old” to learn English. One older family member suggested that one issue lay in the way English classes were provided, suggesting that conversational style classes delivered by older people would be preferable to “school”.

# 4.7

## Health

### 4.7.1 Health Care Needs of Reunified Families

Persons arriving in Ireland to be reunified with a beneficiary of international protection have widely varying backgrounds and circumstances prior to reunification but at least some have experienced trauma, displacement, dangerous or difficult living conditions and periods with limited or no access to health care services. This necessarily takes a toll on physical and emotional well-being. A service provider noted that some reunified family members may arrive in Ireland with an urgent medical need. Others may have ongoing health needs which are less serious but nonetheless require attention shortly after arrival. Some refugee sponsors who took part in the study referred to the particular needs of older parents who joined them in Ireland, some of which required immediate medical care (this included treatment for injuries as well as care for conditions such as diabetes and tuberculosis). It was noted also that vaccination records might be missing or incomplete:

**“Some children might not have the vaccination book and the parents might not remember what vaccinations their children had” (Stakeholder).**

Refugees under resettlement programmes are provided with health screening shortly after arrival and similarly health screening is available to asylum seekers including testing for infectious diseases and checking immunisation records. For persons arriving under refugee family reunification in Dublin Crosscare Refugee Service

have since December 2017 arranged provision for health assessments through the medical NGO SafetyNet. As of June 2020, 129 people arriving under family reunification had been referred for health screening to this service.<sup>7</sup> It was found that there was a high prevalence of chronic disease among those referred to date, many of whom were homeless on arrival and a number of whom were reported to have experienced delays in accessing medical cards.

Health care needs may of course arise after arrival. For instance, part of the adjustment to Ireland for many of those arriving under refugee family reunification is getting used to a colder climate: a refugee sponsor whose minor children arrived under reunification referred to the children needing medical care on two to three occasions in the post arrival period which was attributed to the different climate in which they were now living.

Unsurprisingly, mental health needs were raised as an issue for reunified families, with one stakeholder noting that “there's very little recognition of that trauma that they would have brought with them” and others noting the impact of the stress of separation. Distress related to separation from family members was raised by two participants (a refugee sponsor and a reunified family member) as having precipitated mental health issues which required treatment, while the experience of multiple bereavements and losses was referred to as a key factor in the mental health issues experienced by the family member of another refugee sponsor who took part in the study. For a minor child who had arrived via family reunification, difficulties after arrival, in particular feelings of loneliness, were the main reason for referral to a mental health professional. Identification of mental health needs and uncertainty about their role in helping refugees and family members to access support was raised by some personnel working in migrant NGOs who were conscious of possible unmet need but felt ill-equipped to respond.

7. Source: Email communication with SafetyNet

**“...we aren't mental health professionals. We can't determine who needs counselling or who would be useful for it as well. So I suppose we've to be really cautious about that as well, about not making judgments about who needs counselling or what counselling would benefit for some people.” (Stakeholder)**

### 4.7.2 Obtaining a Medical Card

Entitlement to health care services in Ireland varies depending upon income, and asylum seekers, beneficiaries of international protection, as well as reunified family members share the same entitlement to services as the rest of the population. Those on low incomes are entitled to a ‘medical card’ which provides free access to primary care, tertiary care and prescription medication. Obtaining a medical card is thus one of the key tasks to be carried out by most reunified family members upon arrival in Ireland. As with other social services, applicants must first of all have obtained an immigration card and a PPS number – service providers noted that delays with immigration registration or PPSN allocation necessarily have a knock-on effect on obtaining a medical card. This means that families who need medical care will in general have to pay for this out of their own pocket. The medical NGO SafetyNet provides a small number of free clinics in Dublin for homeless people and ‘other vulnerable groups’ without a medical card but this is a limited service and one that reunified families would not necessarily be aware of.

Registration with a general practitioner (GP) must be carried out before applying to the Health Service Executive (HSE) for a medical card. Service providers noted that reunified families can experience difficulties in finding a GP with capacity for medical card patients. As one service-provider put it, “the same problems there are and faults that there are in Irish society around access to medical care are exacerbated for people who are refugees or family members of refugees”. A stakeholder employed in a migrant NGO in a regional town noted: “You have to often go to two or three GPs before you actually

find somebody who is going to accept you. It's in relation to asylum-seekers but it could be a question for migrants as well who are here on family reunification”. Finding a GP with availability was often a “nightmare”, according to another stakeholder, recollecting a family who could only secure a GP 30 minutes' drive away in a neighbouring county. A refugee sponsor based in Dublin spoke of the serious difficulties encountered in finding a GP for his parent, an older person whose health condition required ongoing medication that is very expensive in Ireland. In the end, he found a GP on the other side of the city from their home. While not ideal, it relieved his worry and the pressure of the weekly €75 cost of the medication.

While some participants experienced the process of applying to the HSE for a medical card to be “straightforward”, others faced a variety of challenges, from seemingly undelivered applications to opaque and sluggish bureaucratic processes. One sponsor, at the time of interview, was still awaiting a decision six months after making an application for his family: in the meantime a number of necessary visits to the GP had to be paid for. Another sponsor detailed the “nightmare” she experienced over nine or ten months trying to secure a medical card for her child, and in the meantime having to bear costs of visits to the doctor and medication. After being informed more than once that supporting documents had not been received, she began sending them by registered post. Eventually, she submitted a complaint after being told that a signed-for registered item had not been received and shortly afterwards her application was approved:

**“So they kept going, like, ‘We need this, we need that.’ Then you give them. They don't respond to you in writing to say, ‘Okay, we need this again.’ So you had to follow up again. Like after about two weeks—‘I submitted what you asked for. Is there anything else that you need?’ ‘Oh, we need maybe bank statements.’ You give them bank statements. They don't respond to you in writing that we need this. You had to follow up again. ... I had sent in my—was it the bank statement that they needed last? I sent in and two weeks down the**



line I called them, they said, 'We haven't received it.' I was like, 'No, but that's not possible because it's registered post, meaning someone signed for it, so it should be there.' Then they were like, 'No, we don't have it so you have to send it again...Then that's when I had to complain that it was the second time for me sending it. So then it was looked into, then it was approved.'

### 4.7.3 Healthcare Services in Ireland: Issues for Reunified Families

#### Accessing treatment

Participants had varied experiences and perspectives on the provision and access to health care in Ireland, often reflecting their level of need and the types of services they sought. Some families expressed satisfaction with Irish healthcare, reporting they were always dealt with efficiently and adequately. For others, delays in accessing tertiary treatment came as a surprise. One family member mentioned having to wait two and a half years for treatment of their painful condition. A stakeholder spoke about having to reassure refugees that their challenges were not related to discrimination: 'It's not because of who you are, it's because of the system.' In relation to families' experiences of the Irish healthcare system, the stakeholder concludes, 'I suppose [there's] a lot of surprise and I suppose disenchantment with the Irish health system certainly', something raised in previous research with resettled refugees (Ní Raghallaigh et al., 2019)

#### Interpretation and cultural mediation

Language challenges arose as a particular issue in relation to health care, with service providers expressing concern about limited formal interpretation supports, as well as the quality of interpretation services when available. Some participants from a refugee

background referred to relying on family members to interpret for them. For reunified family members the refugee sponsor may be the main source of interpretation support in accessing health services. Service providers expressed concern about minor children being inappropriately used as interpreters when family members were using health services.

The HSE has some provision for interpretation services in place but some service providers noted that some GPs were not utilising formal services, with one commenting that 'GPs are totally happy to accept a child or a spouse as an interpreter', something that has been found in previous Irish research (MacFarlane et al., 2009 and see MacFarlane, 2018 for a summary of Irish literature). Another noted that 'interpretation can be a real problem with GPs as well. Some of them will just not engage.' This stakeholder spoke about an incident where lack of interpretation led to a misunderstanding with potentially serious consequences in a case where a reunified family member took a much higher dose of medication than had been prescribed.

In relation to tertiary care, some participants who were Arabic speakers noted that there were generally Arabic speaking doctors in the hospital when they had accessed treatment who had dealt with them:

**"...sometime I understand. Sometime I say, sorry, I can't. But they bring the Arabic doctor. He help me." (Family Member)**

As Phelan (2017) writes, administering medical care in the context of language barriers without the use of a "competent professional interpreter" raises serious issues in relation to informed consent as well as the health provider's ability to obtain information from a patient regarding medical history. The report of the HSE Working Group to Develop a Model for the Implementation of Trained Interpreters in the Irish Healthcare System (MacFarlane, 2018) notes issues in relation to "demand" (lack of knowledge among healthcare professionals about the importance of professional interpretation and lack of training

on how to work with interpreters) as well as "supply" (shortage of trained interpreters) as important factors inhibiting implementation of interpretation in the Irish health system.

