



JRS Ireland Budget 2019 Submission

Direct Provision Allowance: A Barrier to Living with Dignity

1.1 Context

Direct Provision is the system introduced in 2000 by which the State provides accommodation and meets the material needs of people seeking asylum in Ireland. The State essentially provides accommodation on a full board basis in thirty-five centres throughout Ireland until an applicant is granted status, leaves voluntarily or is removed.

In many cases, the parent or parents of young children will be allocated just one room in a direct provision centre for their entire family; single people usually have to share their living space with one or more residents of the same gender. In addition, meals are provided at set times in a common dining room and residents, in approximately 50% of the centres, are not allowed to cook their own food.

While the children of asylum seekers can attend primary and secondary education on a comparable basis to Irish students, adults have limited access to education. In addition, despite the 2018 decision by the Irish Government to opt-in to the Recast Reception Conditions Directive, only one in three adults currently have a right to seek employment. A weekly allowance of €21.60 is payable to asylum seekers living in Direct Provision.

The McMahon Report, published 30 June 2015, contained 173 recommendations to improve the asylum process and improving living conditions and supports for Direct Provision residents. The Working Group recommended in Section 5.30: *The Direct Provision Allowance for adults should be increased from €19.10 to €38.74 for adults and from €9.60 to €29.80 for children.*

1.2 Direct Provision Allowance

The adult weekly payment was increased in 2017 to €21.60 per week from €19.10, far short of the recommended €38.74. The €2.50 increase was the first increase since 2000. Since 2015 the child payment increased from €9.60 to €21.60 weekly, still short of €29.80 per week recommended in the McMahon Report to align with the qualified child payment.

Although Direct Provision accommodation meets the basic material needs of residents, persons living on this weekly allowance may still experience *enforced deprivation* through a de facto denial of some of the 11 basic items and activities used to construct the deprivation index in Ireland; including two pairs of strong shoes, new clothes and a fortnightly evening of entertainment. In reality the weekly payment must cover any additional transport, clothing, food, recreational or personal costs.

For families the situation is particularly challenging. In 2018 the average cost of sending a child to senior infants is €360, while the average cost of sending a child to first year is €765.¹ Eligibility for the Back to School Clothing and Footwear Allowance still leaves parents in Direct Provision with a shortfall of €235 per school-going child, nearly 3 months' worth of weekly allowance for each child.

But there are a host of other costs including clothing, supplementary food plus any individual costs incurred for social or sports activities, participation in which are necessary for the healthy growth and development of a child. Advocates have consistently raised concerns about the impact of child poverty for families residing in Direct Provision.

¹ Barnardos (2018) 'The Real Cost of School in 2018', available at <https://www.barnardos.ie/press-media/2018/august/school-costs-infographic-2018>.

1.3 Current Policy

The weekly allowance payable to adults living in Direct Provision was originally calculated as the balance of the supplementary welfare allowance leftover after the costs of bed and board. In 2000 this was IR£15 (€19.10) or 20.83% of a total payment of IR£72 (€91.70). There was an additional weekly payment per child of IR£7.5 (€9.60).

In 2015, the Working Group on the Protection Process concluded that there was a compelling case for an increase to the weekly Direct Provision allowances to restore the real value of the payment, taking into account:

- Adult weekly allowance represented 20.83% of the SWA in 2000 compared to 10.27% of the SWA rate in 2015.
- The payment of Universal Child Benefit to Direct Provision residents ceased in 2004.

The rationale underpinning the final recommendation was a restoration for adults of the original ratio between the weekly allowance and SWA payment and the alignment of the allowance for children with the qualified child payment under the SWA.

However, in 2018 the current rate of weekly allowance payable to adults and children living in Direct Provision still falls short of the 2015 McMahon Report recommendation.

- Adults: €21.60 per week represents 11% of the current SWA rate of €196, just over 50% of the McMahon benchmark (20.83% of SWA) to restore the payments real value.
- Children: €1.60 per week represents 67% of the current qualified child payment of €31.80, two thirds of the McMahon benchmark to restore the payments real value.

1.4 Conclusion

Living with dignity requires the enjoyment of basic physical (food/shelter/security) and mental needs (companionship/education/self-fulfilment) and from a child's perspective, there is also the necessity for the enjoyment of conditions that facilitate healthy growth and development.

While the recent increases to the rate payable to children living in Direct Provision were welcomed, a failure to fully implement the McMahon recommendation means that concern about child poverty remain and there is no benchmark to future proof payments. In addition, the increase of €2.50 to the adult weekly allowance, the first increase since 2000, was wholly inadequate and ensured the direct provision allowance continues to be a barrier to person living with dignity in Direct Provision.

The estimated cost of increasing direct provision allowance payments in line with McMahon benchmarks at end of July 2018, with 4,033 adults and 1,561 children in Direct Provision, is $(4,033*(40.83-21.6) + 1,561*(31.8-21.6)) * 52 = €4,860,793 < €5M$

As the McMahon methodology only restores and maintains the real value of direct provision payments, the increases proposed for Budget 19 could not be construed as creating a 'pull' factor. Also, it is worth noting that Direct Provision residents who have a right to work and find employment, will at specified income thresholds have their allowance reduced or withdrawn based on a means test after 12 weeks and also be required to contribute towards the cost of accommodation.

JRS Ireland is calling on the Government to restore the real value of Direct Provision allowance payments in Budget 2019 by increasing weekly payments to €40.83 for adults and to €31.80 per child so asylum seekers can live with greater dignity; and to maintain the real value of the payments into the future by incorporating the McMahon benchmarks into the budgetary framework.