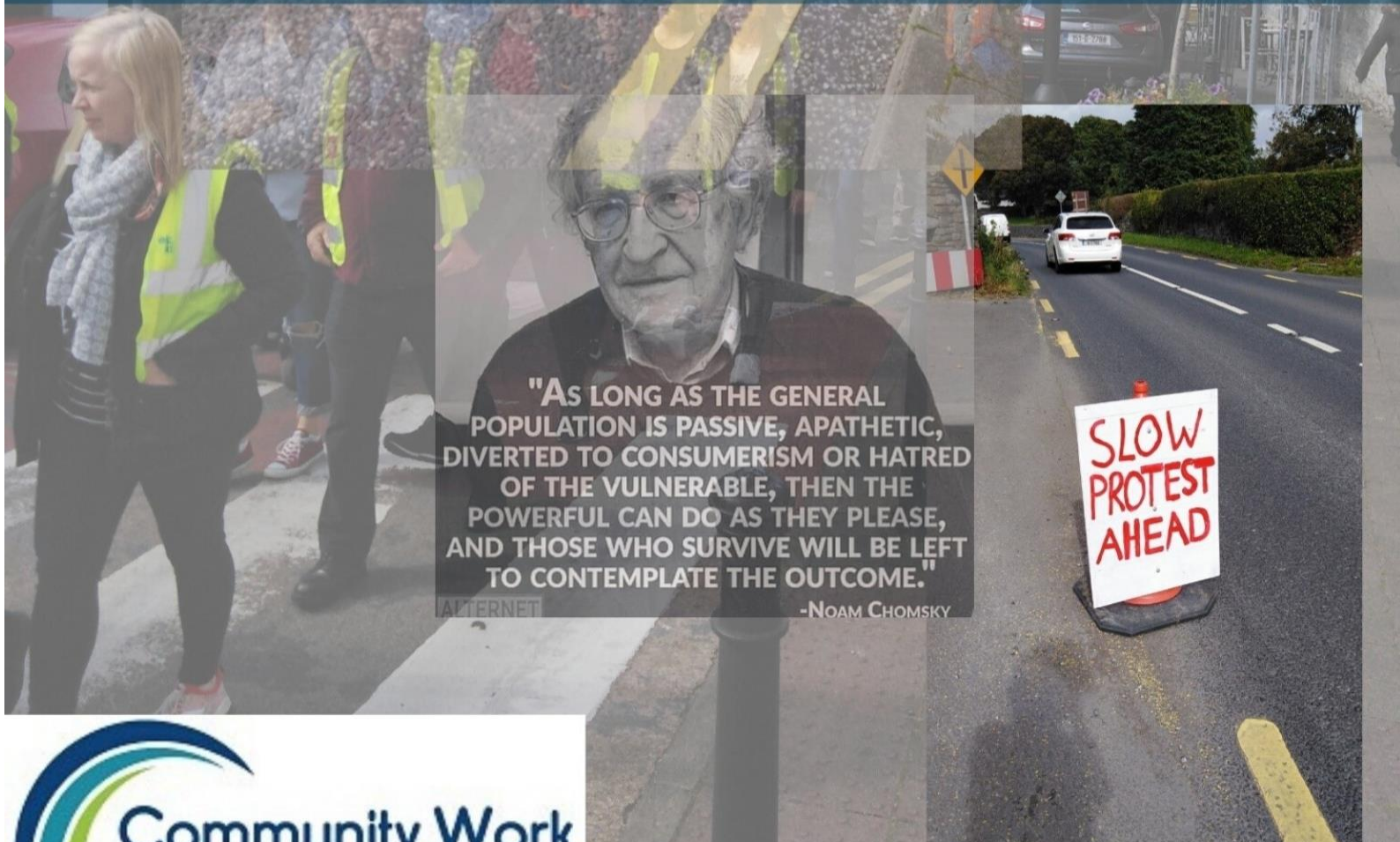




Welcoming Asylum Seekers in Ireland: A Community Work Response



"AS LONG AS THE GENERAL POPULATION IS PASSIVE, APATHETIC, DIVERTED TO CONSUMERISM OR HATRED OF THE VULNERABLE, THEN THE POWERFUL CAN DO AS THEY PLEASE, AND THOSE WHO SURVIVE WILL BE LEFT TO CONTEMPLATE THE OUTCOME."
-NOAM CHOMSKY