Interpretation needs go beyond translation from one language to another: the need for sensitivity to cultural expectations and norms was also referred to by participants. One stakeholder, who provides interpretation for doctors' appointments, highlighted the need for a "cultural mediator":

**"Like I have found myself interpreting and I have found that I needed to say to the doctor or whoever, to say she's saying that because in her country such-and-such happens and such-and-such happens." (Stakeholder)**

Another stakeholder noted that some of those of refugee background accessing the migrant NGO in which she is employed have expressed their discomfort in disclosing sensitive information to GPs and concerns that "their doctor's making assumptions about certain things because they're from a particular country." (Stakeholder)

#### Mental Health Care

Participants referred to barriers and challenges in relation to accessing appropriate mental health services. One refugee sponsor was critical of what was perceived as a tendency to prescribe medication and take a one-size fits all approach rather than addressing the individual mental health issues of refugees and family members:

**"The GPs can be supportive but they can be destructive. ...[I] know one GP who is overcrowded .... who I think they have a lot of clients. ..But at the same time what I have seen, like putting same brush to every patient. ... It's supposed to be to deal[t] with individually, not categorise. ... So it's less supportive when you need to get proper diagnosis where not only treating the symptoms. ...When you need mental health problems you go to referral, and when we talk about an issue— 'Oh, you'll be fine, take this medicine.'" (Refugee Sponsor)**

Stigma and prejudice around mental health issues on the part of refugees and family members were mentioned by some stakeholders as a possible barrier to accessing treatment as was an understandable reluctance to open up potentially very painful issues:

**"There's a kind of reluctance for people to even start exploring that because they don't want to—they either don't believe they'll be useful or secondly, are kind of afraid of actually kind of picking at that scab." (Stakeholder)**

Participants also referred to the particular challenges involved in accessing supports such as talking therapies in the context of linguistic and cultural differences and challenges in accessing appropriate interpretation:

**"Access to interpreters so the person can actually speak freely with a counsellor even if they've managed to find one is hugely difficult. The quality of interpretation in Ireland is really poor." (Stakeholder)**

A refugee sponsor also emphasised the need for community supports – in relation to mental health and family support – and the value of someone to speak with in their own tongue:

**"Yes, but for their like psychiatric, yes, they need like—especially for the people coming from Africa, from Arab country, they don't speak English. They need someone like to talk freely, to understand them. So they need like some special social worker to teach them how to—especially to deal with the kids, you know." (Refugee Sponsor)**



## Chapter 4: Summary of Key Points



The findings from this study point to the significant stress on reunified families in the period following reunification and the responsibility to support new arrivals carried by refugee sponsors, some of whom may have already been in highly precarious circumstances prior to reunification with their family member(s). While migrant NGOs and other services are a source of support to reunified families, this is subject to geographical variability and resource constraints. The burden of responsibility can impact negatively on refugee sponsors in a number of ways, but a particular concern is the impact on the education and general well-being of young refugee sponsors who came to Ireland as unaccompanied minors.

The bureaucratic barriers to applying for social services – particularly housing supports – in advance of family members' arrival in Ireland create significant challenges for reunified families and heighten the risk of financial deprivation and homelessness in the post-arrival period while complicating access to homeless services. In addition delays in accessing a medical card can result in expense families can ill-afford in the period after reunification.

Failures to make appropriate accommodation for linguistic and cultural difference represents a further significant barrier to accessing essential services. Lack of access to interpretation services, combined with policies and practices which fail to take into account the specific needs and circumstances of beneficiaries of international protection – and which at times could be described as actively discriminatory – were issues raised in relation to housing, social protection and health services.

In relation to education, the findings, while limited, point to evidence of good practice in schools in creating a welcoming and inclusive environment. The findings point to challenges in accessing school places and in accessing appropriate educational provision for older teenagers and young people with significant gaps in their education. For adults, there were concerns expressed in relation to both the quantity and quality of English language provision. This is significant given the importance of English acquisition for adjustment and longer-term economic and social integration.

Research suggests that stress associated with migration and settling in a new society can have as significant an impact upon the well-being of beneficiaries of international protection as the stresses associated with loss and displacement (Li et al., 2016). Culturally appropriate mental health services were identified as a need by participants in this study but also important is the need to minimise the stresses of reunification and settlement in order to protect the well-being of families.





# 5

## Chapter 5

# Family Relationships, Culture and Social Connections



# 5.1

## Introduction

As noted in chapter four, when reflecting on the meaning of integration participants of a refugee background drew on the idea of membership in the community and society – seen as underpinned by equal rights and obligations – as well as on the idea of respect for differences in culture and religion. The notion of integration into a community is of course complex and multi-dimensional given the multiplicity of ‘communities’ of which people can form part. Stakeholders and participants of refugee background emphasised the importance of relationships with those of similar background (whether co-ethnics or others from a refugee background) as well as relationships with those in the wider community. Of course for many the fundamental set of relationships is with members of the family, with one stakeholder conceptualising the process of social and community integration of reunified families as a involving two key steps: “integration of a family both as a family unit and then like overall into its community”. This chapter presents findings from the study on issues and support needs arising as refugees and reunified family members readjust to each other and adjust to life in Ireland.

# 5.2

## Relationships with Family Members

### 5.2.1. Being Together with Family: The “most positive thing”

Being reunited with family members brought great relief and happiness to many, often after years of stress, anxiety and loneliness caused by separation. “To be together” was described as “the most positive thing” by one refugee sponsor. Similarly, a family member who had joined his wife in Ireland stated:

“It’s hard to say in words, but it was wonderful to be together again.”

For one refugee sponsor, reunification with his brother meant that he felt able to laugh in a genuine way again:

“I felt that I could—I feel that when I laughed with my brother, that was the genuine laughter. And that laughter affected my health positively. Because I can remember that before my brother came, maybe for two times only I felt that I laughed and that laughter made m[e] happy. Because even when I laughed before the arrival of my brother about the joke or with somebody, I didn’t feel that it affected my health or made me happy.... Maybe it was fake laughter—which I didn’t intend to make. But with my brother I felt it really made me happy for me inside and relieved me, you know.”

Being together allowed family members to support one another in a way that

“

I felt that I could—I feel that when I laughed with my brother, that was the genuine laughter. And that laughter affected my health positively. Because I can remember that before my brother came, maybe for two times only I felt that I laughed and that laughter made my happy. Because even when I laughed before the arrival of my brother about the joke or with somebody, I didn’t feel that it affected my health or made me happy.... Maybe it was fake laughter—which I didn’t intend to make. But with my brother I felt it really made me happy for me inside and relieved me, you know.”

they couldn’t do when separated. One refugee sponsor spoke about his wife:

“Like at home it was really hard for her because I wasn’t able to give her enough support because I was here now. So now that I am here with her it’s good.”

Being reunited also meant that they could spend time together united in a sense of shared history and memories or getting to know the next generation:

“We recalled. We talked about the old memories.” (Refugee sponsor)

“Yes, my grandchildren who live here I go and see them every day, and those in Jordan I talk to them on video.” (Family Member)

### 5.2.2 Challenges in Family Relationships

Yet, despite the positive feelings that were expressed about being together again, in keeping with the literature on refugee family reunification (Rousseau et al., 2004; Strik et al., 2019), significant challenges for relationships were also evident. Stakeholders referenced the challenges which could arise once the “initial euphoria” had worn off: One stakeholder stated:

“Yeah, I think after the initial euphoria it can be quite difficult. You’re learning to live together again.”

The challenges encountered were varied and influenced by both individual and broader systemic factors, related to both past experiences and present circumstances.

### 5.2.3 Impact of Separation and Past Experiences on Relationships

As referenced above, and as is evident in the literature (Rousseau et al., 2004; Mackey, 2013;), refugees are likely to be impacted by the migratory journey itself, as well as by their experiences of resettlement. Such experiences inevitably change people to a greater or lesser extent and can lead to people assuming different roles within society. Upon reunification, such changes impact on family relationships in different ways.

The fact that people had been separated from one another for so long caused challenges, especially initially. In some instances, separation occurred when children were very young, meaning that the child no longer knew the parent upon reunification. This was understandably difficult for parents. One participant, whose husband and children joined her in Ireland following a number of years apart, talked about the ‘gap’ in the relationship between her and her youngest child :



“You know, I feel there is the gap between me and him because it's long time to see him. I left him he was very young. So the first one week he's just looking at me like that. He's very close to his dad. Yes, but after that he used, you know. He know that I'm his mom. He is. And that is really affect me. Yeah, it's not easy, you know. Till now, I feel our relation is not really good like the big one.”

As also highlighted in the literature (Suárez-Orozco et al., 2011), time was identified as a significant factor as regards relationships between parents and children: the time spent apart and the time needed to allow relationships to re-develop were both highlighted. It was recognised that the re-establishment of relationships was a process, rather than a once-off event. One parent described the relationship with her reunified daughter as “work-in-progress”:

“So [my daughter] wasn't really close to me anymore, I think because of the time. But it's something that is still work-in-progress, I'm still trying to get around. And even my son you could see that he's not really used to me, but it's still work-in-progress.”

