



MASI - the Movement of Asylum Seekers in Ireland

Comments on the government's response to Covid-19 in Direct Provision

Submitted to the Special Committee on Covid-19

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With thanks to MASI members, asylum seekers in Cahersiveen and Sasha Brown for their contributions

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About MASI - the Movement of Asylum Seekers in Ireland is a grassroots organisation based in Ireland. We are people who are or have been in the asylum and direct provision system in Ireland, working and advocating together for justice, freedom and dignity for refugees, asylum seekers and migrants. Our focus is on the Right to Education and the Right to Work for all people seeking asylum, the complete abolition of direct provision and an end to deportations.

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Contents

Pre Covid-19 Conditions in Direct Provision	3
Crammed rooms - in pictures	4
Enter Covid-19.....	10
Relocation of asylum seekers.....	13
Recommendations	19
Communal Toilets and Showers.....	21

Pre Covid-19 Conditions in Direct Provision

Prior to the Covid-19 pandemic, life in Direct Provision was difficult. One of the fundamental flaws in abhorrent system of Direct Provision is the congregated nature of for-profit centres with often cramped conditions where asylum seekers are forced to exist in for years on end while waiting for a decision on their asylum claims. For instance:

- The Eglinton Direct Provision centre in Galway where a mother and father share a bedroom with their 3 children (eldest in their teens and youngest being a toddler). See page 13 in the last RIA/IPAS [inspection report](#) in the centre for room occupancy.
- The Hazel Hotel Direct Provision centre in Monasterevin with a family of 6 in 1 bedroom. The last RIA/IPAS [inspection report](#) shows several family units of 6 in same cramped conditions.
- Temple Direct Provision centre in Moate, Westmeath with as many as 5 different strangers in 1 bedroom in the last RIA/IPAS [inspection report](#).
- Glenvera Hotel Direct Provision centre in Cork with 6 men in 1 bedroom recorded in this RIA/IPAS [inspection report](#).
- Great Western House, a hostel-styled Direct Provision centre, had several rooms with 5 men in each room in the last RIA/IPAS [inspection report](#).

What these few Direct Provision centres highlight is the normalisation of warehousing asylum seekers in cramped conditions for many years. While the Department of Justice and Equality may attribute this overcrowding to the increase in number of people seeking asylum in Ireland, they conveniently neglect to mention that most of these Direct Provision centres have been operating with this overcrowding long before there was a marginal surge in the number of people seeking asylum. The Eglinton Direct Provision centre and Glenvera Hotel have been operating in the same conditions for years. What does seem to have changed in the two Direct Provision centres is the amount of [profit made by the centres over the years](#) to keep asylum seekers in inhumane conditions.

Crammed rooms - in pictures

Glenvera Hotel Direct Provision centre in Cork City: bedroom for 6 men.



More Glenvera Hotel Direct Provision centre bunk beds



The Central Hostel in Miltown Malbay, Clare: tiny bedroom for 4 men.



The White House in Roscrea, Tipperary



Travelodge in Swords: family room



Clare Lodge, new Direct Provision centre in Ennis: had as many as 7 men in 1 bedroom.





Bedroom for a family of 5 in Riverside Park Hotel in Macroom



While some of these centres are new, the cramped conditions are not new in the many old Direct Provision centres. Riverside Hotel in Macroom has similar conditions for families to the Eglinton hotel Direct Provision centre that has been operating in Galway since the very beginning of the Direct Provision system. The only difference between the two centres – the building in Riverside Hotel is in a better condition. There are similar conditions in Temple Direct Provision centre, where the building is in better shape but conditions still appallingly cramped. Comparable conditions are present in St Patrick’s Direct Provision centre in Monaghan which has been operating for years, and the Hazel Hotel Direct Provision centre which has only been open since it started hosting programme refugees in 2015. Asylum seekers in these centres cited here and many other centres are stripped of their fundamental human right to privacy and the dignity that comes with it. Families cannot have private family life in many of these centres, where parents have to sleep in the same bedroom with all their children and having to queue in the canteen for meals or queue for pots and stoves in Direct Provision centres where asylum seekers are allowed to cook. The conditions in the Eglinton Direct Provision centre do not uphold the right to private family life nor do they vindicate the inviolable right to human dignity. There is no dignity in parents depending on handouts from the State through the operator of the Direct Provision centre or “friends of the centre” for the provision of their children’s material needs. In such situations, parents do not control what their children eat. Decisions that would ordinarily be made by parents in everyday life are made by management in the centre. None of this is in the best interest of the child. For single people forced to share bedrooms with strangers denied any private life for years, parents stripped of their parental duties and private family life and children forced to grow up in State-sponsored poverty, the conditions in Direct Provision were inhumane prior to the Covid-19 pandemic.

