

DIRECT PROVISION

“Scrap the system”

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LOUISE BROWNE learns what one asylum seeker caught in the system believes the Government should do about the controversial ‘direct provision’ policy

“Scrap the whole system,” says Uche Odinukwe, a Nigerian asylum seeker living in a direct provision centre in Co Cork.

The mother of three says that life in such centres is extremely difficult, especially for single mothers.

“[It’s] three people to a room if you are single, but if you have a child you share with another, usually who has a child also, and bathroom facilities are shared. It is not spacious at all, there is always conflict. It is not a nice place to be for a mother and child.”

Odinukwe says one of the main problems she encounters is the total lack of privacy. “There is really no problem with security but there is with privacy. The adults could be dressing or something and people could just walk in – it’s the privacy that is missing.

“I have a boy, he is six, and I have to change and everything in front of him. He is beginning to see things and ask questions, and it is not his fault, but it is not fair.”

She also explains how these centres are no place to raise any children, let alone sick children.

“We have people living here that are sick, such as my daughter who has a blood disorder, and another child also is here who has a heart condition, so it is a very difficult life.”

The direct provision centres which house Ireland’s asylum seekers are mixed accommodation complexes, usually made up of separate blocks for single men, single women and mothers with babies. Nasc, the Irish Immigrant Support Centre, has stated that they ultimately oppose these provisional centres, but with the lack of political interest in changing the system, they would like to see a number of improvements to the problems which Odinukwe has seen first-hand.

“There are lots of people that have been here for years,” she says. “One person I know has been here for eight years, some for five or six. It is just not healthy to live in such close quarters with people for that length of time.”

Nasc is also concerned about this issue. Asylum seekers in Ireland do not have the right to work or full time education, and those housed for long periods in direct provision are showing signs of significant mental health problems such as depression, despair and loneliness.

“During the day we sometimes go out. A bus comes and brings us into town and then back again, which is the one good thing I can say,” says Odinukwe. “We try to stay busy, maybe go shopping. But it is difficult for children in these centres because they can’t go out and play or anything. It wouldn’t be safe to let them go off by themselves.”

Life for those who do eventually leave direct provision can also be difficult, explains Odinukwe. “Once people get out, they simply cannot function in the outside world. It takes time to adjust after leaving the centre and you are not living with lots of people.”

The Department of Justice says it has no plans to review the direct provision system as it currently stands. But Odinukwe believes the department must act now.

“If they are going to remove us, we should be removed early,” she says. “We shouldn’t just be left here for years. We can be waiting for up to six years to hear back on [an asylum] decision.

“It is something that cannot happen or be allowed go on anymore. People should be told sooner whether they are allowed in or out. That way, no children will have to see what it is like living in centres.”

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