For unaccompanied minors and other young people whose family member joined them, relationships similarly had to be re-established. A stakeholder who worked with young refugees referred to families needing “to fit in together again” following reunification, something which she felt was impacted by the experiences and changes the young people had gone through during their migratory journey:

“They have to fit in together again. Which means the young person has gone through an evolving process, through their trip to here, and they have gone through different things that their families may not understand.”

Related to this, several refugee sponsors spoke about the trauma experienced by their family members. One sponsor referred to her mother's trauma as “a challenge to my family and for me”:

“[She] has lost a lot of family members. She got a lot of trauma which not—I can't talk about now. It's very deep and dark story.”

A stakeholder referenced tragic events that may have occurred that are not being talked about:

“Like a family might have been a really, really strong family unit in their country, they come, they assimilate that back very easy, and some families don't assimilate back very easily. Maybe something very bad happened that they're not talking about and their uncle was killed by their other uncle and nobody got to know about it and then they're bringing all that here. So it just is varied, as I said...”

In some instances, a lengthy separation could mean that family members felt abandoned by the refugee sponsor. One stakeholder referred to marital issues that emerged due to people having established new relationships during the separation period:

“And people form relationships. People—I mean, it is—again, we're not a marriage counselling service. .... Occasionally it feels like it! But, you know, you do have people saying actually that you find out that, you know, their husband or wife had like another partner or wasn't really faithful to them and, you know, because of the long delays someone believed that actually they've just gone for good and they weren't ever coming back for them or they weren't ever getting them and they were stringing them along.”

## 5.2.4 Impact of present circumstances

### Impact of orientation stressors on relationships

Reflecting the findings of research elsewhere (e.g. Marsden & Harris, 2018), present post-reunification circumstances also had an impact on family relationships. In the previous chapter,

it was evident that the initial stages of adaptation posed considerable challenges and stressors for refugee sponsors and reunified family members alike: these included having to navigate complex bureaucratic systems and sometimes encountering hostility and significant language barriers in the process; a lack of appropriate housing, sometimes resulting in cramped conditions or having to access “night by night” homeless services; financial precarity and difficulties accessing social protection; and challenges accessing general health services and mental health services. Refugee sponsors shouldered much of the burden in navigating these difficulties. The challenges existed in a context where “there's the added pressure of ... what's supposed to be a happy occasion and actually ... it's not” (Stakeholder). Another stakeholder noted the shock and disappointment that could be experienced by family members whose expectations of life in Ireland were far removed from the reality:

“And then people who've come from, we'll say, relative positions of privilege and moving to Ireland and then kind of going—actually, you know, you've been telling your family that they're going to move to Ireland and they have these conceptions in their head of what Ireland will look like and everything will be perfect once they arrive and that they'll be able to be a doctor or they'll be able to whatever, and actually the reality is that all these things are extremely difficulty when you're here. And they're living in substandard accommodation. They're living in very overcrowded settings. They're living in a B&B because they're homeless, in emergency accommodation. And they're thinking, ‘This is not what I signed up for’.”

Inevitably, there was an impact on relationships. One stakeholder referred to the “many different potential pressure points”:

“There are so many points at which, you know, the refugee or the family member—the ability to—I suppose the potential for conflict or the potential for tension is so high in so many areas. There's so many different potential pressure points...”

Another stakeholder suggested that the stress has an impact on communication within the family:

“When you are under pressure you are stressed. So that kind of anxiety will bring out a lot of anger and the communication will be hit all the time.”

A refugee sponsor spoke about the fact that she was able to help her family members to navigate the various systems within the Irish context upon arrival but she was acutely aware that this was much more challenging for some other sponsors, especially those without English, those who don't know the system and those who don't have supports themselves. Her response suggested that the practical challenges of resettlement had a negative impact on families' relationships.

“So the settlement problem we have it's so huge when it comes to the family reunification. ... And actually it's very challenging and very... [its] retraumatising families' relationships because you bring together family who have been waiting to reunite very long time and you give them another stress, which is like this state could do better, I think.”

### Changed family roles, dynamics and expectations

As discussed in the previous chapter, refugee sponsors held most of the responsibility as regards assisting their family members to navigate systems and begin settling into Irish society. While this in itself was stressful for sponsors, it also had a knock-on impact on family relationships and dynamics. Our data suggested that this was particularly the case in relation to parents who, as refugee sponsors, were reunited with their children, in relation to young refugee sponsors who were reunited with parents, and in relation to female sponsors.

For unaccompanied minors and other young people whose parents were reunited with them, data from interviews with stakeholders indicates that roles changed considerably upon reunification. Separation from family members



was likely to lead to a sense of independence and increased maturation for young people. However, despite this, one aftercare worker described how young people wait for their parents to come to care for them but then become the carers themselves:

**“Yes, they’ve become independent, become individuals, but they still want to be cared for, you know. And our roles are really limited in that. I mean, we’re not there on Saturday night, when they’re feeling low, to give them a hug or what have you. And so, you know, waiting for their parents to come and care for them and then realising they are the carers.”**

As indicated by previous research (Marsden, 2018), parents were likely to have missed out on a significant time in their child's development where the child had grown into adulthood. When reunited with their child ‘sponsors’, their “lack of environmental mastery” (Miller et al., 2002) meant that they relied heavily on their “child” to help them in the new societal context, particularly in navigating official systems. When speaking about the stress experienced by former unaccompanied minors in having so much to do post arrival of their family members, one professional described the parents in these situations as “helpless, really really helpless”, with a colleague adding that this was because “they’re in a new environment ... that they don’t know anything about”. Parents in these situations were described as “like kiddies”, thus suggesting a type of role reversal in these situations and a sense of disempowerment.

Family members responded in different ways to the changed roles within the family. Some family members were accepting of the way in which their relatives had adapted and taken on new roles. One stakeholder working with unaccompanied minors spoke of a young person who was worried about losing her freedom when her parents arrived. However, the father recognised her maturity:

**“The father sees how much she has grown in maturity as well because of the responsibility she has carried, so he is giving her that freedom anyway ... which is really nice to see. ... So, yeah, I think it has an impact when the**

**family sees how much children have grown in maturity... and became individuals and carrying responsibility for family.”**

For other family members, the changes were more difficult to accept and there was somewhat of an expectation that roles would revert to the previously accepted status quo. The data suggested that changes in roles and in family dynamics were particularly relevant in relation to gender relations. This reflects some evidence in the literature whereby for many refugee women, resettlement results in increased autonomy and changed roles (Rousseau et al., 2004; Mackey, 2013; Marsden, 2018). Often, the separation had resulted in women taking on new roles – whether in Ireland or in the country of origin. Stakeholders reported that when families were reunited there was sometimes an expectation from some family members that the “old dynamic” would resume, thus resulting in considerable challenges:

**“Even things like gender roles, you know, particularly where women have come here first or like a woman has been head of the family at home and she's used to now being the authority. She's used to having, you know, the say on something and someone then expects it to fall back into an old dynamic. That's really, really challenging.”**

Being separated for significant periods of time and living in very different contexts had an impact on relationships between husbands and wives also. One refugee sponsor referred to the fact that cultural differences between the country of origin and the country of resettlement mean that “the way of thinking becomes different”, thus leading to challenges for relationships.

### Family Breakdown

The international literature suggests that, efforts to live together again following reunification can be sometimes be unsuccessful, with tensions and difficulties that arise ultimately leading to family members separating from one another (Rousseau et al., 2001). In our study a refugee sponsor, while



discussing the need for more support for reunified families, drew attention to the ultimate tragedy of family breakdown following reunification:

**“So I think I have seen a lot of family breakdowns and that ...where the people who have been [yearning?] for each other to unite again are not able to continue their familyhood. So it's another tragedy and trauma for family breakdown here.”**

Stakeholders also expressed concern about struggles after reunification leading to family breakdown and separation. It was reported that when family members wanted to separate from one another, doing so was not always easy or indeed possible. In particular, the housing crisis meant that leaving and finding suitable accommodation was difficult. In one example, a stakeholder recounted how a young woman became homeless after she left the family home. Another stakeholder was aware of situations where separating from family members was not considered possible due to the housing crisis:

**“Occasionally rather than a lot of time, occasionally you see situations where because of the housing situation people are saying, ‘Actually I can’t leave. We’ve just found somewhere to live. The kids are just stable again. I can’t leave.’”**

Where family breakdown occurred, it was reported that reunited family members faced challenges re-registering with INIS as it was the expectation that the sponsor would accompany the family member to such re-registration appointments. NGOs sometimes made submissions to INIS in relation to this in order to allow reunified family members to renew their GNIB cards without the sponsor present.



# 5.3

## Maintaining Continuity While Adapting to Irish society: Culture and Social Connections

### 5.3.1 Maintaining Cultural and Religious Practices

For refugees and their family members, maintaining a sense of continuity with the past at a time of great upheaval and change is key (Rousseau et al., 2004; Ní Raghallaigh & Gilligan, 2010). Within our study most refugee sponsors and reunited family member participants stated that they were able to maintain culture and traditions from their own country. In particular participants talked about food, religion and being with people from their own cultural background. Regarding food, mention was made of being able to access halal meat, being able to get similar food to that from their countries of origin from Polish and other shops and being able to order some food online from other countries. There were challenges too of course. For example, one Kurdish participant mentioned the fact that there was no Kurdish shop. Another participant spoke about catering for her children's friends when they come to play and needing to “change the menu” as sometimes they don't like the food from her country that she cooks. She spoke too about needing to communicate with other parents about what her own children could eat.

