

Minutes of the Third Meeting of the Interim Advisory Board of the Reception and Integration Agency, 24th September, 2001

Attendance

Raymond Rooney (Chairman)

Board Members:

Noel Waters
David Costello
Joe Moran
Alexis Fitzgerald
Peter McCann
Brian O' Raghallaigh
Brian Glanville

Bishop William Murphy
Remba Osengo
Mary Murphy
John Rowan
Jim O' Farrell
Mary Aylward

RIA:

Pat Wylie
Breda Naughton
Bernadette Loughrey

Apologies: Christina Carney and Aileen O' Donoghue

Minutes of previous meeting

The Board asked that the minutes of the previous meeting be amended to reflect the following points. The first related to the non representation of the Department of Education and Science on the Board. The Board was informed that the Department of Education and Science would be invited to make a presentation at a future meeting and, in accordance with the relevant Government decision, would be represented if issues related to education are on the agenda. The second point referred to the status of the Draft EU Directive on Minimum Reception Standards for Asylum Seekers. It was confirmed that this document is at proposal stage. The final point related to the Board's wish that Agencies invited to make presentations at future meetings should be asked to talk about their strategies for the future as well as current work.

Right to Work

The Chairman congratulated the authors of the draft policy report and thanked Board members for submitting observations on the report. In keeping with the wishes of Board members for an early discussion on the right to work for asylum seekers, which was referred to in the report, the Chairman invited all members to express their views. The following points were made:-

- Not having the right to work makes it very difficult for asylum seekers to integrate into Irish society. Asylum seekers are isolated from the community with limited opportunity to integrate into Irish society as they have not got access to work or work colleagues.

Doc 48

- Asylum seekers, after a period of time e.g. 6 months, should be given a temporary work permit and access to training. They would then be seen to be supporting themselves rather than being dependent on social welfare and this could reduce racism.
- Temporary work permits should be issued when asylum seekers have been in the system for six months. Such a permit could lapse if application was refused but could be renewed up to the point of the legal process being exhausted.
- Asylum seekers are being introduced to the Social Welfare system on arrival and as the majority have a strong work ethic are being forced into situations they don't want to be in. Such an approach creates a dependency culture.
- Asylum seekers suffer a loss of social dignity by being denied work opportunities.
- There is an obligation on the State to allow asylum seekers to work if asylum seekers have not been given their first interview within 6 months of arrival.
- Many politicians and social partners support the right to work.
- The right to work is a human rights issue.
- When parents are not working it can have a negative psychological effect on the children.
- Other European countries have given asylum seekers the right to work - such systems should be examined.
- Asylum seekers should also be allowed to participate in third level education and training courses.
- If given the right to work it may encourage more people to seek asylum here as it did after Government Decision on 26th July 1999. Figures went from 350 per month applying for asylum to over 1,200 in December 1999.
- Decision on right to work, if given, could be misrepresented abroad.
- Effective and well established work permit system for immigrants in place which would be undermined. Work permit/visa schemes should be better publicised in countries such as Romania and Nigeria and people should be encouraged to enter as immigrants.
- Rising unemployment, especially in tourism and service sectors. If asylum seekers are allowed to work this could cause displacement of the indigenous population and lead to resentment.
- System would not be able to cope if rate of people applying for asylum were to increase significantly.

- Adequate accommodation would not be available if numbers seeking asylum rose significantly.
- If right to work is given this would require amendment of the Refugee Act.
- Security risk and huge potential for trafficking if right to work given.
- Significant progress has been made in the processing of applications e.g. 1400 interviews per month are being scheduled compared with 900 asylum seekers entering which will go some way to reaching the six month target.
- Right to work should be limited and clearly defined. This would be tricky to implement.

The Chairman thanked all members for expressing their views and indicated that the majority of the Board were in favour of giving asylum seekers the right to work after six months. Members views would be incorporated into the policy document which will be brought to Government by the Minister.

Draft Policy Document on the Reception and Resettlement of Asylum Seekers

The Chairman noted that board members had submitted detailed written comments on the draft document. These comments will be reflected in the final report which will be submitted to the Minister. For the purpose of the meeting the Chairman asked members to summarise and speak to their comments.

