

IRISH REFUGEE COUNCIL PRESS CONFERENCE

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Senator Ivana Bacik

It gives me great pleasure to support the call being made by the Irish Refugee Council in their pre-budget submission for an increase in the weekly allowance paid to asylum seekers and their families in the so-called 'Direct Provision' scheme. I know that this call is also supported by ICTU, the Society of St Vincent de Paul, CORI, the National Women's Council and the Combat Poverty Agency.

At present the weekly allowance is 19.60Euro per week per adult, and 9.60Euro per child – a miserly amount that comes nowhere near enabling adults or children to buy simple necessities like suitable food, dietary supplements, over the counter medicines, basic playthings for children; toiletries or school books. This amount was not adequate when it was introduced eight years ago – and it is really scandalous that it has not been increased since that date, despite significant increases in the cost of living.

The Vincentian Partnership has calculated that the basic minimum acceptable income to provide to asylum seekers who are in receipt of food and accommodation would be a much more realistic sum of 60Euro per adult and 35Euro per child per week.

Even this more realistic amount, it should be said, does not quite measure up as far as children are concerned according to the Government's own social security policies.

Last week I spoke in the Seanad about an important campaign, initiated a year ago by a group of NGOs including FLAC and the Vincentian Refugee Centre, to restore universal child benefit. Some 3,000 children in Ireland, mainly the children of asylum seekers in direct provision, have been disentitled to receive child benefit due to the Government's imposition of an habitual residency condition. Child benefit is supposed to be a universal benefit, and in the Government's own policies is described as an important plank to lift children out of poverty. Yet some of the most disadvantaged children in Ireland are being deprived of this essential support.

Last Thursday 22nd November I called Minister Martin Cullen into the Seanad to answer my question why the children of asylum seekers are not being allowed to claim child benefit. In his reply, Minister Cullen stated categorically that Direct Provision payments to the children of asylum seekers are regarded by the Government as a direct alternative to child benefit payments. Yet child benefit payments are currently set at 160Euro per month – approximately 40Euro per week, and more than four times the payment being made in respect of children in Direct Provision. I believe it is disingenuous of the Minister to suggest that Direct Provision payments, even taken together with indirect provision of board and lodging, are somehow a realistic alternative to child benefit payments.

I support the Irish Refugee Council call to increase Direct Provision payments to realistic levels – and in particular the call to increase the payment made in respect of children to an amount closer to the so-called universal child benefit payment – because I believe that we have a duty to behave with fairness and compassion towards those who come here seeking asylum.

With our long history of emigration, and with so many Irish people in the so-called ‘diaspora’ working and living abroad, we should be particularly well equipped to understand their plight.

Instead, we have refused asylum seekers the right to work – making it much more difficult for them to integrate into Irish society, and forcing them to rely on social welfare benefits during the often very lengthy periods they must spend awaiting an outcome on their asylum claims. In addition, we have been slow to develop consistent and transparent processes to deal with asylum claims; and we have granted very small proportions of claims made - between 1992 and 2004, for example, over 59,000 people applied for asylum here, but just under 9,000 got either refugee status or temporary leave to remain – only 15 per cent, less than one in five.

Asylum seekers make up only a small proportion of immigrants to Ireland. They deserve particular protections, and supports to enable them to integrate successfully into Irish society if granted refugee status. Raising the amount payable to those in Direct Provision would be a step towards provision of adequate protection.

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