“And sometimes when my children go into

the other children's home I have to talk to the parent and tell my children, ‘Don't eat pork!’ So look out and tell the other children my children they are Muslim so they don't eat that kind of food, so please be aware. So it's communication and it's cultural, it's language, it's about trust.” (Refugee Sponsor)

In her experience, such communication with parents was more challenging for others, due to language barriers, the importance of language not only in adapting to the new culture but also in holding on to one's own culture.

In terms of maintaining customs and traditions one participant stated that “we can do everything we want”. Regarding religion, those who wished to practice their religion felt able to do so. For example, one participant stated:

“Yeah, really here in Ireland—I tell you, four years I don't face any problem in my religious situation. I prefer my religion to have three—we have three mosques here in city centre. ...I go to my mosque and I pray and I come back my house. I don't face any problem. Not yet. Yeah. I hope even for the future!”

Some participants identified challenges regarding religious practice, including access to a Mosque and availability of a Muslim cemetery, and in the case of a Christian participant, lack of time to practice her religion. One reunified family member stated that she stopped going to the Mosque after a bomb attack on a Mosque in a different country as she was “literally scared”. For another participant, a refugee sponsor, his Muslim religion proved to be a barrier to finding work – he was interested in working in a kitchen but felt unable to do so as pork was being cooked there. One female sponsor also talked about being questioned about why she practiced hijab, something which she attributed to a lack of awareness and information:

“It is quite [difficult] to explain so many people about how why do you dress like this and so many things like that, and I think it's about quite ignorance of—some people they know, some people they don't, and sometimes some

of us might get offence, but what I've seen in practicality is lack of information and awareness. So it's opportunity for asking me something. So, yeah, that's what we do. And also it's not much burden on us to practice or to dress the way we do. In a school we go, my girls, like my older one she started having proper hijab last year and she's quite well with the school. There is no question or no problem from her.”

While for this woman's daughters the practice of hijab posed no problems, some participants noted that issues of discrimination and exclusion sometimes arose as regards the hijab. As discussed in the previous chapter an education professional noted that girls practicing hijab could be targets of verbal racism in school settings:

“So in terms of sort of racism definitely I know some young people have had—like in school, you know, especially if—you know, for example, Muslim girls, you know, they sort of stand out because they're wearing the hijab. They sometimes get comments and things like that.”

One participant noted that her daughters had been subject to unwelcome attention and verbal bullying when at secondary school centred on wearing of hijab:

“...because in school, in secondary, and, you know, the girls in school—.. Yeah, because say, ‘You bald? You bald?’ ... ‘You bald and your hair is dirty?’ and like this.” (Family Member)

This participant said that one of her daughters – now a young adult – had abandoned the practice of hijab due to concerns that discriminatory attitudes were hindering her employment prospects.

Reflecting findings in the literature (Choumanivong et al., 2014; Mackey, 2013), people from the same cultural background were important in helping people in numerous ways, including helping people to maintain cultural practices and traditions. Being able to spend time with people from one's own community was considered important. One refugee sponsor, spoke about the joy of being able to get together with others to celebrate Eid. She was involved

in a cookery project / programme for migrant women, but members of the group didn't “stay for long time” in the locality as they tended to move on to live elsewhere. In this context, it was clear that being able to be together at Eid was very meaningful for her. Similarly another refugee sponsor spoke about his parents meeting up with people from his country of origin:

“We have—they go to the community [from country of origin] here. They see some family [from country of origin], you know, to—for the traditional things and stuff, you know. And we know family here, family [from country of origin]. My mum sometimes goes with them. Sometimes they come to us, you know.”

Continued separation from some family members impacted on people's ability to maintain their culture and traditions. For example, the importance of being with family members and loved ones was highlighted by a participant whose sibling had been reunited with him. Despite this reunification, he found it difficult to perform traditions because of continued separation from most of his family:

“Like obviously we have the absolute freedom to do anything we like. But being away from family, you know—like traditions are performed with a family. Once there is no family there is no traditions, you know. ...So, for example, we don't feel that there is—we don't feel Eid al-Adha in Ireland because Ireland doesn't celebrate it, on the one hand, and because we don't have the atmosphere and we don't have family.”

### 5.3.2 Cultural differences and Adapting to a New Society

For many reunified family members, adaptation to the new society and culture is one of the biggest challenges faced upon arrival in a new country (Choumanivong et al., 2014; Marsden and Harris, 2015). The data from stakeholders, sponsors and family members

suggested that these differences are viewed in different ways by different people. Some struggle with the differences, others like them and appear to adapt more easily. One reunified family member responded as follows when asked what it was like for her as she was getting used to living in Ireland:

**“Actually I like it. First I came here I see—even it was very like strange for me, but I like it. Especially the weather was ... I like the rain, but not every day's rain every day. We were in Turkey. It was very hot. When we get here, it was raining and ... I told you, it's everything completely different to compare with my one. Language, weather, people, and culture. ... Food, everything. Everything. Buildings, everything.”**

Language and the different weather were mentioned frequently as challenges. References were also made to cultural differences. One stakeholder referred to “the shock of coming to another country and culture, and not having English”, while another identified “cultural challenges” as one of the difficulties encountered by people upon arrival, whereby there were many things they had to learn:

**“It's a big, big challenge really, big challenge to themselves. They have to learn how to live in this country, how to get on with neighbours, how to get on with colleagues, how to get on with teachers at school, how to get the healthcare that they need. That's challenging. That's very challenging because you mightn't have an interpreter and even when you have an interpreter it's not straightforward, you know, what you can do.”**

Other often taken-for-granted elements of life also posed challenges. For example, being frequently asked for one's signature and date of birth when dealing with officialdom was something entirely new for some people. Not only the language but the manner of speaking was also sometimes different. One refugee sponsor spoke about the “cultural shock” experienced by her family member who was used to a very vocal or expressive way of speaking in her country of origin. This differed in Ireland.

When families arrive together, the process of adjusting to the new context begins together. However, when family members arrive via family reunification, the sponsor has already begun the process at an earlier date and so his or her acculturation journey has progressed further. While this holds the benefit of having someone who can help to orientate family members, someone who has already gone through the process and might understand what it is like for them (discussed in the next section), it also poses challenges as the different members of the family are at different stages of the acculturation process. Reflecting the literature (e.g. Rousseau et al., 2004; Marsden 2018), within our study frequent reference was made to tensions that arose within families due to the perception that sponsors had changed or assumed new roles or a new lifestyle in the new cultural context. For example, stakeholders reported that young refugee sponsors struggled to suddenly have their parents intervening in relation to their lifestyle. They had become used to living independent lives, in a very different cultural context and they struggled with their parents' views in relation to their lifestyles, for example views about them having boyfriends or girlfriends or about their style of dress. One stakeholder recalled a young person whose mother felt he was losing his culture and lamenting the fact that her son was not like he had been before. The same stakeholder talked about a young woman whose parents were reunited with her and wanted to arrange a marriage for her:

**“They expected of her to marry, to do other things, and the girl was in college. So they ended up completely like just not talking to anybody and she have to get out. But obviously she went to homeless accommodation because nowhere to go. The usual. And she's been struggling a little bit.”**

Stakeholders reported that some young people made efforts to live both lifestyles – the new lifestyle that they had adapted to in Ireland and the lifestyle that their family and community of origin expected of them – navigating their way between the two as has been highlighted

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**It's a big, big challenge really, big challenge to themselves. They have to learn how to live in this country, how to get on with neighbours, how to get on with colleagues, how to get on with teachers at school, how to get the healthcare that they need. That's challenging. That's very challenging because you mightn't have an interpreter and even when you have an interpreter it's not straightforward, you know, what you can do.**

in previous literature (McMichael et al., 2011; Olwig, 2011). One stakeholder felt that this caused “inner conflict” for the young people:

**“Yeah, yeah. So definitely we've had quite a—we often have young people who might arrive, for example, you know, maybe a Somali young person or an Afghani young person, who'd come and who would be quite religious and follow those things and a few years later they are, you know, out drinking and I suppose acting the same as many of their other—you know, in relationships and acting the way that maybe their Irish peers are. ... So, yeah, they sort of adapt, but then it is that conflict between—they adapt when they're in that situation, but then when they're within their own culture or community then they have to change that behaviour. ... I think there's a lot of conflict, inner conflict in something like that.”**

A number of stakeholders referred to family members returning to their countries of origin post reunification. This was attributed to a number of factors including “the secularism, the

lifestyle, the loss of family, the ability to integrate, language, breakdown of relationship”. In some cases it was reported that reunification did not occur in the first place as family members learnt about how different the culture was and did not want to come despite being eligible to do so.