Enter Covid-19

When the Taoiseach first announced measures taken to tackle Covid-19 on the 12th March this year, the Movement of Asylum Seekers in Ireland grew increasingly concerned about what these might mean for asylum seekers in Direct Provision. The Taoiseach announced that gatherings of more than one hundred people indoors should be cancelled. The canteen service in Knockalisheen Direct Provision centre where over 200 asylum seekers received

their meals 3 times a day was not cancelled. In the early days of the pandemic, security staff in Knockalisheen Direct Provision centre prevented asylum seekers from taking food out of the canteen with Aramark cutlery. Members of the public donated food containers which encouraged asylum seekers who wanted to avoid congregating in the canteen to take food to their rooms. The Holy month of Ramadan became the saving grace as it significantly reduced the number of people in the canteen during meal times. Similar experiences of asylum seekers having to congregate in canteens or dining areas were observed in other Direct Provision centres including centres that later had clusters of Covid-19 cases. Some good practice on providing meals where canteens were closed and asylum seekers offered takeaways, and groceries ordered from food hall via emails to be delivered at the door step. The major problem was the impossibility of observing social distancing due to the congregated nature of Direct Provision. Many asylum seekers share bedrooms, toilets, showers, kitchens, and dining areas with strangers. Keeping 2 metres away from the next person becomes impossible in this setting. Single people use communal toilets and communal showers in Knockalisheen, Kinsale Road, Great Western House, Glenvera Hotel, and others. Whereas asylum seekers in the Hazel Hotel, Clare Lodge, Temple Direct Provision centre and others use communal kitchens.

There were differences in how the centres responded to the pandemic partly because they all have different operators, each responsible for their contingency planning. Some got a few things right and some got a lot of things wrong. For instance, on the 14th April 2020, a member of staff in the Clayton Hotel contacted an asylum seeker at MASI asking for protocol to be followed when an asylum seeker tests positive for Covid-19. An asylum seeker there had just tested positive for Covid-19. This call was disturbing because the hotel has guests which include asylum seekers and called an asylum seeker living in Direct Provision to ask for protocol to be followed when there is a positive case. Fortunately, the asylum seeker who took the call advised them of the steps that ought to have been followed the minute it was believed that an asylum seeker in the hotel may have contracted the virus. The Clayton hotel was not the only place where staff were clueless on what to do. When each Direct Provision centre was asked to create self-isolation rooms, a number of them did not seem to have an idea of what that should look like. The Grand Hotel Direct Provision centre in Wicklow, Eyre Powell Direct Provision centre in Newbridge, and Temple

Direct Provision centre in Moate Westmeath had multiple beds in their initial self isolation rooms.

Self isolation room in Temple Direct Provision centre



Proposed self-Isolation room in Eyre Powell Direct Provision centre



It took considerable effort from an asylum seeker in the centre to get Eyre Powell Direct Provision centre management to understand that the room with multiple beds and no windows, photographed above, is not appropriate for self-isolation. Temple Direct Provision centre was just as problematic because both centres had detected Covid-19 infections. The communal kitchens in the centres became a hazard. At the onset of the pandemic, MASI asked the Department of Justice and Equality to provide single rooms for single asylum seekers and self-contained units for families. The Department refused to do this. Instead, they opted to move some people into new Direct Provision centres and commercial hotels to reduce overcrowding in Direct Provision.

Relocation of asylum seekers

When the relocation was announced there was some hope that people would finally be able to observe social distancing, but that was not to be. The people who were moved to hotels continued sharing bedrooms with strangers and so did the asylum seekers they left behind. The hotels sourced by the Department of Justice and Equality to reduce overcrowding replicated the same problematic congregated settings Movement of Asylum Seekers in Ireland were complaining about in Direct Provision. And these conditions had disastrous consequences in a few cases. Asylum seekers who were transported by bus from Temple Direct Provision centre into Central Hotel in Dublin later tested positive for Covid-19. And some asylum seekers who had remained in Temple Direct Provision centre also tested positive later, including a child who was the only member of the family to test positive. Parents who remained in the centre feared for their children and kept them in the bedroom for weeks.



