Findings of Joint Inspectorate and NEPS Visits to Education Settings in Emergency Reception and Orientation Centres (EROCs)

June 2018



INSPECTORATE



Introduction

The Irish Refugee Protection Programme (IRPP)¹ was established by Government decision on 10 September 2015 to offer a safe haven for those seeking international protection as a direct response to the humanitarian crisis that developed in Southern Europe as a consequence of mass migration from areas of conflict in the Middle East and Africa. Under the Programme, the Government pledged to accept a total of 4,000 persons into the State.

The IRPP is operated by the Office for Promotion of Migrant Integration (OPMI). It is a multi-faceted approach and includes the establishment of Emergency Reception and Orientation Centres (EROCs) under contract from the Department of Justice and Equality (DJE) to provide accommodation for refugees accepted into the country as part of Ireland's commitment to alleviate the refugee crisis in the Mediterranean. The main function of an EROC is to "provide for the basic needs of those resident there and the intense range of support services which are generally speaking not available to asylum seekers".

During 2016 and 2017 three EROCs were established by the DJE in Dungarvan, Monasterevin and Ballaghadereen. The EROCs are intended as short-term homes for refugees during an initial reception and orientation period of 3-4 months pending their resettlement under the IRPP in other parts of the country.

When EROCs are established by the DJ&E, often there is little opportunity for detailed consultation with other Departments and Agencies. The 'ask' of the Department of Justice and Equality of the DES is to provide an interim education response in terms of provision for school-age children and adults (including pre-school provision during this initial reception period). Delays in the resettlement process, due to factors such as the availability of housing which is beyond the control of DJE, have resulted in refugee families remaining in the EROCs for substantially longer than the three-month period initially envisaged, with, for example, some families in the Roscommon centre resident there for in excess of nine months.

With regard to education, the Department of Justice hoped that children in the centres would access, 'mainstream services with local populations while not impacting on the delivery of local services'. However, in all three towns there were difficulties in enrolling the children of EROC residents into local town schools due either to a lack of school places or because of

¹ Source: Department of Justice Briefing on opening of Ballaghadereen EROC January 2017

reported concerns about the impact of a "churning" effect where new and unsettled pupils would be constantly arriving for enrolment throughout the school year. While it was envisaged that children in all three EROC centres would attend local schools as a means of supporting integration, and this has been possible for some of the children, reported lack of capacity in local schools resulted in a decision to provide capacity for education provision within the centres themselves funded by the Department of Education and Skills through the local Education and Training Boards (ETB). Provision within the EROCs was made on an "ad hoc" basis initially in response to the opening of the centres. While these education centres are referred to as "EROC schools" in this composite report, they do not have roll numbers or official recognition as schools within the meaning of the Education Act 1998.

Following discussions between the Department's Social Inclusion Unit, the Inspectorate and the National Educational Psychological Service (NEPS), it was decided in late autumn 2017 that teams comprising an inspector and a psychologist would visit each centre to establish the educational needs of children and the nature and quality of educational provision available in the EROCs. Members of NEPS gathered data and conducted a review of relevant literature (Appendix 1) to establish best international practice in addressing the likely educational needs of refugee children. Members of the Inspectorate discussed an agreed evaluative approach to establish the quality and suitability of education in the EROC schools. NEPS was also tasked with having a particular focus on the psychological needs of the children attending these centres and the type of educational psychological service they may need. This report compiles and analyses the joint findings from NEPS and the Inspectorate on all three centres.

A Note on Normalising and Pathologising

While many of the children and young people attending EROC provision have experienced significant loss and trauma, and specialist provision is required to ensure their successful integration, psychologists were also mindful of the resilience of children, the importance of the support of their families and communities and the need to afford these children normalised experiences and time to settle in a new country and culture. Most children quickly adapt and adults working with refugee children should be cautious not to set up a pathologising expectation. Research tells us that teachers should adopt a watching brief, alert to signs of trauma or upset that persist or emerge after these children have settled in their new communities and appropriate services can then provide the necessary supports or interventions.