Welcoming Asylum Seekers in Ireland

A Community Work Response

Community work is about working collectively for change that promotes social justice, human rights and equality, and a sustainable economy and environment, words popular in public discourse but not always evident in the actions of world leaders when it comes to migration, and certainly not evident in recent protests against the provision of accommodation for asylum seekers in different parts of Ireland.

During these protests, there have been deliberate attempts to confuse Programme Refugees invited to Ireland by the state, refugees invited by the state under Community Sponsorship and asylum seekers who seek to have their status as refugees recognised. The latter group are, arguably, the most marginalised people reaching our shores.

Ireland has international human rights and humanitarian responsibilities to people seeking asylum. This responsibility must be reflected in the practice of community workers, as the rights of asylum seekers, and the commitment of those that believe in a just and sustainable future, cannot be realised without making their plight our priority.

Community work Ireland does not support the current system of direct provision, believing it to be in contravention of the rights of asylum seekers. However, in the short-term and in the context of the ongoing homelessness crisis, CWI believes that direct provision is a necessary support for asylum seekers while advocating for significant, immediate reform of the system.

The Influence of the Far-Right

Increasingly, there has been a growth of far-right elements who have deliberately and cynically infiltrated and manipulated concerns at proposals to locate direct provision centres in rural villages and small towns across Ireland.

In an Irish Times article of Sept. 23rd Sorcha Pollock highlighted¹ a coordinated, antagonistic response to a meeting in Lismore that was organised to welcome a Syrian refugee family moving to the town under a new Community Sponsorship Programme established by the Department of Justice and Equality.

In her article she quotes one of the meeting organisers as saying, *“We had an idea some far-right people might come along.....that they had got it into their heads that a direct provision centre was going to open in the town”*. The interviewee reported that 8 or 10 far right activists attended the meeting. *“They were very, very well organised and they were live streaming the whole meeting”* she said. The group continued to interrupt the meeting asking questions about direct provision despite it being clearly stated that just one family was coming and there were no plans for a direct provision centre in the town. *“It was getting quite tense”, added the interviewee, “They were trying to provoke us, and we refused to be provoked,” ... “They weren’t listening. There was lots of yahoing. There was shouting that you’re going to be raped or killed on the street.”*

Recent weeks have seen similar activity in Oughterard in response to the proposal to locate a Direct Provision centre in the Connemara Gateway Hotel, a hotel that has been closed for many years. At a

¹ <https://www.irishtimes.com/news/ireland/irish-news/how-far-right-is-exploiting-immigration-concerns-in-oughterard-1.4026612>

public meeting in the town in mid-September, Noel Grealish TD stated that the type of people to be accommodated in the centre would be “*economic migrants from Africa*” whom he described as “*spongers*”. Minister of State Seán Kyne was booed and heckled at the meeting when he reminded those assembled that Ireland has obligations under EU and United Nations regulations to accept and process anyone who can prove they had fled persecution and injustices in their own country. Tensions in the town heightened quickly with protesters calling for ‘*an end to inhumane direct provision*’. On September 28th a silent vigil was held in the town². Observing the September protest, CWI Co-ordinator, Rachel Doyle, asked approximately 12 people why they were protesting. While most did not answer, one replied “*it’s the immigrants*” and another “*it’s bad for the town*”. Despite the tag line, not one person raised concerns about the plight of asylum seekers or their accommodation circumstances.