Other asylum seekers were rounded from several hotels in Dublin and bussed into the Skellig Star hotel in Cahersiveen, where one of the Covid-19 clusters developed. Putting the Cahersiveen Covid-19 puzzle together reveals a lot of recklessness on the part of the Department of Justice and Equality and the operator Remcoll Capital. Below is a series of notable events concerning the relocation to Cahersiveen:

- A guest who checked into the Travelodge Swords on the 7th March [fell ill and later tested positive for Covid-19 with several staff members](#) testing positive.
- In the early hours of the morning on the 10th March, a number of ambulances with staff in hazmat suits are seen by homeless people and asylum seekers staying in the Clayton Hotel near the airport.
- The ambulances later left the hotel with a number of guests and people in hazmat suits were filmed and photographed during this hive of activity.
- Homeless people and asylum seekers staying in the hotel were not told anything by authorities and were scared.
- Around the 18th of March, the Department of Justice and Equality begins the process of moving asylum seekers from Ballsbridge Hotel, Clayton Hotel, and Travelodge into Cahersiveen, Co. Kerry.
- On 3rd April, MASI receives complaints from parents that toddlers are not being provided with nutritious meals. Requests for appropriate meals are rejected.

- On the same day, an asylum seeking woman who has had a persistent dry cough, chills, high temperature, vomiting and has breathing difficulty is being nursed by her roommate with no help from staff.
- Security later calls a doctor who advises the roommate to administer panadol every 6 hours.
- Roommate goes down for breakfast on the following day and staff ask, “how is your roommate?”
- The asylum seeker experiencing symptoms of Covid-19 does not speak English very well.
- Throughout this, asylum seekers from various hotels have to congregate in the dining area for meal times.

The staff in Cahersiveen did not provide self-isolation facilities when the first asylum seeker showed symptoms. The roommate, a stranger from a different country who spoke a foreign language, had to nurse the other asylum-seeking stranger in the bedroom. Another asylum seeker whose roommate tested positive was locked out of her room without being given an alternative, so she slept in a friend’s room. The number of people testing positive in the Skellig Star hotel grew and included members of staff. A 7-year-old was the only member of her family to test positive for Covid-19 in the hotel. This left other parents frightened for the safety of their children. Some kept their children in the bedrooms for weeks as they risked contracting the virus if they stepped out of the bedroom. These actions by management, including the refusal to provide age appropriate and nutritious meals for toddlers, perhaps stems from reports that [more than half of staff at the Skellig Star hotel were not Gardaí vetted](#). The problem with the Skellig Star hotel started with the relocation in the middle of a pandemic. The explanation offered to asylum seekers for the sudden move from Dublin is that they were being moved to protect them from Covid-19. Yet groups from different hotels, some with positive cases of Covid-19, were bussed into Cahersiveen in hazardous conditions. From the experiences of asylum seekers, staff was clueless on how to manage the situation, insisting that asylum seekers congregate in the dining area for meal times. What was more disturbing is the agreement reached by the operator of the Skellig Star hotel and the community in Cahersiveen to [confine asylum seekers to the hotel grounds](#) as news of an outbreak of Covid-19 broke out. A decision that appears to have been later

formalised by the HSE as the local public health office ordered quarantine of everyone in the hotel. Asylum seekers and the community in Cahersiveen called for the Direct Provision centre to be shutdown and their calls are being ignored.

At the very start of the pandemic, MASI wrote a letter to the Minister for Justice and Equality pleading to him to take action in order to protect elderly people in Direct Provision, asylum seekers with underlying health conditions, healthcare workers in Direct Provision, and enable everyone in Direct Provision to observe social distancing guidelines. The response received highlighted that provisions would be made to assist the elderly and people with underlying health conditions to cocoon. Further, the HSE announced that asylum-seeking healthcare workers can apply for temporary accommodation on the same basis as other healthcare workers in the State. Several healthcare workers in Direct Provision had already tested positive for Covid-19 by the time this announcement was made and the first had already recovered. The delays in making these arrangements put both asylum seekers in Direct Provision and people in nursing home at risk of harm. It was unnecessary for activists to beg the government to move healthcare workers out of Direct Provision and demonstrated a flaw in the measures taken to tackle Covid-19. No action was taken to give every asylum seeker their own room. Instead, the government decided that strangers forced to share bedrooms would be treated as a household unit. As the situation in Cahersiveen and other Direct Provision centres that had clusters, that remains a fundamental flaw as it makes unfounded assumptions about the people in Direct Provision. An asylum seeker in Knockalisheen Direct Provision centre whose roommate did not know their name after sharing a bedroom for more than a year illustrates the core problem with the State placing two strangers in one bedroom and calling them a household. Indeed the asylum seeker who ran to their neighbours in Knockalisheen Direct Provision centre because their roommate wanted to beat him up signals that the State did not consider how asylum seekers have to negotiate sharing of that tiny intimate living space every day for many years.