Methodology

To ensure consistency of approach in preparation for the visits to the centres, inspectors were paired with psychologist colleagues in teams of two and assigned to one of the centres. Under

guidance from an Assistant Chief Inspector and a NEPS Regional Director, members of the teams agreed a range of questions for use in all of the visits to establish:

- the nature of the pupil population
- the quality of teaching and learning
- the CPD needs of staff
- provision for children's welfare
- compliance with child protection regulations.

The visits were conducted in December 2017 and January 2018 by prior arrangement with the IRPP and with two days' advance notice being given to the Centre Manager in each case. Each visit lasted approximately half a day and inspectors and psychologists recorded their own separate written findings. When all visits had been concluded, the three inspectors involved met with the Assistant Chief Inspector to share, discuss and analyse their findings. The three psychologists and their management in NEPS also analysed and collated their observations. Using agreed summaries from both services, an inspector and a psychologist collaborated in the final preparation and writing of this composite report.

Evidence – The EROC School Contexts

Hazel Hotel, Monasterevin, Co Kildare (Opened in Autumn 2016): In this centre, children ranged in age from birth to young adult. Prior to arrival in the EROC, most children had been transient for around three years and their previous experience of education ranged from no formal schooling to private education. Most of the children displayed a positive attitude to school and teachers noted that children often developed an intrinsic motivation to learn and the families were eager for their children to succeed. There were twenty children of primary school age, thirteen of post-primary age and nine of crèche or pre-school age. Children from a newly-arrived group were not yet attending school because they were in a settling-in phase. During this phase they were expected to become accustomed to their new accommodation and surroundings over a short period, before their transition to the routine of regular education.

The pre-school children had been attending a pre-school in the local town. New arrangements were being discussed which would allow the crèche to open an onsite pre-school where the children could be enrolled on a short term basis initially and then transfer to the town pre-school setting. The EROC school was staffed by two qualified and registered primary teachers, some with experience in teaching pupils from minority groups or those with EAL needs. An ETB-funded staff member fulfilled the role of co-ordinator. The school operated for five days each week continuing throughout the summer. At the time of the visit there were thirteen pupils present in the EROC school and four other children had progressed from their initial settling-

in period and were travelling by bus each day to attend the Kildare Educate Together School (KETNS). No pupil in the EROC school was on a reduced school timetable at the time of the visit, although some pupils may have attended for shorter periods in earlier phases. Teachers saw their role as preparing the children for the language, behaviours and culture of a mainstream Irish classroom. Particular attention was given to ensuring pupils' sense of wellbeing, especially during the settling-in period. A wide curriculum (except Religion) was taught with particular emphasis on English, functional Mathematics, Geography and some Gaeilge. The school also worked to support parents by encouraging healthy lunches and by establishing routines for dropping off / collecting children from school.

Children usually remained in the EROC school for an initial period of three to four months before moving to a local primary or post-primary school. Uniforms and schoolbags were supplied for the children and the Educational Welfare Officer organised the transfers. Schools have been very welcoming and some have arranged for parent (Syrian) / parent (Irish) gatherings for the families, to give opportunities for interaction and building communication.

Clonea Strand Hotel, Dungarvan, Co Waterford (Opened in Autumn 2016): Children's ages in this centre ranged from pre-school age to young adult. At the time of the visit, there was no crèche in the centre but it was reported that there were plans to open one in the near future because there was no capacity in the local area to provide places. At the time of the visit there were thirty-five primary-aged children attending the EROC school while seven older students attended the local post-primary schools. Attendance rates were very good for the children attending the EROC school. There were three classrooms in the EROC school and all three teachers were qualified and registered. An ETB employee fulfilled the role of co-ordinator. The teachers had backgrounds in EAL and in teaching minority groups and some had accessed CPD on working with people who have experienced trauma. The school day lasts from 9.00am until 1.00pm from Monday to Thursday. The school remains in operation throughout the summer holiday period.

There was evidence to show that that the teachers implemented the primary curriculum with particular emphasis on oral language, Mathematics and Geography to prepare children for transition into mainstream schools. Pupils had visited local mainstream schools and pupils from the mainstream schools had been invited to the EROC school. Links have also been established with the local GAA and Soccer clubs. During the visit it was noted that pupils had a very positive attitude to school and were generally making very good progress. Teachers reported families were eager for their children to succeed.

