



Community Profile of Athlone Accommodation Centre at Lissywollen

Submitted to National University of Ireland Galway for part
fulfillment of the Diploma in Community Development Practice

HEIDAR AL - HASHIMI

2013/2014

EXCLUSIVE SUMMARY

This profile highlights the community needs as well as effects and impacts of long staying process of Asylum seekers living in Direct Provision System in Athlone Accommodation Centre at Lissywollen. The first part of this profile will introduce and define key terms used repeatedly. It investigates the historical background, interprets what meant by Asylum Seeker & Refugee in Irish law and focuses on HIGH LEVEL Criticism of the Direct Provision System. For the purpose of this profile, the second part investigates more specific details on Lissywollen Accommodation Centre such as geographical location, housing, population demographics, and other concerned issues.

Moreover, the third part identifies services that have been performed by vital organisations to residents. SWOT Analysis of this community takes part to identify and categories the significant internal and external factors they face. At the end of this profile, the researcher will come to conclusion and recommendations built on the information have been investigated.



ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

I would like to thank my supervisors from NUI Galway, for guiding and giving me the ideas and directions throughout writing this profile. I would like to express my gratitude to my family: wife and children, for their continuous help and support.



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AIM AND OBJECTIVES

AIM:

- To produce a community profile of Athlone Accommodation Centre at Lissywollen.

OBJECTIVES:

- To highlight the effects of long staying process of Asylum seekers living in Direct Provision system.
- To investigate community needs and concern issues of people living in the centre.
- To profile the range of community services and facilities in Lissywollen Centre.
- To conduct a SWOT Analysis for identifying the significant internal and external factors of this community.



1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 DEFINITIONS

Athlone Accommodation Center (AAC) at Lissywoollen is one of group of accommodation centers in Ireland supervised by the Reception and Integration Agency (RIA) throughout Direct Provision System (DP) of support for asylum seekers within the Department of Justice. The Reception and Integration Agency (RIA) is a functional unit of the Irish Naturalisation and Immigration Service (INIS) of Justice Department. Asylum seekers from different backgrounds over the world have been accommodated in this accommodation while their applications for international protection are being processed (Debates Oireachtas, 2012).

The system of RIA accommodation portfolio mainly consists of a total of thirty four centres throughout 16 counties. They are scattered on different counties in the republic of Ireland (RIA Report, 2013). Irish Refugee Council (IRC) (No Date) defined Asylum seeker as 'someone who is seeking to be recognised as a refugee'. If they are granted this recognition they are declared a refugee, whereas a Refugee in Irish law is defined as someone who 'owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his or her nationality and is unable or, owing to such fear, unwilling to avail himself or herself of the protection of that country.....' (ORAC, No Date)

1.2 BACKGROUND

1.2.1 HISTORY

The main reason behind establishing Direct Provision accommodation system for asylum seekers is that there was a large increase in the number of persons seeking asylum in Ireland in the late 1990s. At that time, such a system of accommodation which is provided in former hotels, hostels or mobile homes in widely scattered areas throughout the country was to some extent understandable and acceptable as a solution for the Irish state authorities to deal with applications for large increase in the number of asylum seekers while they were waiting (Arnold, 2012).

The RIA reception system latterly became recognised as "Direct Provision" system (DP) because of the full provision for residents that they are provided with three meals daily, shared sleeping quarters (or separate), medical care and an annual clothing allowance. However, asylum seekers found themselves locked into institutional living for periods of



years, their only income being an allowance of €19.10 per week for an adult and €9.60 for a child (Arnold, 2012). DP has been supervised by Department of Justice in conjunction with other government departments such as Education and the Health Service Executive (HSE) (RIA Report, 2013).