Bedroom shared by 2 strangers in the Skellig Star Hotel in Cahersiveen.




The only space left in the room



Gooch and Jacko are Rising stars!

Kerry GAA heroes Jack O'Shea and Colm 'Gooch' Cooper have signed up to make their big screen debuts - in a multi-million blockbuster film about the 1916 Rising. **ROLES: P2-3**

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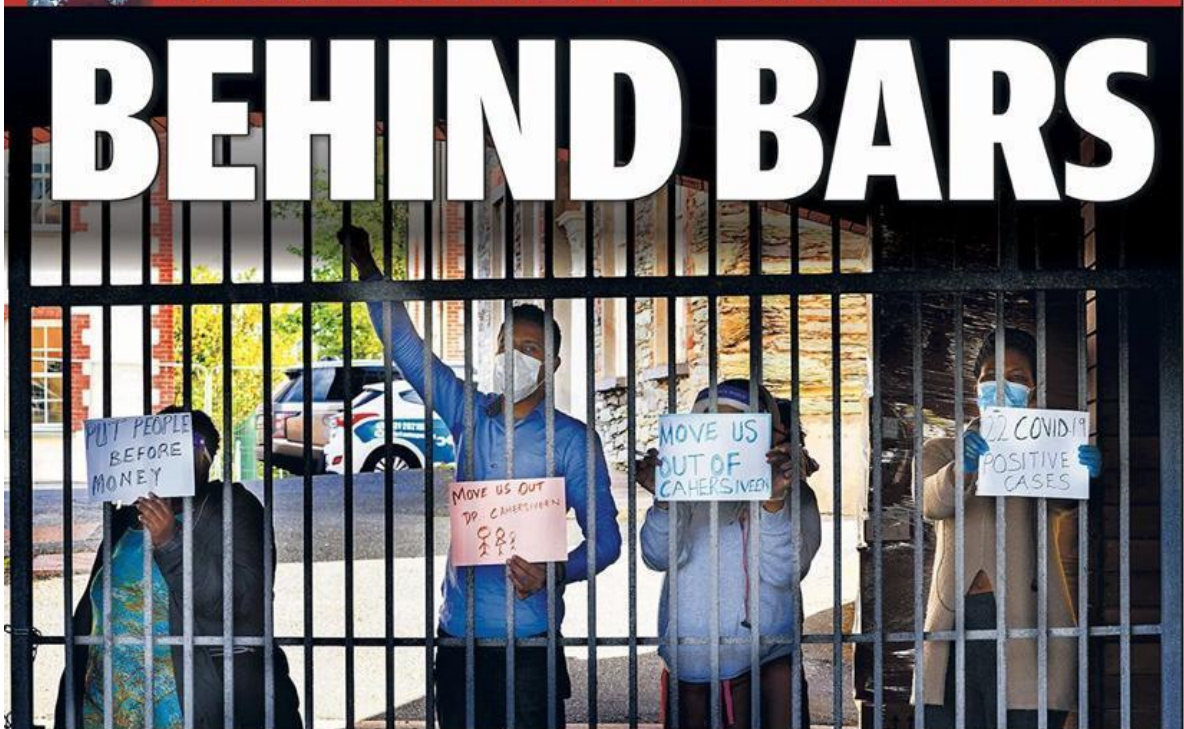


KERRY'S EYE PEOPLE POWER

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COVID-19

Concerned locals demand centre closure



Asylum seekers under lock and key at virus centre

Anger grows as Covid-19 infects 7-year-old girl

UP TO 90 asylum seekers are now under lock and key at a Direct Provision centre in Cahersiveen, the scene of a major outbreak of the deadly coronavirus.



BY CHIEF REPORTER
AIDAN O'CONNOR

A seven-year-old girl was amongst the 22 confirmed cases at the centre.