### 5.3.3 Social Isolation and Forming New Social Connections in Ireland

Within the integration literature it is widely accepted that social connections act as important facilitators of integration (Choummavong et al., 2014; Marsden, 2018). As has been discussed above and in previous chapters, the refugee sponsor played a crucially important role in helping reunited family members to adjust to Irish society both in terms of negotiating the various practical steps that needed to be taken upon arrival and also in terms of navigating Irish society and culture more generally. Various professionals and formal supports – including staff of NGOs and educational projects and Tusla aftercare workers – played an important role in this regard also.

Informal sources of supports – especially friends – were also significant. Upon arrival in Ireland reunited family members began making new social connections and friendships with members of their own ethnic and religious communities, with members of other migrant communities and with the Irish community more generally. These social networks and friendships provided general support while also facilitating adaptation to the new society and a sense of cultural continuity. One stakeholder emphasised this in relation to discussing personal issues, such as marital problems:

**“And like that's I think again where the difficulty with not having that kind of like that friendship network comes in, because it's very hard to disclose to someone—you know, going to Citizens Information and saying, ‘Actually my marriage is breaking down, where can I go?’ You know, that's not a conversation that people**



feel very open to having with a total stranger, you know. .... Whereas it might be something that you can more easily have with someone if they were a friend and—so, you know—.”

Regarding connections with others from their countries of origin, reference has already been made to the importance of these connections in maintaining customs and traditions. In addition, one Syrian family member, speaking through an interpreter, highlighted the sense of a shared understanding that was present in friendships with other Syrians:

“We have very strong relationships with [the other Syrian families in the town]. You know, we are from the same place. We understand each other. We share the language and everything.”

A stakeholder expressed the view that making friends in the ‘local’ community was not necessarily essential for integration as people could rely on their ‘own’ communities:

“Yes. I feel on one hand that it's not necessary for integration. On one hand I feel that. So I feel that they are—they seem to be very supportive of each other if they come from the same culture and comfortable with that. So I feel that they can be integrated and at the same time rely on their own community for support.”

In terms of what facilitated making friends with co-ethnics and other migrants, attendance at English classes was seen as a way to meet people, while of course also allowing people an opportunity to learn the language, something which would facilitate the creation of wider social connections in the future. Reference was made by participants to family members getting to know other migrants through the classes. One stakeholder viewed such classes as particularly important for women:

“And I think definitely for some of the women going to class can be a massive thing. You know, going to an English language class can be a huge step into making their own network separate from their family.

“

**I think then there's that social isolation as well because people don't have access to friends. People speak to us about this all time, that Ireland theoretically like quite friendly in that they'll walk down the street and everyone will smile at them and they'll get like a really cheery hello from their shopkeeper or whoever, but we don't go beyond the surface in that regard. So people find it very difficult to strike up social networks outside of that kind of like migrant or refugee community.”**

.... And, yeah, even sometimes just, you know, the fact that they might travel to that class alone and, you know, that can be—it needs courage sometimes, you know.”

Having children appeared to facilitate the formation of social connections to some extent. It was generally viewed as easier for children to make connections in the community than for parents, although children struggled with this too, especially in the initial phases. Several sponsors talked about their children being “alone” especially upon arrival, with language barriers playing a role, but through schooling children generally picked up English and began to make friends. One stakeholder referenced the fact that children were almost “forced” to integrate by virtue of the fact that they attended school. When asked what life was like now for the children who had been reunited with her, one refugee sponsor stated:

“It's improved. Yeah, it's differently. It's totally different than the first months when they

arrived, yes. The kids are now, they integrated with the other kids at school. They makes friends and now they able to communicate. They join them in different activities.”

A stakeholder highlighted that parents sometimes made connections through their children and highlighted Gaelic games as a means for this to happen:

“It comes through the kids. ... They're vicariously going to integrate because of the kids. GAA is great. You know, if you can get the kids into the GAA club, it seems to engender integration more quicker. And then through schools and stuff.”

However, there was evidence that many reunited family members struggled to establish relationships with Irish people. Several participants described Irish people as “very nice people” and “very friendly” but their descriptions tended to be based on passing encounters with Irish people rather than on friendships that had developed. A stakeholder referred to the “social isolation” experienced by reunited family members, because of their lack of access to friends and made reference to how the friendliness of Irish people “doesn't go beyond the surface”:

**“I think then there's that social isolation as well because people don't have access to friends. People speak to us about this all time, that Ireland theoretically like quite friendly in that they'll walk down the street and everyone will smile at them and they'll get like a really cheery hello from their shopkeeper or whoever, but we don't go beyond the surface in that regard. So people find it very difficult to strike up social networks outside of that kind of like migrant or refugee community.”**

Social isolation of reunified family members was highlighted by several other participants also. A number of family members who were interviewed said they had few or no friends and the same sentiment was expressed by some refugee sponsors in relation to their family members. When asked if she had been able to make friends,

one participant who had arrived through family reunification a number of years previously stated:

“It's too hard. Sometime. I have just one friend. ... Like she can't come like all the time to me, I can't go to her. You know, she's in [a different town]. It's a little bit far away.”

In particular, concerns were expressed about older people and females and the social isolation that they experienced. Regarding his parents, one refugee sponsor stated that “most of the time, they are alone.” In addition, several stakeholders expressed concern about the isolation experienced by females. One stated:

“And we would have people say that to us that they feel very alone. And yeah, in particular women are saying that they don't talk to any other Irish women, they've got no friends.”

A number of different barriers were identified in terms of getting to know Irish people or making new social connections more generally. Language was highlighted by some participants, with reference made to children being “alone” in the initial periods when they didn't speak English. A respect for privacy was also identified by one stakeholder as a barrier to forming friendships:

“But you have, you know, a family who moves into a house and they're Iraqi and they don't speak English and no one really knows who they are and the tendency is to just leave them alone. You know, and not for any bad motivation. I think there's a respect for people's privacy as well. But it can lead to people feeling very alone.”

Lack of time was also mentioned as a barrier. Refugee sponsors struggled to have time to socialise with friends because of juggling work/study and their new family responsibilities: it is likely that their lack of time impacted on their ability to help their family members to make friends. Similarly, members of society in general – including Irish people and other migrants – were perceived to have a lack of time to get to know newly arrived families. One stakeholder linked this to the pace of life in Ireland:

**“You know, the Irish, myself, we have our lives here. We don’t have too much time to introduce new people. And that's what they complain. They think—just they are in a hurry, people are in a hurry. And so that's a challenge for them to pace, you know, and find people with time for them.”**

Even when reunited family members met people or made friends, often these friends had little spare time to spend with them. In one interview a refugee sponsor was asked if there was anyone her reunited husband could talk to or get support from. She identified herself as his support and referenced the fact that her husband was not working and people he knew from his country of origin had little time:

**“It's me. You know, for him, he found that to be difficult, because he was working there in [country of origin]. So when he came here stayed without work. He found it a little bit difficult actually. But there is also some men [from our country of origin] here. But most of them they are working, so they don’t have enough time, you know, to—he can visit them or they can visit him. I feel like he's worried sometimes, yes. But I told him to start the English language course in ETB. So he start with the kids in September.”**

Indeed, unemployment served as a further barrier to establishing social connections. As discussed in chapter 4, refugees and reunited family members face numerous obstacles in securing employment. There appears to be somewhat of a vicious circle here: people struggle to get work partly due to a lack of social connections and in turn they struggle to make social connections partly due to not being employed. One refugee sponsor referenced the role of work in establishing friendships when asked if his family members had been able to make friends in Ireland. He answered:

**“Not yet. Me, I have friends from Ireland,... —a lot of friends I had because I work here and I have a lot of friends.”**

Experiences of racism are also likely to impact on the establishment of friendships and social connections. There were mixed views and experiences shared by participants of refugee

background in relation to racism in Ireland. One reunified family member living in a regional town commented that from her experience there “is absolutely zero racism here. People are extremely kind here and they are very good when you talk to them. It's as if you’ve known for years.” This view of Irish people as “friendly” and “not racist” was echoed by some other participants, but it must be noted that the fact that the interviewer was a white, majority-culture Irish person is likely to impact on how participants respond to this question. Some participants did reference racist incidents, either observed or directed at them personally, incidents which most likely impacted on the formation of friendships. Other participants had experience of racist or discriminatory behaviour in the neighbourhoods in which they lived. One parent of young children noted that while some of her neighbours were “so nice” others were overtly exclusionary:

**“I can feel it sometimes. They don’t like—like their kids play to my kids. ... Sometime I hear their mum say, ‘Say to her go away.’” (Family Member)**

A participant of refugee background living in a regional town had experienced anti-social behaviour directed at the family's home:

**“But sometimes, you know, in the area we are living there—I think it's—I’m not saying that that is discrimination, but it's teenager behaviour. They’re coming at the evening time, they threw some ... in the window.” (Refugee Sponsor)**