It was envisaged that children would be placed in this centre for three months but at the time of the visit, many had remained for up to nine months because alternative accommodation had not been easily found for the larger families. While it was evident that some pupils had previously attended school in refugee camps *en-route* to Ireland, others had never attended any school.

Abbeyfield Hotel, Ballaghadereen, Co. Roscommon (Opened in Spring 2017): In this centre, children's ages ranged from pre-school age to young adult. At the time of the visits, a pre-school had yet to be provided in this centre. There were thirty-eight school-aged children in the centre and all were enrolled in the school onsite. There were two primary classrooms and one post-primary class in the school. Thirty-three children attended the primary school and five attended the post-primary section. All of the teachers were qualified and registered and some had a background and expertise in teaching EAL and international pupils. Together with the three fulltime teachers, there were some part-time teachers and volunteers to address particular learning needs. The Co-ordinator was an ETB employee with a background in adult education. He has the strong support of a regional ETB representative. The primary school was operating from 9.30am to 2.10pm for junior classes and from 9.30am to 3.10pm for seniors. The post-primary class was operating from 10.00am to 3.00pm. Primary pupils covered all curriculum subjects except Irish and Religion. Teachers replicated the routines and structures of mainstream Irish classrooms for the pupils to prepare them for their eventual enrolment into mainstream schools. The Aistear framework was implemented in the junior room. In the post-primary setting, students had access to a limited range of subjects (English, Maths, basic History and Geography) but there was an emphasis on English language learning and the establishment of routines and structure. Attendance was very good and no pupil was on a reduced timetable, although some were on reduced days initially. There was a good system for tracking attendance. The school operated fully right through July and August. It was closed for Christmas and Easter holidays only.

At the time of the visit, many of the children had been in the centre in excess of three months, with some being there almost nine months. Many pupils had no English when first enrolled in the school. By the time of the visit, six children had moved out of the centre to locations in Cork, Mayo and Donegal. While tentative plans were discussed in relation to establishing pupil links with some local rural schools, there had been no success in organising integration opportunities for the children in mainstream schools by the time of the inspection visit. It was reported by the EROC co-ordinator that integration with the town school had faced challenges.

Leadership and Management Structural Issues

All of the EROC schools are funded by the DES and local ETBs. Locally, provision is coordinated by designated key personnel with backgrounds in adult education or teaching. In all
cases, inspectors noted that the co-ordination function was discharged very effectively and it
was apparent that some of the co-ordinators had invested significant personal efforts to
provide a safe and educationally stimulating environment for the children. Clear routines and
management practices had been established and it was notable that despite a reported
teacher shortage nationally, the centres had been successful in employing qualified teachers
with relevant expertise. Given the current staffing levels, the pupil-teacher ratio in most of the
classrooms was slightly more favourable than that typically observed in mainstream schools.
However, the centres' provision for additional educational needs was often also drawn from
their core staffing.

As the EROC schools are not recognised schools within the meaning of the Education Act 1998 they do not have roll numbers. Teachers reported that this lack of recognition and a roll number caused difficulties for them in accessing assistance and CPD from the Department's support services. The schools have no recognition in the NCSE system and consequently no special needs assistants are funded for children's additional care needs, although this role is fulfilled by volunteers in some centres. Lack of recognition also means that there is uncertainty about the regulation of the schools. For example, there may be a lack of clarity about the extent to which regulations and guidance issued from time to time to recognised schools by the Department of Education and Skills applies to these EROC schools. The lack of recognition of the schools also complicates the monitoring of the enrolment and attendance of the children at the schools by the Education Welfare Officers of Tusla, the Child and Family Agency. In the context of deciding the future role and function of the EROC schools, the possibility of assigning a temporary roll number should be considered so that teachers can access CPD and other relevant supports, and the regulatory position of the schools can be clarified. If the provision of separate temporary roll numbers is not feasible, the concept of the EROC schools becoming satellites of existing schools for roll number allocation and CPD support should be explored.