The asylum seekers, their representative groups, politicians and Cahersiveen residents have all pleaded with the authorities to immediately move out all remaining residents and shut the centre down.

On Wednesday evening, the Department of Justice confirmed to Kerry's Eye that they had no plans to close the centre in Cahersiveen. The Department said there was an

exercise area available for residents, but that the centre was locked to visitors.

Meanwhile, Kerry is now seeing the lowest daily increases in the number of virus cases since records began in mid-March.

Kerry's Eye can confirm:

- there were no new cases of the virus on three separate days
- the total number of cases in Kerry up to this Tuesday stood at 265
- the dreaded surge at University Hospital Kerry has not happened
- the number of confirmed cases at UHK has now dropped from TEN last week to FOUR this week
- one person is still in critical care at the hospital after contracting the virus

LOCKED UP: Devastated residents appeal for help from behind locked gates at the Sleight Star Direct Provision centre in Cahersiveen on Wednesday morning.

FULL STORY: PAGES

CORONAVIRUS CRISIS
Kerry responds P8-33

Recommendations

The key lesson to be learned from the Covid-19 outbreak in Direct Provision centres is that congregated settings are wholly unsuitable for anyone to exist in. There is no living in such environment but existing. One of the first few cases of Covid-19 in Direct Provision perfectly illustrates the inappropriateness of the forcing strangers to share intimate living spaces for years on end. A healthcare worker tested positive while having to share a communal kitchen with other asylum seekers in Cork. A single man in a hostel-styled Direct Provision centre tested positive for Covid-19 in Galway. His 2 roommates had to go into self isolation as by virtue of sharing a bedroom with him, they were deemed close contacts because it is impossible to observe social distancing when sharing a bedroom with a stranger. Another asylum seeker who tested positive was sharing a bedroom with 3 other strangers in Wicklow. We know of at least two children under 10 who were the only people in their respective families to test positive for Covid-19. They both stayed in a hotel bedroom where an entire family unit is expected to stay. Several people who shared bedrooms, two to a room, tested positive. In Cahersiveen, the HSE wrote a memo blaming the asylum seekers for the outbreak after their results returned positive when their roommates had tested positive earlier. These suggest that the call we made to the Department of Justice and Equality to provide single rooms for single asylum seekers, and self contained units for families in Direct Provision, would have helped prevent outbreaks and save an enormous amount of public resources while ensuring that asylum seekers who came to Ireland fearing for their lives are not forced to imagine their death again when they test positive for Covid-19. Thus, if Ireland is to create a post Covid-19 society that is protected against a pandemic of this nature, there has to be a bare minimum standard that everyone who is provided with accommodation by the State has to live in, not just exist. Whatever mode of State accommodation is provided:

- It must vindicate the right to privacy, which includes private family life, for everyone in the care of the State.
- The best interest of the child must prevail.
- The fundamental human right to dignity is inviolable in EU law and must be upheld irrespective of the nationality or immigration status of the person.

- The accommodation guarantees a suitable standard of living that protects the physical and mental health of the person.

It cannot be said that those legal requirements are met in the current system of Direct Provision. To achieve these, the Irish government must treat every human being who is entitled to the provision of material supports by the State in the same manner. The principle of equality requires this much. Thus, an asylum seeker who needs accommodation must be treated no differently to an Irish person who needs assistance with accommodation from the State. The Movement of Asylum Seekers in Ireland recommends that:

1. The next government implements policies to abolish the abhorrent system of Direct Provision.
2. To phase out Direct Provision, amend the criteria for accessing Housing Assistance Payment to include asylum seekers.
3. To lift restrictions on the right to work for asylum seekers to allow everyone in Direct Provision and asylum seekers not residing in Direct Provision to work.
4. Extend Jobseeker's allowance to asylum seekers, and child benefit for all children in the State irrespective of immigration status.
5. Recognising the contribution of migrants in essential services, the Department of Justice and Equality can, should, and must regularise undocumented people and offer long term residency to all non-EU/EEA nationals in the State during this pandemic irrespective of current immigration status. This has caused great uncertainty for people as no one knows when air travel will return to some normality.
6. To impose a statutory limit for processing asylum claims, and a 90 day maximum limit for stays in reception centres to prevent long-term institutionalisation.

For more information, please see our submission to the Joint Committee on Justice and Equality here <http://www.masi.ie/2019/05/27/submisson-to-justice-equality-joint-committee/>

Communal Toilets and Showers

Kockalisheen Direct Provision Centre