While the participant was reluctant to label it as discrimination a stakeholder working in a migrant NGO in the same town suggested that racism and anti-social behaviour was a serious issue in this town :

**“somebody has brought up the issue that socially they’re not accepted because they are black, and there are some touchy issues, touchy issues there. And there are some housing estates here in [this town] where somebody of a different colour is not accepted, and somebody**

**who is different in other ways. You know, it could be somebody Polish or whatever. Different, you know, the ways it's not accepted. And you could have eggs thrown at the house or you could have the fence taken down or you could have windows broken. Antisocial behaviour, yeah”**

This stakeholder noted that beyond recording incidents there was limited anti-racist work taking place in the locality:

**“I don’t see anything on the ground. The ... Resource Centre records racist incidents and there is an organisation—that just records racist incidents and counts them. But that's not a response which I feel is adequate.”**

Other more subtle forms of racism were mentioned by a service provider working in a city-based migrant NGO, who was of the view that while these forms were not overtly hostile they were still upsetting. Noting that the housing crisis had restricted accommodation options forcing people to look further afield for housing to places with limited experience of inward migration:

**“No. Yeah, yeah. And before, you would have kind of seen perhaps those maybe limited to more towns that maybe had direct provision centres and would then as a result have just a bigger awareness of migrant issues and would have like Friends of the Centre-type groups or would have supports in place, or just people who are just, you know, used to seeing someone who's black or who's brown or in a hijab or whatever the case may be. But now people are finding it like more difficult as they move to towns that, you know, have like, you know, like a more staring and things like that.”**

This participant noted the difficulties in addressing racism, particularly in its more subtle or ambiguous forms:

**“...it kind of gets kind of casually mentioned in conversation with ‘how are you finding your new town?’ and they kind of bring it up. Like, okay, do you want to [report], they’re like, ‘Okay, what am I supposed to do, report a dirty look I got or report someone staring at me?’” (Stakeholder)**

### 5.3.4 Political Integration

Although our study did not examine in much depth the question of political participation and exercise of political rights this represents an important domain of integration. As noted earlier, based on the ‘developmental’ account of integration put forward by stakeholders who took part in the study, it was suggested that concern with political rights generally comes only after primary integration goals such as housing, education and employment have been realised or at least once fundamental needs are met. Of the participants in our study of refugee background 7 were registered to vote in Ireland at the time of interview: 3 refugee sponsors each of whom had been living in Ireland for more than 8 years and 4 family members, each of whom had been living in Ireland for at least 4 years. Full political rights are allocated only to Irish citizens. 6 of the participants had become naturalised Irish citizens, of this sub-group 3 were registered to vote at the time data collection took place.

Political activity or activism was not a focus of the interviews – a limitation to be addressed in future research. Interestingly two of the participants reported leveraging support from political representatives (local TDs in both cases) in relation to issues around family reunification. In one of these cases which involved a clear bureaucratic error on the part of the Family Reunification Unit a local TD assisted by writing a letter (this participant also sought assistance from a private solicitor to resolve the issue). In another case assistance was sought from a local TD in obtaining a reply to a query in relation to the progress of a reunification application, in which case also a letter was sent. These participants had clearly become aware of the time-honoured role of Irish parliamentary representatives as “brokers” between citizens and state institutions (Komito and Gallagher, 2005).



# 5.4

## Adapting to Family Reunification and to Irish Society: Support Provision and Needs

### 5.4.1 Provision of Support

There was an obvious interconnection between the challenges faced as regard family relationships and the challenges in relation to adaptation to Irish society and it was evident that support was needed in relation to both aspects and their interconnecting components. Refugee sponsors and their family members spoke about needing, seeking and obtaining support in relation to the various hurdles and challenges that they faced. Sponsors themselves were of course to the forefront in supporting their family members, particularly as regards adaptation to Irish society. For example, one sponsor spoke of the family as the main source of their own support, “we do our best to support ourselves by ourselves.” Another refugee sponsor whose mother and children were reunited with her referred to the help that she was able to offer her mother who couldn’t speak English. She also referred to the resilience displayed by her son when he was reunited with her, acknowledging the importance of the support that the family can provide in such contexts.

“But it depends how the child feel to fit in the system and how supportive it can get from the family. .... I was trying to help my son to be—to feel well in the school. And he have seen a lot as a young child. I was really worrying how will I deal with him when he came, but he proved me wrong. The resilience they have is greater than

anything. But sometimes I feel that I feel they need more cuddling and pushing, moral support than anyone else. Because trouble always been there. But he’s trying his best, like, ‘Mum, I can do. I can do this. I can do that.’ He’s very courageous. Children, they’re amazing.”

When friendships had been were established these served as important sources of support for reunified family members. For example, when asked where she would go for support in the town in which she was living one reunified family member stated:

“I fix everything with myself or I go with my friends, Irish friend. Yeah, stay and talking and talking and....”

Stakeholders spoke about the support that they and other organisations provided. In addition to preparing and supporting sponsors with the practical aspects of the reunification process, many stakeholders referred to relationship supports they provided to families as well as supports in relation to adaptation to Irish society. Regarding the former – relationship supports – none of the stakeholders interviewed for this study considered family and relationship supports to be part of their explicit professional mandate, and most struggled to identify whose mandate it might be. Many, however, felt it was their “duty of care” to address. One stakeholder referred to it as part of their responsibility towards “minding people in [the family reunification] process”.

Relationship supports often began at the point of helping to prepare the sponsor – and preparing sponsors to prepare their family members – for the potential emotional aspects of the journey on which they were about to embark. Areas of support discussed by participants included managing expectations, particularly around preparing oneself for a potentially lengthy wait, as well as what reunification with a family member might be like after a long separation. For example, aftercare workers spoke about providing emotional support to young people who were worried that they would lose their independence after their family members arrived. Another stakeholder spoke about the importance of bringing up relationship matters

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But it depends how the child feel to fit in the system and how supportive it can get from the family. .... I was trying to help my son to be—to feel well in the school. And he have seen a lot as a young child. I was really worrying how will I deal with him when he came, but he proved me wrong. The resilience they have is greater than anything. But sometimes I feel that I feel they need more cuddling and pushing, moral support than anyone else. Because trouble always been there. But he’s trying his best, like, ‘Mum, I can do. I can do this. I can do that.’ He’s very courageous. Children, they’re amazing.”

with sponsors “just even make them aware that this potentially an issue as well, you know, to be ready for it.” He gave an example of providing support to a husband who, in the lead up to the arrival of his wife and children to Ireland, was sensing tension in conversations with his wife:

“We just knew what could happen having seen it, what she was going to be like. And just by virtue of the skype conversations he was having with the wife back home and some of the languages she was using and he was getting scared. So I suppose it was to give a bit more confidence and coping mechanisms so when they arrived what he kind of needed to do around it. And, you know, just kind of woo her again and start being a responsible husband. Just practical

advice. And then, you know, it never got—there was issues with this particular family unit but they seem to have worked through them...”

However not all professionals working with refugees felt comfortable addressing such matters:

We’re not the right people to be saying to them, ‘Have you considered what it’s going to be like with your husband again?’ or like, you know, ‘You know, how does everyone feel about the fact that you’ve kind of got a job?’ Or—you know, that’s—like it would be totally inappropriate for us to try and take on all of that.”

Relationship supports were also needed by young people being reunited with their parents after long separations. One aftercare worker working with unaccompanied minors, mentioned that while the young person was their primary client, in order to meet the needs of the young people upon family reunification, their work often necessitated engaging with the family as a whole:

“We’re aftercare workers. We’re not kind of family support workers or anything, but that’s what we end up doing a lot of the time... But you’re supporting your young person, I guess, and they need that support.”

The feeling that such support was necessary stemmed to some degree from the stakeholders’ awareness that refugee sponsors were often under huge pressure following reunification, given the myriad of responsibilities placed on them. As well as the practical pressures of linking family members with services, a number of stakeholders referred to situations where refugee sponsors struggled with role-based expectations placed on them by family members following reunification. As discussed earlier in relation to the challenges of adapting to Irish society it was sometimes expected that sponsors would revert to traditional family roles. Support was sometimes provided in this regard. One stakeholder spoke about a refugee sponsor who had begun to feel overwhelmed by home demands following the arrival of her husband and children. The woman organised for her family to attend family therapy. Another stakeholder also spoke about supporting

a young woman struggling with demands and expectations on her from reunited family members. Emotional support was provided to the young woman and her family members were linked with English classes. It was acknowledged though that the work did not focus on addressing any issue arising in the home context.