1.2.2 CRITICISM OF THE DP SYSTEM

DP system is controversial and criticised on high levels. Its impact is very negative on physical and mental health of residents. Due to the effects of long stays within accommodation centres, United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees UNHCR has expressed high concern around asylum seekers staying in accommodation centres within DP system. According to Deputy Jonathan O'Brien, while criticising DP system throughout a debate with Alan Shatter TD, Minister for Justice, Equality and Defence, refers to the report by UNHCR which expresses that 40% of current residents have lived in such centres for three or more years. He indicates to a paper by the European Anti Poverty Network called "The integration of New Communities" sums up the effects of long period residence in the Direct Provision system as follows; 'This system directly creates poverty and social exclusion as well as isolation and widespread depression and mental illness. The explicit exclusion of asylum seekers from integration policies stores up social problems for the future. Many people who receive refugee status or leave to remain in Ireland have been de-skilled and have become socially isolated, wasting a potential resource of new skills, ideas and energies which could be available to the Irish economy and society.' (Debates Oireachtas, 2012)



2. ATHLONE ACCOMMODATION CENTER AT LISSYWOLLEN

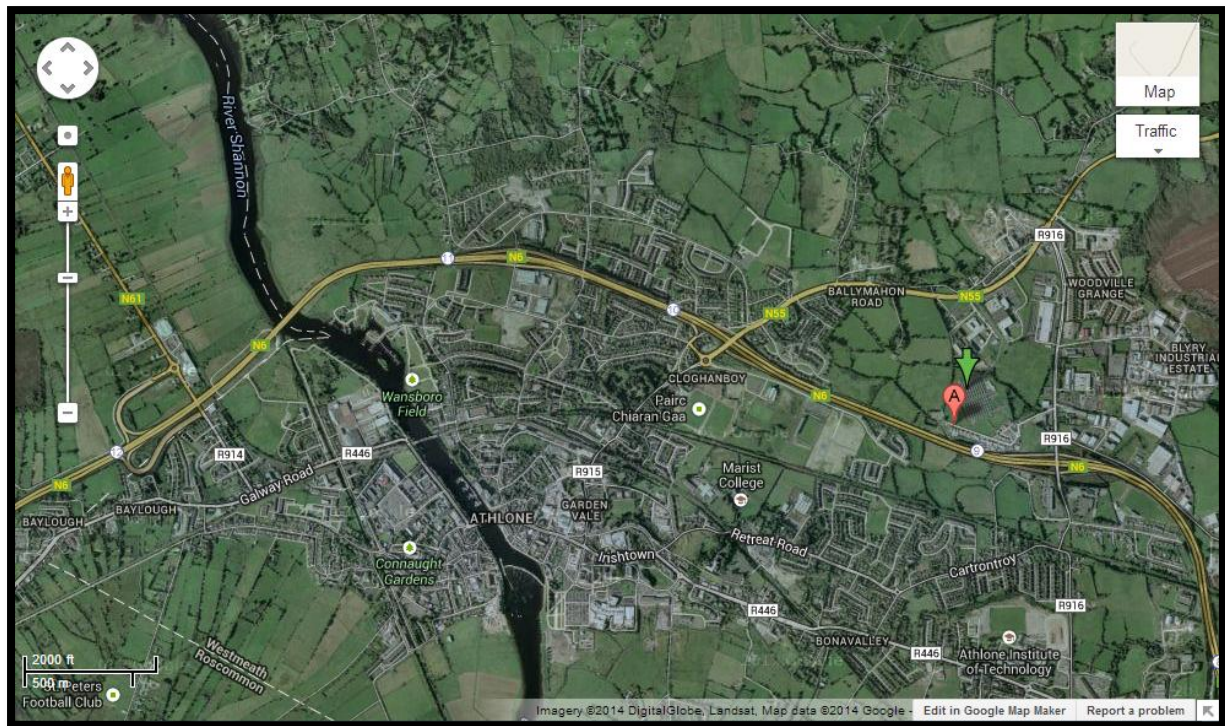
AAC at Lissywoollen was a mobile home park first located at 22/05/2000. It is state owned but run by Bridgestock company till end of 2012. Then Aramark Ireland wins the contract for running and managing the centre at Lissywoollen (RIA Report, 2013).

2.1 GEOGRAPHICAL AREA

AAC locates at Lissywoollen, Ballymahon Rd., Athlone, Co. Westmeath. The main road N55 (Ballymahon Rd) that links between Athlone Town Centre and Ballymahon town is the same roadway neighboring to the Department of Education and Science offices. It provides access to the Department of Justice Asylum seeker Mobile home site, located between the DE & S offices and Lissywoollen Halting Site (Athlone Town Council, 2006). See figures No. 1 and 2.



