

# **Direct Provision: Ireland's controversial system for accommodating asylum seekers to end**

**One of the promises Ireland's new coalition government has made is a commitment to abolish Direct Provision, the state's controversial system for accommodating asylum seekers. But what new regime will be put in place to protect those seeking shelter on the Emerald Isle?**

**The Focus spoke to representatives from Abolish Direct Provision, the Movement of Asylum Seekers in Ireland (MASI), Monaghan Against Racism and Green Party Member Tate Donnelly to find out their response to the government's decision.**

On 27 June, Ireland officially formed a new coalition government, which saw Fianna Fáil's leader Micheál Martin replace Leo Varadkar as Taoiseach. The historic coalition will see rival parties Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael work together for the first time since their formation during the Irish Civil War. They have also been joined by the Green Party, and the trio will govern the country together.

One of the plans for the new government, put forward by the Greens is a commitment to end Direct Provision and replace the system with a "new international protection accommodation policy, centred on a not-for-profit approach." The government plans to implement this over the next five years.



Photo credit - MASI the Movement of Asylum Seekers in Ireland

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## What is Direct Provision?

The Direct Provision System was established in 2000, to accommodate asylum seekers entering the Irish State in need of international protection. It was initially introduced as an “interim” system which would provide accommodation for six months for those awaiting the results of their asylum application.

Currently adults living in Direct Provision receive €38.80 a week to live on, while children receive €29.80. Since 2 June 2018, asylum seekers can apply for permission to work but only after eight months from arrival.

People living in Direct Provision accommodation can apply for access to state-funded health care and children have full access to primary and secondary mainstream education.

A number of human rights organizations have criticized the system, describing it as “inhumane and degrading,” as asylum seekers are placed in overcrowded conditions, with very little money while waiting for an indefinite amount of time on their application outcome.

According to Doras, an NGO that works with migrants in Ireland, there are 6000 asylum seekers currently living in 40 Direct Provision centres across Ireland, including over 1,500 children. Seven are state-run and the rest are managed on a for-profit basis by private contractors.

Last year the largest number of asylum seekers arriving in Ireland came from Syria, followed by Afghanistan, Venezuela, Colombia, and Iraq.

Doras’ website says that the system was designed as a short-term measure but many applicants experience lengthy stays, which is associated with declining physical and mental health, self-esteem, and skills.

“A number of Direct Provision centres are in isolated locations with limited transport options. Despite recent progress, the majority of people living in Direct Provision centres still have no right to work, to access higher education, or to cook for themselves,” it says.

Doras lists overcrowded living conditions, limited access to further and higher education and lengthy stays as some of the main issues with the current system.



Photo credit - MASI the Movement of Asylum Seekers in Ireland

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## Current Proposals

The Irish government has promised to publish a White Paper by the end of the year, along with “annualized capital and current investment” to fund changes.

There is not a clear plan as to how the system will be changed yet, but the Irish Times reports that the three parties are “pulling in different directions.”

According to the paper, Fine Gael and Fianna Fáil are looking at reducing the length of time an asylum seeker stays in the system, while the Green Party wants the system completely changed, not just improved upon.

The Greens want the accommodation to be provided by new, or existing approved housing bodies instead of private operators, while asylum seekers could gain housing benefits and local authority support to find a home.

According to the Irish Times, the government’s next step will take place in September when former European Commission secretary-general Catherine Day

will deliver her report of reform on direct provision which will inform the government's White Paper.

## **Government's plan is a "welcome idea"**

A spokesperson for the Movement of Asylum Seekers in Ireland (MASI) said that they "welcome" the government's plans and their recognition that "capital investment" will be required to end the "profiteering racket" that is Direct Provision.

"For the first time since the system of Direct Provision was introduced 20 years ago, there is acceptance that it cannot go on any longer. MASI commends the Green Party for their insistence that ending Direct Provision must be included in the programme for government," MASI said in a statement.

MASI said however that they are concerned by the lack of appreciation "of the harm caused by Direct Provision on the 60,000 plus people who have gone through it over the years."

"While the programme for government includes regularisation of undocumented people, it is silent on the brutal deportation regime that has seen many migrants who have spent years in Direct Provision and children who were born and raised in Ireland being deported," they added.

MASI says that it will continue campaigning till every Direct Provision centre is closed and asylum seekers are assisted to live independently in the community.

A spokesperson for the Abolish Direct Provision Campaign said, "The Government made a bold statement without any road map of the process of abolishing direct provision. We are still holding our celebrations until the full plan of action is given."

As of 2 July, 48,914 people have signed the organisation's petition, calling for an end to the current system and replacing it with a "more humane and transparent" regime.

Tate Donnelly, Ireland's youngest Dail candidate in this year's election and Green Party member said he would like to see the state provide "own door" accommodation for asylum seekers.

“I’d like to see a maximum waiting time be introduced, the right to work extended to include all, a higher weekly allowance given, and for the recommendations in the McMahon Report to be implemented,” he said.

A spokesperson for Monaghan Against Racism said it is a “very welcome idea” but until “words are put into action” it is hard to feel any sense of certainty that it will definitely happen or if it is just a guise “to adjust policy framework to result in more deportations.”

“If it is to end, we need to have some alternative in place that means asylum seekers are not coming to Ireland, from often very traumatic situations and spending years in substandard living conditions with very little rights. They need to closely liaise with current or past asylum seekers now to figure out how they can make this transition the right way,” they said.

They said it would be “encouraging to see more anti-racist networks developing and more local grassroots response groups” as a means to support asylum seekers and refugees currently living in Ireland.

To learn more about Ireland’s Direct Provision system, you can listen to Bulelani Mfaco from the Movement of Asylum Seekers in Ireland’s interview on the Irish Passport Podcast.

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