### 5.4.2 Gaps in Support

Unsurprisingly, given the myriad of challenges that were faced, participants reiterated time and again the need for dedicated family supports as part of an overall orientation or resettlement programme for reunified refugee families. Such supports were needed to address difficulties faced in relation to adaptation, navigating systems, family relationship issues and social isolation. However, the experience of participants was that, even when sought, such supports are not provided:

**“You try to link like, you know, just with the community services or whatever. But my experience: no services are receptive.” (Stakeholder)**

This stakeholder described one instance in which she requested a Tusla family support worker for a recently reunified refugee family. When asked what the issue was, she explained that “they’re new. And they’re trying to integrate.” However, the family was not deemed to meet the threshold for support. The stakeholder’s colleague explained how having to wait months for support demonstrated lack of consideration for the actual needs of reunified refugee families, whereby the primary needs were immediately upon arrival:

**“They finally get housed, yeah, they finally are attached to a community. It’s actually the gap between the arrival and when they get down there that they probably need the most psychological support because it’s the most confusing and stressful time.”**

Another stakeholder suggested that there was a need for what she described as “positive social work” – social work that is preventative rather than reactive in nature, to “check-in



**At least to make two or one people within the community to be trained. Counsellors who can talk to them, who knows their culture, who knows their religion. ... A person within the community trained by the comm— understood the context, the cultural context, at the same time who has understanding both with professional and personal.... ...And I think that's what they need is community supports input and supporting the people within the community, who are qualified maybe nurses, qualified community workers, qualified social workers, to be assisted to give them within the cultural competence or within the community”.**

post arrival as to how they are getting on”. Similarly, another stakeholder made reference to the need for services that provide support and information to parents who are struggling in order to allow children to be protected within the family. Unfortunately, stakeholders were of the view that the current system in relation to family reunification is based on the latter: interaction between social work services and refugee families is absent, “unless it gets to the critical stage and they’re actually getting involved in child protection interventions and in a negative connotation sort of way.” One refugee sponsor pointed out that parents are unlikely to seek help or support if their only knowledge of the Irish

child welfare system was associated with fear, or the perception “that your children will be taken away from you, [and] you will be punished by looking for support”. The participant also spoke of the need for education and trust-building with refugee families around the supportive role of the An Garda Síochána and social services in Ireland.

Another stakeholder spoke about the lack of support structures in relation to young refugee sponsors who were over 18 when they arrived in Ireland and thus not in receipt of services from Tusla. Stakeholders highlighted that without access to assigned aftercare workers who could help and guide them challenges that arise in relation to family reunification can be much more difficult:

**“The young person, for example—we’ve had a few, you know, who had quite a lot of freedom in their lives previous to joining their parents and then they suddenly come here and—it’s again that expectations are very different and there’s a clash.... I think the fact that, you know, there’s no—they don’t necessarily have a link person to help them with things like, you know, a social worker or, you know, an aftercare worker. It means that it definitely can be tougher.”**

There was acknowledgment too that even when services existed, they were not always accessible to refugee communities. Interestingly, one stakeholder referenced the importance of “informal supports” such as religious figures or community groups but placed this in the context of the multiple barriers that exist in accessing more formal supports:

**“Again, having a situation where both parties firstly know about the availability of counselling, can afford to do it, or have the time to do it, and have the childcare that they can access it. Again, all these things are just huge barriers for people. I think people generally look for more informal supports. So that would be talking to their pastor or to their imam or to, you know, to their community group about it. So it tends to be very community-based supports at that stage, which has its positives and its negatives.”**

A participant made reference to the need for culturally competent counselling to help to address issues of trauma. She suggested the need to involve the community in this service provision either by training people from within the community to provide more formal support or by engaging with the community to upskill qualified professionals so that they could offer more culturally competent services:

**“At least to make two or one people within the community to be trained. Counsellors who can talk to them, who knows their culture, who knows their religion. ... A person within the community trained by the comm— understood the context, the cultural context, at the same time who has understanding both with professional and personal.... ...And I think that's what they need is community supports input and supporting the people within the community, who are qualified maybe nurses, qualified community workers, qualified social workers, to be assisted to give them within the cultural competence or within the community”.** (Refugee Sponsor)

One stakeholder pointed to the need for local integration projects, both those that help refugees themselves to understand about life in Ireland and those that help Irish people to understand more about refugees and issues around identity. In relation to the latter, she stated:

**“...there is so many places where you can feel... you can see they have never had— what’s asylum-seeker mean, or refugees? They hear refugees but they don’t know more about issues. They feel about differences. There’s fear. There’s fear of hate. There’s a fear. So it’s so hard to break that barrier. I think it’s more integration projects to do. But emotional—bring it to the neighbourhood.”**



## Chapter 5: Summary of Key Points



The literature on refugee family reunification points to the joy and relief experienced by families upon reunification (Suárez-Orozco et al., 2002; Hinds, 2018), but also to the significant challenges during the post reunification period (Marsden & Harris, 2018). This was evident in our research also. Refugee sponsors and family members were of course delighted to be together again, but past experiences and present circumstances combined to create many challenges in their relationships as they learnt to “fit in together again”. In relation to past experiences, the impact of the period of separation and the impact of trauma were pertinent. Regarding present circumstances, the significant stressors associated with their initial period in Ireland, put a strain on relationships. In addition, changed family roles and dynamics were identified by service providers as sources of tension between reunified family members.

As well as resettling into family life again, reunited family members were also faced with the challenge of adapting to Irish society. Differences were encountered across various dimensions, including language and culture, and the evidence – primarily from stakeholders in relation to this issue – suggested that at times challenges arose when refugee sponsors and family members differed as regards their approach to the changed circumstances. While attempting to adapt to these changes family members also tried to hold on to their cultural and religious practices. Again challenges were encountered but connections with their own ethnic communities were identified as important in this regard.

The data pointed to a number of factors that hindered social and community integration, including language barriers, time, the pace of life, and unemployment. While some reunited

family members managed to make friends both within and outside of their own ethnic or religious communities, there was evidence also that for some social isolation was an issue. There was evidence too of racism and discrimination within neighbourhoods, something which is of course likely to have a negative bearing on the ability to form friendships and social connections.

The chapter again pointed to the significant role played by refugee sponsors in supporting family members, as well as to the role played by both formal and informal support structures. However, there was evidence of very significant gaps in support, particularly as regards the relational challenges that arose, but also in relation to adaptation to Irish society more generally.



# 6

## Chapter 6

# Conclusions and Recommendations



# 6.1

## Concluding Remarks

There are a number of key themes arising from the findings of this report but among the most significant are the *policy invisibility* of reunified families and what Rousseau et al. (2004) refer to as “Western administrative violence”. Reunified refugee families are not specifically mentioned within Irish integration policy and no programmes of orientation and support exist for their benefit. As highlighted throughout the report, this places a heavy burden on refugee sponsors – who may already be living in quite precarious circumstances – to assist family members in navigating the complex bureaucratic tasks involved in initially getting settled in Ireland.

The findings from interviews with those of refugee background and those working in support roles highlight the complexity and inflexibility of the governmental systems which must be dealt with: the expectation that interactions will generally be carried out through English, the lack of interpretation support and frequent insensitivity to the particular needs and circumstances of beneficiaries of international protection. From the outset of the process of applying for family reunification, individuals must conform to rigid timetables and with limited official guidance undertake what can often be an onerous and expensive process of proving entitlement.

Following a successful application there is limited support or guidance from government agencies either before or after reunification. Families arriving in Ireland are at high risk of housing deprivation or homelessness due to inflexibility in relation to provision for housing supports and the complete lack of a coordinated response

to meeting needs. Delays in accessing vital services such as social protection payments and medical cards exacerbate financial insecurity. The resulting stresses – at a time when family members are adjusting to each other after what may have been a lengthy separation – are likely to negatively impact upon integration outcomes in the short-term at the very least. In addition, while friendships that are formed can provide important support, establishing social connections can be challenging, particularly within a very changed cultural context and when faced with a number of barriers, including racism and discrimination.

It is important to highlight positive aspects of the refugee family reunification regime in Ireland: the fact that beneficiaries of subsidiary protection have an entitlement to reunification is one of the most significant of these. The provision of travel documents by the Irish government where necessary (and the waiving of the necessity for a visa in these cases) was also highlighted as a welcome recognition by the state of the challenges faced by refugee families. It is important too to note that a number of the refugee sponsors and reunified family members who took part in the study were eager to express their gratitude for the refuge provided to them in Ireland and for the provision of social services in particular social protection and education. It is clear, however, that inadequate access to certain social services – in particular housing and English language classes – is impacting on outcomes in relation to economic and social integration. For some of the participants who took part the biggest issue inhibiting integration was their concern about family members living in precarious situations elsewhere. The narrow definition of the family under current Irish law means that for some of these reunification may not be possible. In this regard, the broader range of family members eligible for reunification under the complementary humanitarian admission programmes must be seen as another very positive aspect of the reunification regime in Ireland. Given the increasing rates of forced displacement and concomitant growth in the need for resettlement opportunities, there is a strong argument to be made for the establishment of a permanent complementary admissions mechanism.

# 6.2

## Recommendations for Policy and Research

### 6.2.1 Legislative Reform

Amend the 2015 International Protection Act to address concerns about the narrow definition of the family (S. 56(9)) and the time-limit to apply after recognition of refugee status (S. 56(8)). The provisions of the International Protection (Family Reunification) (Amendment) Bill 2017, endorsed by the Oireachtas Justice and Equality Committee which carried out legislative scrutiny of the Bill, provides for repeal of S.56(8) of the International Protection Act 2015 and that the categories of family members eligible for reunification under S.56(9) of the International Protection Act 2015 are broadened. We recommended that the provisions set out in the 2017 Bill are enacted by the Oireachtas as soon as possible.