Figure No 1: AAC close to DE & S offices and Ballymahon Rd N55



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Figure No. 2: AAC outside Athlone town center

2.2 HOUSING

AAC is a mobile home site. It is a direct provision facility for families. It consists of 100 mobile homes in addition to a central building that including management offices with a kitchen, canteen, laundry facilities, games room, meeting rooms, mother & toddler room, social welfare office, public health nurse room and other services. The site contains a preschool and Health Service Executive (HSE) Unit (Pobal, No Date). See figures No 3 and 4.





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Figure No 3: General view of AAC



Figure No 4: Inside view of AAC



2.3 POPULATION DEMOGRAPHICS

According to recent report by RIA (2013), current contractual capacity of AAC is 300 people while the current typical occupancy is 243 people. Just over two thirds of residents are children (Pobal, No Date). The Residents Group (2013) annual record states that the number of children on site under the age (0 – 11) years is 142 children, and 24 teenagers between (12 – 18) years.

AAC Residents are from different backgrounds and belonging to multiple cultures. They came from several countries. Thus they represent about five ethnicities: Africans: DR Congo, Zimbabwe, Cameroon, Nigeria, South Africa, Ghana; Asians: Pakistan, Afghanistan, Iraq, Armenia, Israel; Eastern Europeans: Albania; and South Americans: Bolivia (Residents Group Annual Records, 2013). See figure No 5.

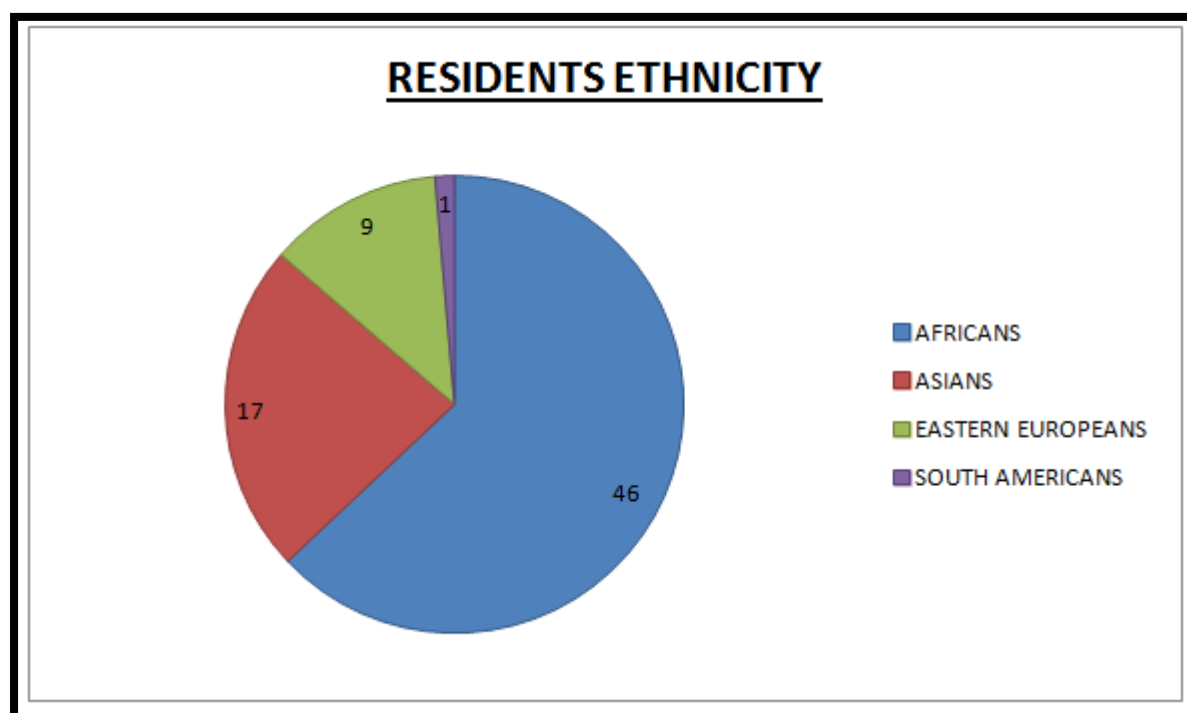


Figure No 5: AAC Residents' Ethnicities (73 Mobile.)

2. 4 CONCERN ISSUES

There is certain concern issues have been raised and highlighted to management, councilors and community organisations by Resident Committee. These issues have been built on a survey conducted by Resident Group with the participation of 73 families living in 73 mobiles in AAC about special dietary and cultural requirements for residents i.e. Food served

is too much fatty and oily; It is not well cooked; Cultural needs are not catered etc (see Appendix no. 1) (Residents Group, 2013).

