

# Submission to Migrant Integration Strategy Monitoring and Coordination Committee

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OCTOBER 30

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## **About Nasc**

Nasc, the Migrant and Refugee Rights Centre is a non-governmental organisation based in Cork. Nasc, the Irish word for 'link', empowers migrants to realise and fulfil their rights. Nasc works with migrants and refugees to advocate and lead for change within Ireland's immigration and protection systems, to ensure fairness, access to justice and the protection of human rights. Our goal is to realise the rights of all migrants and refugees within Irish society. Nasc has almost two decades of experience supporting refugees, asylum seekers and ethnic minority communities in Ireland. Nasc provides information, advice and support to approximately 1,300 people annually. Our policy and campaigning work are directly informed by our day-to-day experiences working with migrants, refugees, asylum seekers and ethnic minorities living in Ireland. More information on our service is available at [www.nascireland.org](http://www.nascireland.org).

Nasc welcomes the opportunity to make submissions to the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth in relation to the impacts of COVID-19 on migrant integration, the additional challenges it has presented, and the ways in which our work has adapted to respond to the current crisis. The pandemic has had a disproportionate impact on our service users who are low income, single parents, persons with a disability and those relying on public transport. It is however unfortunate that the experiences of asylum-seeking communities and residents of direct provision falls outside of the remit of the Migrant Integration Strategy 2017-2020. The pandemic, and the clusters of Covid-19 in direct provision and emergency centres, has highlighted the stark failings of the direct provision system.

This submission will outline Nasc's experience of supporting migrant communities both in Cork and nationally since the Covid-19 outbreak began in Ireland.

### **Nasc's response to Covid-19 pandemic**

The Covid-19 pandemic and the resulting public health restrictions have impacted on Nasc's services. Prior to this, our projects were focused on the in-person delivery of information, advice, social work and English classes. Nasc were able to pivot to the provision of supports online and over the phone.

As the country prepared for the beginning of lockdown in March, Nasc became aware that low income households and families in direct provision were struggling to get essential supplies as local shops ran out of hand sanitiser, tissues, medication and soaps. Nasc teamed with Sanctuary Runners to organise a public collection of supplies which we were then able to distribute to families in need.

Nasc's Connect Project, a social work-led project working with children and young people, began arranging delivery and drop-offs of essential items including baby food, clothes and toys for children, educational supports, basic food items and sanitary products. Many of our most vulnerable clients do not have access to private transport or childcare and this significantly impacted their ability to shop for themselves. The closure of primary and secondary schools between March and September 2020 with a move to online learning represented a very serious challenge to low income migrant households, and particularly in non-English speaking households. A lack of equipment (laptops, tablets), internet connectivity made home-schooling children very difficult. Nasc worked with families where multiple children in different school classes were all trying to complete their schoolwork using their parent's phone.

Nasc's Gateway Project, a social work-led project working with refugee and migrant women, moved their classes online. We taught the class participants how to use Zoom and were able to deliver our full programme of English language classes online. The project found that the participants were more likely to feel isolated during the pandemic and it placed significant stress on their households. The project responded to this by expanding its programme.

Nasc's Legal Service directly liaised with HSE Social Inclusion to provide assistance and support to migrant communities, including asylum seekers, in Cork who were either in isolation or who had tested positive for Covid-19. We also worked with the Public Health and HSE Social inclusion to assist in the rollout of mass testing in Direct Provision Centres in the Cork area. The service has also been an important source of information and a link to services and supports for quarantining for persons entering the country. The Legal Service also maintained its information and advocacy service online and via phone with limited appointment availability for emergencies.

The pandemic has impacted Nasc's ability to do outreach into communities. Nasc, in common with other community groups, have been unable to organise capacity building and other integration-focused events that would comply with public health restrictions. Nasc's planned programme of public events for 2020, including promoting self-employment and entrepreneur had to be deferred.