### 6.2.2 Complementary Admissions Mechanism

A permanent complementary admissions programme should be put in place by the Department of Justice and Equality. This should be in addition to Ireland's existing commitments under the Irish Refugee and Protection Programme

### 6.2.3 Administration of Family Reunification

- Free Legal Aid should be made available for those applying for family reunification under the International Protection Act, 2015.
- The Department of Justice and Equality should produce a comprehensive and accessible guide to the statutory mechanism for family refugee reunification for applicants.
- In order to avoid unnecessary delays the necessity for DNA testing should be anticipated and communicated to applicants for refugee family reunification at as early a stage in the process as possible.
- Related to this and in line with the recent decision in **X v Minister for Justice and Equality [2020] IESC 284** appropriate guidelines in relation to requests for DNA testing in applications for family reunification under statutory and complementary mechanisms for beneficiaries of international protection should be developed by the Department of Justice and Equality.<sup>8</sup>
- Decision letters from the Family Reunification Unit to successful applicants for family reunification should be accompanied by guidance to refugee sponsors (beyond visa and immigration requirements) and information on sources of advice and support
- Fees for visas to enter Ireland should be waived by the Department of Justice and Equality in the case of all persons admitted to Ireland under refugee family reunification

8. [https://www.bailii.org/ie/cases/IESC/2020/2020IESC30\\_0.html](https://www.bailii.org/ie/cases/IESC/2020/2020IESC30_0.html)  
<https://berkeleysolicitors.ie/supreme-court-determines-definition-of-a-child-for-purposes-of-family-reunification/>

### 6.2.4 Travel of family members

- The Irish government should commit resources to assisting in organising and funding travel of all those admitted to Ireland under statutory and complementary mechanisms for refugee family reunification, whether via the existing Travel Assistance Programme administered by the Red Cross or another mechanism.
- In the context of the restrictions imposed due to COVID-19 the Irish government should – as a matter of urgency – examine ways to support the travel to Ireland of family members with permission to come to Ireland for the purposes of reunification with a refugee.

### 6.2.5 Reception and Integration Policy and Supports

- A dedicated integration strategy for asylum seekers and beneficiaries of international protection and refugee family reunification should be developed by the Department of Justice and Equality as part of the successor to the current migrant integration strategy.
- As a general principle *all* applicants/beneficiaries of international protection, including *all* beneficiaries of refugee family reunification should have equal entitlements and access to reception and integration supports and accommodation,; provision of orientation information; access to health assessment on arrival; a programme of support from integration support workers and intercultural workers.
- Consideration should be given to allocating responsibility for driving and overseeing reception and integration policy for *all* applicants/beneficiaries of international protection, including all beneficiaries of refugee family reunification, to a single administrative unit within the Department of Justice and Equality, which would also have responsibility for overseeing coordination of relevant activities across relevant government departments and agencies.

- In order to facilitate equality of provision of reception and integration support nationally appropriate structures and roles must be put in place at local level. It is recommended that the existing structures and roles put in place by local authorities to support resettlement programmes at county level are made permanent and adapted accordingly to support asylum seekers and beneficiaries of international protection, including all beneficiaries of refugee family reunification. This includes placing county inter-agency committees led by local authorities on a permanent footing as well as creating permanent posts for integration support workers and intercultural workers in each local authority area, ensuring that sufficient posts are created to facilitate manageable caseloads.

### 6.2.6 Accessing Public Services

In the initial period after arrival support from integration support workers and intercultural workers should be available to beneficiaries of family reunification to support access to services.

Relevant actions of the Migrant Integration Strategy should be fully implemented by the end of 2020. In particular government departments should immediately prioritise implementation of Actions 15, 16 and 18 in relation to which limited progress had been made by the time the mid-term review was produced in January 2019:

- Action 15: – “Information will be provided in language-appropriate formats and in a manner easily accessible by migrants.” In January 2019 just 7 of the 46 departments which provided updates had made available information leaflets in languages other than English or Irish while even smaller numbers provided information in other languages through other formats such as on their websites. Only 5 had available application or complaint forms in other languages.
- Action 16: “Government Departments and State Agencies will ensure that staff are trained to inform migrants accurately

of their entitlements.” Just 10 of the 46 departments which provided updates in January 2019 had provided such training.

- Action 18: “Mechanisms for providing adequate interpreting facilities will be explored in order to facilitate equality of access to services”. Only 13 of the 46 departments which provided updates had provision for “face-to-face interpreting” in January 2019.
- Given concerns about the quality of interpretation services in Ireland appropriate measures should be taken to support provision of accredited training for interpretation and to put in place provision for regulation of services.
- Given the avowed emphasis within the Migrant Integration Strategy on integration as a “two-way process”, an obligation should be placed on all government departments and agencies to ensure that recruitment and continuous-professional-development of front-line workers takes account of the requisite language skills required to work with linguistically and culturally diverse populations. This should be included as an action in the successor to the current integration strategy.

### 6.2.7 Housing

- In order to reduce the very high risk of homelessness for reunified families we recommend that local authorities permit registration of housing need in advance of the arrival of family members given permission to come to Ireland under refugee family reunification.
- Increased HAP payments adequate to the needs of the enlarged family unit should be available to refugee sponsors *at least* one month in advance of the arrival of family members in Ireland.
- Responsibility should be placed on a designated body (for example local authorities or the Reception and Integration Agency) to ensure that reception accommodation for persons admitted under refugee family reunification is available on arrival where necessary.

### 6.2.8 Social Protection

- The Department of Social Protection should be allocated responsibility for fast tracking of applications of reunified family members for PPS numbers in the context of a coordinated approach to reception and orientation services.
- All actions under the Migrant Integration Strategy for the Department of Social Protection should be implemented by the end of 2020

### 6.2.9 English language provision

- As a priority beneficiaries of international protection and family reunification should have access to English language provision through Education and Training Boards of a minimum of 15 hours per week.
- Ensure that English language provision is put in place by Education and Training Boards that meets the needs of reunified family members with childcare responsibilities or in employment.

### 6.2.10 Education

Beneficiaries of family reunification must be supported in accessing early years services, school places and other forms of educational provision in the same way that support is currently provided to programme refugees.

### 6.2.11 Health

- The Health Service Executive should be allocated responsibility for ensuring that reunified family members have access to health assessments upon arrival and for provision of support with accessing primary care health services for reunified families.
- The Health Service Executive should be allocated responsibility to fast track access to medical cards for eligible reunified family members so that they can access health services as soon as possible.



- Ensuring access to professionally qualified interpreters is vital: in this regard ensuring that recommendations of the HSE Working Group to Develop a Model for the Implementation of Trained Interpreters in the Irish Healthcare System are fully implemented must be a government priority.
- Mental health service providers, including counsellors and psychologists should be upskilled to ensure that their work is cognisant of the experiences of reunified families. Refugee communities should be consulted in relation to how these services might better meet their needs

### 6.2.12 Relationship and Family Supports

- Tusla should provide or fund proactive family support services to reunified refugee families. Beneficiaries of refugee family reunification should be provided with information on available family support services with other orientation information provided on arrival and the services offered should be tailored to meet the particular needs of reunified families.
- Particular attention should be paid to supporting young refugee sponsors and their families.
- Ensure that existing relationship, counselling and family support services are adequately resourced to meet the needs of reunified families.

### 6.2.13 Discrimination and Racism

- The current migrant strategy has set out a commitment to “intercultural awareness training” for all employees of government departments and agencies under action 61. Progress on this action up to January 2019 was delayed with just 10/46 departments and agencies having provided such training. We recommend that training on anti-discrimination and anti-racism in addition to intercultural awareness

should be mandated for all front-line workers in government departments and agencies.

- Schools and educational services should be obliged to put anti-racism policies and procedures in place
- Discrimination in relation to housing appears to be a serious issues for migrants, particularly those dependent on HAP or other housing supports. Proactive measures should be adopted to combat discrimination against recipients of housing supports in accessing private rental sector accommodation and on the other grounds set out in Equal Status legislation. Crosscare Refugee Service, 2018 have put forward a recommendation for a model of licensing of landlords as part of registration with Private Residential Tenancies Board which incorporated an anti-racism/discrimination charter and we support this recommendation.

### 6.2.14 Future Research

- This study captured the experiences of beneficiaries of family reunification at a particular point in time – there is a need for longitudinal research to be carried out to track experiences and outcomes over time
- Collection and/or collation of data for the purposes of monitoring integration outcomes must be carried out in way which facilitates assessment of outcomes for beneficiaries of international protection and family reunification
- There is a need for participatory research to be carried out with refugees and reunified families in order to ensure that their concerns are reflected in research and policy. This should be recognised in the development of state-funded research programmes.





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