Professor of Psychology at NUIG, Brian Hughes, wrote of the situation in Oughterard that ‘*Notwithstanding frantic after the fact efforts to rehabilitate the town’s reputation, there is little doubt that alt-right/far right extremists successfully infiltrated that public meeting in Oughterard*’³. According to Hughes, the protesters would not be there were it not for an orchestrated campaign of fear mongering on the part of the far right provoking them to do so. The article itself makes interesting reading and highlights a number of factors in relation to the Oughterard situation including;

- the setting up of a Facebook page for the first meeting moderated by people with far-right links and associations;
- the barring of TV crews from the meeting which was then filmed by a prominent far-right blogger;
- dissemination at the meeting of a ‘fact sheet’ with misleading information about asylum seekers;
- the meeting being addressed by the chair of the local branch of the far-right National Party;
- the tone and content of speeches, completely belying any claim that the organisers were concerned about the “inhumane” nature of Ireland’s Direct Provision system.

In fact, says Hughes “*there was no mention of the word “inhumane” in the campaign until after the Oughterard meeting had begun to attract negative media attention*. Hughes also notes however that ‘*The townspeople currently protesting the proposed Direct Provision facility are not members of any far-right organisation. They are just ordinary citizens*’. He notes that around the world, the tactics of the far right are consistently successful.

Reactions in Ballinamore, Borrisokane and Carrickmacross in relation to direct provision have been mixed with different views and messages within and between communities being expressed in relation to proposed centres in these towns. What is clear from a community development perspective is that messages of inclusion, respect, recognition and support of asylum seekers must be placed at the forefront of any such discussions to combat the increasing levels of rumour, misinformation and racist rhetoric which we are now witnessing.

Alternative Voices

Most of the above has been widely reported and debated in the media over the past few weeks. What has not been heard however are the voices of those in Oughterard who welcome asylum

² (<https://www.irishtimes.com/news/social-affairs/large-crowd-continues-protest-over-direct-provision-centre-in-oughterard-1.4034095>).

³ <https://thesciencebit.net/2019/09/22/fact-checking-the-racists-a-look-at-the-psychological-approach-of-irelands-alt-right/>

seekers to the town and who were and continue to be appalled by the protests and the racism and racist views which they say have been continuously expressed throughout this process.

In September, Community Work Ireland met with a number of such local residents to discuss ways forward. A group of residents wishing to support the asylum seekers had already been meeting in Oughterard to discuss the provision of supports. None of the members of this group attended the protests.

The group was deeply concerned at the ongoing divisive and destructive protests against the proposed Direct Provision Centre in their town. They felt it was necessary to come together in response to the dangerous influence of right-wing elements in the protests, the racist rhetoric that was used, the stimulation of fear amongst the community, the spreading of rumour and mistruths and the suppression of alternative voices leading to potentially lasting divisions in the community. They remain concerned about the possible effects such protests and rhetoric could have on people seeking asylum, and more generally on integration and inclusion.

Those that attended the meeting with CWI did not want to speak publicly for fear of backlash and potential intimidation. It was agreed that Community Work Ireland would act as an umbrella for the group protecting the identity of group members. The meeting explored ways in which the voices of those who opposed the protests could be heard, and a proposal to the Department of Justice to address the situation.

These Oughterard residents and CWI are of the view that the current system of direct provision is not fit for purpose, undermines the human rights of asylum seekers and contributes to the perpetuation of a cycle of poverty, segregation, lack of safety and alienation of asylum seekers, with a devastating impact on their physical and mental health and that of their children. We agree that the direct provision system contributes to increased racism and divisions within Irish society. We believe that the direct provision system requires an urgent overhaul to ensure that the human rights of asylum seekers are protected and that co-ordinated and well managed communication processes with stakeholders at community level should be undertaken in planning for the location of asylum seekers.