## **Access to Citizenship**

### *i) Registration and security of residence*

On 20<sup>th</sup> March 2020 the Department of Justice and Equality announced that registration at GNIB offices and at its registration office in Burgh Quay was being suspended for two months in line with public health restrictions. All immigration permissions were extended for this period of time. There

have been four further extensions since then with the most recent extension set to expire on the 21<sup>st</sup> January 2021. While we welcome the extension of immigration permissions up to the 21<sup>st</sup> January 2021, the manner in which these extensions have been rolled out and then communicated to migrant communities, employers and other State bodies has been poor and has led to widespread confusion and worry.

The lack of sufficient notice of the intention to extend immigration permissions has led to concerns amongst migrants that they would become undocumented through no fault of their own. This would in turn have significant repercussions for employment, housing supports, social welfare supports, medical cards and access to SUSI and caused significant worry and upset for migrants.

The lack of any official documentation for individuals to evidence that their permission had been automatically renewed by the extension added to the confusion. This is in contrast to other State services where letters were issued to service users to advise that extensions were in place. Our services have had to intervene in several cases where people were at risk of losing their employment or access to essential services.

The registration of non-EEA nationals recommenced on the 20<sup>th</sup> July 2020. Unfortunately, this too was marked by poor communication. This was exacerbated by the difference in registration procedures between Dublin and the rest of the country with Burgh Quay in Dublin operating a postal system and the rest of the country having an in-person registration process. We are aware that in large urban areas (including Cork City) there are very significant backlogs of between eight and twelve weeks to obtain an appointment with GNIB and are concerned that it will not be possible to deal with the backlog of cases before the expiry of the extension on the 21<sup>st</sup> January 2021.

#### *ii) Processing of Citizenship & Residency Applications*

Citizenship and residency applications have all been affected. The experience of Nasc's legal service users suggests that the average processing time for citizenship applications is in the region of 18-24 months.

Similarly, our services have seen an increase in delays in processing visa applications, residency applications and family reunification applications.

#### **Access to Public Services and Social Inclusion**

*Information will be provided in language-appropriate formats and in a manner easily accessible by migrants.*

In March 2020, Nasc began looking for public health information on Covid-19 in high-demand languages including Arabic, French, Pashto, Russian, Georgian and Portuguese. However, there was little available for several months. Some of the documents produced by the HSE were incorrectly translated or labelled as the incorrect language. The information was not readily accessible to migrants and to services working with migrants. This has improved and the HSE now has posters and booklets available in a multitude of languages.

However, we believe that there would have been a great benefit to the HSE producing information in other formats including public health adverts similar to those produced in English to be broadcasted on TV and radio. It is our experience that people who do not speak English are the least likely to be able to find information in their language on a state website unless that service is widely advertised. We believe that there was a significant information gap in getting high quality, accurate, Irish-based information to migrant communities in Ireland.

Nasc partnered with Together Ireland on a Covid-19 World Service project to produce short, instructional videos from medical professionals in over 30 languages. These videos were designed to be shared in migrant communities via YouTube or WhatsApp and were updated regularly as restrictions and public health guidance changed. A link to these videos was made available on the HSE website and we're very grateful to RTE for producing a promotional video for the Covid-19 World Service. We've received very positive feedback from migrants about being able to access information from a medical professional in their first language.

### **Promoting Intercultural Awareness and Combating Racism and Xenophobia**

The Covid-19 pandemic has triggered racist incidences. INAR reported 60 coronavirus-related racist incidents in the first four months of the year. These were incidents where something was said blaming the victims for causing coronavirus. In one incident in Cork City in August, two Chinese men were verbally and physically assaulted. The two men were taken to hospital for treatment.

There is also a very significant correlation between anti-mask and anti-lockdown protests and anti-migrant sentiment. Many of the marches and demonstrations against Covid-19 restrictions have featured anti-migrant speakers. It is worrying that the pandemic is being used to mobilise or normalise anti-migrant sentiment.