Additionally other issues have been observed and presented by Residents Group throughout a meeting with a number of Co. Westmeath Councilors at 2013. These issues that affected directly the Health and Wellbeing of the residents in AAC have been identified as first: Physical Health impact i.e. Diabetes, Iron deficiency, Severe Back-pain, Asthma and Bleeding gums. Second: Mental and psychological Health impact i.e. Stress, Depression and Upset (see Appendix no. 2) (Residents Group, 2013).

Moreover, Resident Group records have been observed a notable sense of poverty of residents due to limited financial allowance of €19.10 per week for an adult and €9.60 for a child with no right to get waged job. Such issue is very concerned for it indicates an explicit exclusion of asylum seekers from integration policies that leads to next social problems. Such weekly allowance is not enough to cover extra expenditures (see Appendix no. 2) (Residents Group, 2013).



3. SERVICES

There are number of supports and help have been given to asylum seekers in the Lissywollen accommodation centre to help residents cope with life and help them combat boredom and isolation while learning new skills. That is throughout certain local programmes and activities provided by key stakeholders and service providers operating at the centre. They link in with other organisations to provide direct supports, information and advocacy to asylum seekers living on the site. However these services presented occasionally that it depends on funds has been facilitated. Many services and activities have been implemented with the conjunction of Residents Group on the accommodation site (or Lissywollen Residents Committee). This section will include more information to clarify the positive role of these groups and organisations.

3.1 RESIDENTS GROUP

Lissywollen Residents Committee (or Residents Group) has been established by a number of asylum seekers (eight members) with the conjunction of Westmeath Community Development centre at 2010. They are working actively on promoting services as well as carrying out community activities such as: family fun days, Santa's Grotto, a talent competition for children and young people (Pobal, No Date). This group has been achieved and co-ordinated a wide range of activities like sewing classes, cookery classes, photographic classes, art & colouring competitions and sports days (Lissywollen Community Group, No Date). Additionally they are attending meetings and participation in campaigns and making representations on behalf of asylum seekers (Westmeath Integration and Diversity Strategy, 2013).

3.2 ATHLONE COMMUNITY RADIO

Athlone Community Radio is one of vital organizations that working with AAC at Lissywoollen on developing their community. Some programmes have achieved by asylum seekers themselves. (Integration Centre, 2013) such as:

1. World Awareness Programme which focuses on asylum seekers living in the Lissywollen centre.
2. FETAC Level 4 training to people in AAC on PR and media skills. This training comes to encourage people to volunteer in the radio as well as providing them with new skills.



3. “Just Bearable” program provides a voice to this community to tell their stories about life in direct provision and their background (Westmeath Independent, 2013)
4. Socialising Events: Boat trips and days out, Christmas parties and music talent show.

3.3 WESTMEATH COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENTS (WCD)

WCD has a great role in empowering asylum seekers community throughout significant support and guidance with different projects aim to overcome disadvantages of kind of living in Direct Provision system (WestCD, 2013). Westmeath Community Development has supported asylum seekers at AAC with useful supports, assistance by funding, organising a lot of projects such as: Information Events (Bray, 2013) photo exhibition (O'Flynn, 2013), Christmas celebrations, etc.

3.4 OTHER ORGANISATIONS

Additionally there are Other Vital Community Organisations that contribute community development in AAC, such as: New Horizon, Westmeath VEC, the National Learning Network, Midland Regional Youth Services, Gateway project, Triple P and Barnardos have been actively working on developing and running programmes and projects for asylum seekers in AAC.



4. SWOT ANALYSIS

SWOT analysis is used for identifying and categorising the significant internal (Strengths and Weaknesses) and external (Opportunities and Threats) factors that face any organisation, or a region, nation, or city (For Learn, No Date). The following figure (No. 6) illustrates the internal (Strengths and Weaknesses) and external (Opportunities and Threats) factors that face Asylum seekers in AAC.