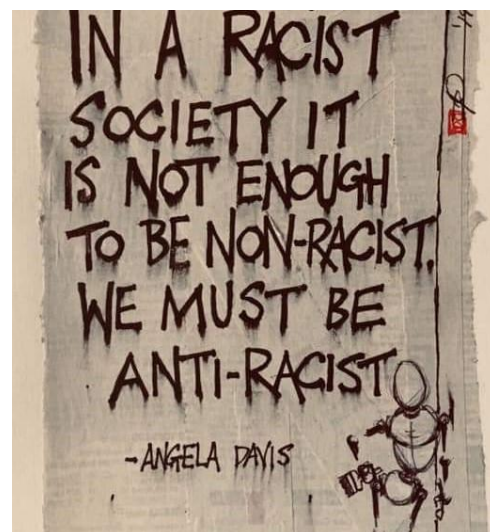
We also believe that the rapid and urgent response required to provide emergency shelter and services to the people concerned should not overshadow the need to consider a longer-term vision and co-ordinated strategy for support, inclusion, Interculturalism, integration and social cohesion.

Women

The particular experiences and vulnerability of women coming to our shores seeking asylum cannot be ignored. There is no doubt that forced migration is a gendered concern. The 2017 UN Women Report on The Legal Rights Of Women And Girl Asylum Seekers In The European Union noted that 'while women represent less than a third of all asylum applicants in the EU, in 2016 women and children were the majority of those who attempted to reach EU shores (suggesting that) women are less confident in their applications, face more challenges in presenting a full case, have less access to gender appropriate information and services, and are being restricted by cultural norms. Today, women and children are the clear majority of those who are stranded in Greece and the Western Balkans, facing harsh winter conditions and at risk of abuse by criminal gangs. Access to asylum is essential for persecuted women and girls who reach the EU, but EU Member States should also ensure that those who remained behind are allowed to join family members who have received refugee protection'.

The Role of Community Work and Community Workers

Community workers have a central role in working with communities (of geography and of identity), in building a sense of belonging, cohesion, and inclusion for everyone on this island. Recent developments in various places in the country should not be ignored by community workers, or others including policy makers, who have a role in building social cohesion and interculturalism. The increase in alt-right activity in Ireland, increasing racist rhetoric and action especially that perpetrated under the guise of protecting human rights, is something we should all be concerned about and poses many challenges which can only be addressed if we work collectively. The parallels between some responses to the plight of people arriving here now and some of our own treatment as emigrants must become a central part of the discussion. We must also find ways of challenging the duplicity, propaganda and persistent attempts to ensure that 'our fears trump their rights'. While this is challenging and complex, it is essential for community workers. Consider the following actions:



- **Take a stand** – in situations where there is open opposition to supporting migrants and asylum seekers, it is critical that community workers and community work organisations take a stand. Encourage your organisation or network to take a formal position that challenges the negativity, including issuing media releases.
- **Facilitate social analysis** – one of the issues is that language is being mis-used and misrepresented. For example, the language of concern for the direct provision system is being mis-used by those with anti-immigration views. Facilitate social analysis that challenges the confusion and identify alternative messaging.
- **Alternative narrative** – highlight an alternative narrative.
 - Remind people that Ireland has international obligations to those seeking asylum and there is no evidence that direct provision centres lead to the increased crime rates, etc;
 - Remind people of the difficult, often traumatic, situations that asylum seekers are seeking to escape.
 - Remind people that migrants have made a significant contribution to this country.
 - Remind people of the Irish experience of migration;
- **Organise** – provide opportunities for people to collectivise and organise into welcoming committees that challenge the negativity and where people can show solidarity and support.
- **Support** - Seek the support of national organisations such as CWI, ENAR Ireland and others.
- **Inform** – inform the Department of Justice and Equality and the Reception and Integration Agency that there is an alternative view to the one likely to be highlighted in the media, so they are aware that opposition to direct provision is not universal in your area.

CWI welcomes opportunities to be involved with communities and community workers in Ireland who wish to work against fear, hostility and hatred and provide a true welcome to those who come here seeking refuge and solidarity. Community Work Ireland will hold a members' meeting in the coming weeks to discuss these issues further and will issue an invitation shortly.

Community Work Ireland represents the Irish Refugee and Migrant Coalition on the Department of Justice Community Sponsorship Advisory Group and is a member of the Far-Right Observatory.