The main points raised are as follows:-

- ✓ Some members felt that the word dispersal should be used instead of the word resettlement - *others suggest the opposite.*
- ✓ Local groups/voluntary organisations/ support groups should be consulted - *RIA stated that they had been consulted.*
- ✓ Legislation to place RIA on a statutory footing would improve staff morale.
- ✓ Question of flotels should be ruled out. *RIA stated that flotels would only be used as a last resort.*
- ✓ RIA should not depend on other agencies to identify sites. Accommodation crisis not reflected in report. *RIA has personnel sourcing accommodation at all times.* This point should be stressed in the document.
- ✓ Clarification as to consultation with statutory sector is required. *In March/April 2000 draft policy document issued to all the relevant Government departments*

and the health boards. Their views on the current draft were requested again recently.

- ✓ No comparative analysis with other EU countries apart from UK.
- ✓ Policy of dispersal adds to marginalisation of asylum seekers.
- ✓ SWA payments should be increased as more money is being paid out on exceptional needs payments.
- ✓ Living in direct provision accommodation should be limited to 6 months.
- ✓ Breakdown of length of time asylum seekers have spent in direct provision accommodation is required.
- ✓ Information should be more readily available. *The RIA distribute information to newly arrived asylum seekers at reception centres on their rights and entitlements. Before being resettled at accommodation centres around the country asylum seekers are provided with detailed information about the centre, the locality, local facilities, educational and religious facilities and so forth.*
- ✓ Notice boards should be placed in each accommodation centre giving details of NGOs in the locality. *RIA agreed to do this.*
- ✓ Children's needs and rights should be addressed. *Asylum seeker children are entitled to primary and post primary education.*
- ✓ Skills and qualifications of asylum seekers should be obtained on arrival. *CDVEC is currently carrying out a study of asylum seeker needs in English language classes. FAS model already in place where asylum seekers are tested on their skills to verify qualifications. The Department's view is that it may be possible to get information on asylum seeker's qualifications at point of initial application.*
- ✓ Unaccompanied minors. *These are the responsibility of the Health Boards.*
- ✓ Women with Irish Born Children should be carefully monitored - 30% of women in direct provision accommodation have had a child or are due to have a child. Many with IBCs withdraw asylum application but still remain in accommodation. Issue should be addressed in document.
- ✓ Language support - *some support groups organise homework clubs and English language classes. The VECs also provide English language classes.*
- ✓ Regional management structures should not be broken down on the basis of Health Boards but based around the larger accommodation centres. RIA should

have control of accommodation centres. *It is proposed to accommodate a maximum of 400 people in larger accommodation centres. Difficulties in acquiring sites and opposition from locals.*

- ✓ Data in tables needs to be updated.
- ✓ Role of CWO overestimated. It was felt that CWO should only pay SWA payments and exceptional needs payments to asylum seekers and that the RIA should cover all other aspects. Staff of RIA should be doubled to enable regional structures to work. Huge amount of resources already dealing with asylum seekers in Department of Health and Children and the Department of Social, Community and Family Affairs. Suggestion made that 57 CWO posts involved with asylum seekers should be transferred to RIA. *The RIA expressed strong reservations concerning the latter suggestion in the context of public policy concerning mainstreaming of services.*
- ✓ Information meetings should take place - *Consultation does take place with representatives of voluntary and community organisation and NGOs prior to asylum seekers being dispersed to a particular area and contact is maintained with such groups.*
- ✓ NGOs not given meaningful participation in decision making.
- ✓ Too much text on health screening as people may become overly concerned about the diseases that asylum seekers may have. *Over 70% of asylum seekers take up health screening. Figure for family take up of health screening is high compared to take up of singles. High uptake of vaccinations. It would not be feasible or practical to make it mandatory.*
- ✓ Integration not addressed - *Framework for integration policy already in place. Strategies and initiatives for implementation can be discussed by the board. It is important to note that the regional/local structures proposed in the policy document on reception will also be used to implement integration policy at regional/local level.*
- ✓ The integration model proposed does not go far enough. Resettlement officers should be employed at each accommodation centre to act as advocates for asylum seekers and liaise with regional/local statutory and voluntary service providers. *This would have significant staffing and cost implications. Approval of*

the level of resources being suggested is extremely unlikely in the current climate.

- ✓ Correct identification of refugees in the first application would reduce pressure on accommodation centres - *this is a matter for the RAC and RAT. RIA can express concerns but cannot be seen to interfere.*

The Chairman indicated that the document will be altered to reflect the comments made by board members. The amended document will then be circulated to members once again before being finalised.

Other Business

It was agreed that in recognition of board members' other commitments, meetings in future will finish at 2.30 with a short break for light lunch.

Meeting of RIA Interim Advisory Board, 24th September, 2001

Agenda

1. Minutes
2. Matters arising
3. Summary of comments made by board members in relation to draft policy document followed by discussion

see notes on separate file
re Policy Doc

Brian Moore