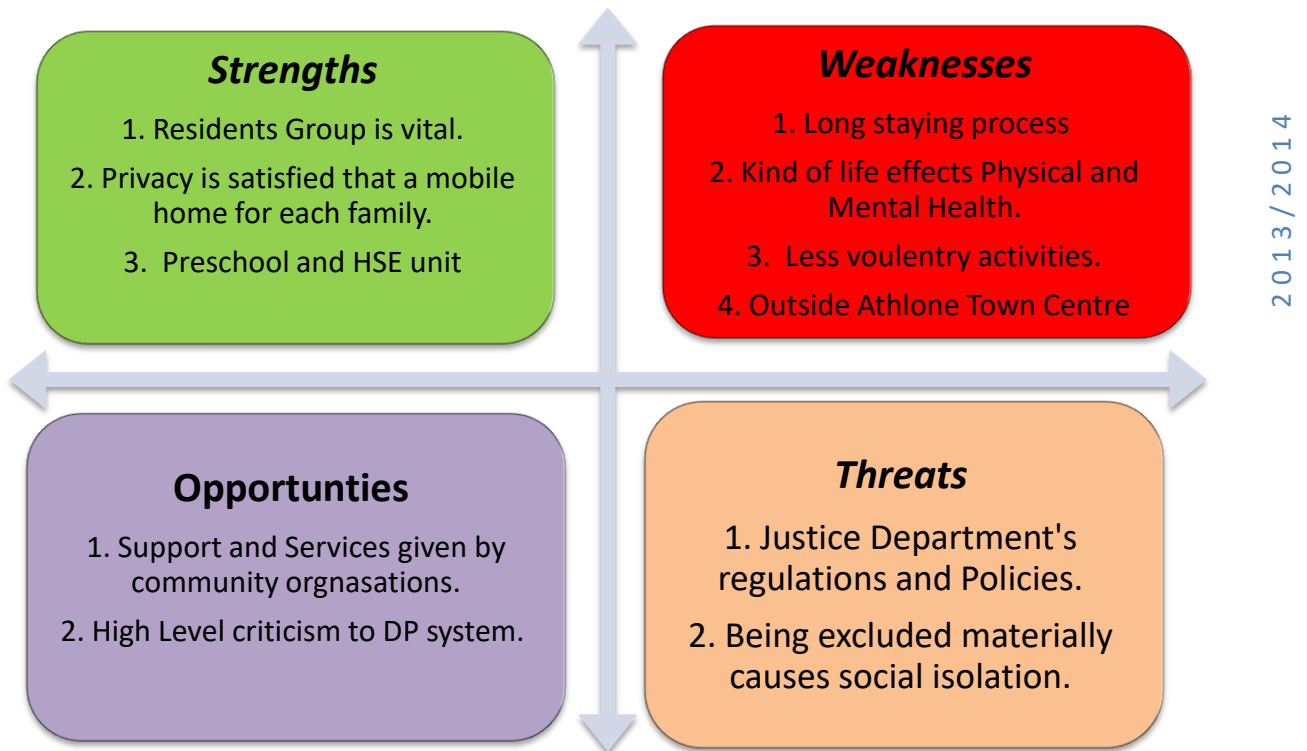


Figure No. 6: AAC SWOT Analysis



CONCLUSION

The main conclusion of this profile is that the community of AAC is excluded socially although the vital work by community organisations occasionally. As being one of 34 accommodation centers served throughout Direct Provision system, AAC at Lissywoollen run by RIA in an institutionalised scheme. Since 2000, Asylum seekers are living in mobile homes for years waiting their applications for protection to be processed. When located outside Athlone town, 243 residents are excluded in a "limbo".

Although many facilities attached to the site as well as privacy insured to families yet mobile homes are narrow, close and crowded. They get terrible when budget their expenditures that their only income is the weekly allowance which is not enough to satisfy their own and children needs. They have no right to get a waged job or access to third level education by their high school graduated children. Food served to them is not as dietary and cultural as their needs require. Along years of waiting with uncertainty, their physical and mental Health Well-Being is at risk of illness.



RECOMMENDATIONS

After investigating of AAC community profile the researcher comes to the following recommendations:-

1. For more social engagement, community of AAC at Lissywoollen can be involved within different activities conducted in Athlone or Co. Westmeath communities.
2. Reforming of Direct Provision System is representing as a necessity.
3. For its significant impact on human rights, more freedom in daily human life, i.e. cooking their own food, is required.
4. For their core role, Resident Group needs more funds and activates.



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