Compliance with Child Protection:

Teachers in all three centres are registered with the Teaching Council and at the time of the visits, all staff members were Garda Vetted. In the Monasterevin centre, the school had its own child protection policy and Designated Liaison Person (DLP). In the two remaining centres, the schools operated under the overall centre's child protection policy and the DLP was the centre's director. In all cases the DLP name was displayed prominently.

Is Education Provision Appropriate?

In all three centres, Inspectors noted that the children had very good capacity to learn in the primary classrooms. It was reported by the teachers that while children initially had little or no English, immersion in the target language resulted in remarkable progress and this was evident in classroom interactions during the visits. All the EROC centres allowed a brief settling-in period for children after their arrival before they were enrolled in the educational setting. In some cases, children exhibited difficulties with separation from their parents and there were some initial concerns about anxiety levels. Largely, these issues had been resolved for most children, and during the visits most children presented as interested, motivated and active learners.

The quality of teaching observed in the primary settings was of a high quality overall and teachers had made significant efforts to ensure that pupils would be familiar with mainstream classroom life. These efforts were evident from the classroom displays, resources, layouts, teachers' planning and assessment practices. The breadth and balance of curriculum implementation was also commendable. It was also noted that teachers differentiated effectively for the wide range of pupils' attainment levels and that in some settings pupils progressed rapidly from one group to another as their language skills improved.

Although all of the EROC centres were intended to house families for up to three months, in practice, most families had been there for significantly longer periods. The schools were established to prepare children for the transition to mainstream schools, ideally in the locality of their final housing settlement. While the educational provision in the EROC primary schools is of a high standard, overall, these schools do not have the range of resources (for example, PE facilities) and supports to provide for the broad range of pupils' needs over a longer period. Protracted enrolment in an EROC school, while it may provide stability and familiarity with the Irish curriculum, does not assist the pupils to interact and socialise freely with Irish children. Despite the delays in securing final housing placements, one EROC school had been particularly successful in managing the transition of its pupils to a mainstream school after three months, although this incurred transportation costs to a different town. However, in this instance, transportation had been creatively shared with the parents to allow the adults to access their own educational programmes. It is recommended that information on this successful model of transition be shared with all of the EROC centres with a view to extending its use throughout the system.

At the time of the inspection visits, some children of post-primary age were educated on-site. While the quality of teaching and learning was good, the narrow breadth of subject choice was

a concern unlikely to be resolved under current staffing levels. Given the lower number of pupils in this category and their social and holistic educational needs, greater effort should be made to enrol all second-level students in local mainstream post-primary schools after a very short period of familiarisation in the EROC school.

Future Educational Provision

As described earlier, the EROC schools have evolved from a necessity to provide education for groups of refugees during their proposed short-term stay at the centres. Particularly at primary level, a period of settling-in and stabilisation is desirable to familiarise the children with the Irish education system, the new language and to have their needs assessed. When their period of residence in the EROCs becomes protracted (in excess of three months), there is a need to fully integrate these children into local schools as the next step in preparation for their ultimate settlement in another part of Ireland. It is recommended, therefore, that EROC primary schools should continue to exist but that pupils' enrolment there should be time-limited. While a period of 3 months is recommended, it is acknowledged that flexibility may apply in exceptional circumstances, for example, where long-term accommodation has been arranged in an alternative location and there are definite plans to move the family within a short period of weeks, or where it is close to end of term and it is considered that a transition coinciding with the start of a new term may be in the best interest of the pupils concerned.

The small EROC schools do not have the staffing or resources necessary to provide sufficiently broad subject choices or age-appropriate social interactions for post-primary students. However, it may be appropriate to provide EROC based post-primary education for a very short initial period, ideally no more than two weeks, to assist students settle into school routines.

Within these proposals for the future of the EROC schools, the following sections of this report address the supports, services and facilities required to ensure that the schools can best provide for the educational, psychological and social needs of their children and young people

EROC Teachers' Continuing Professional Development (CPD) Needs

In these schools, teachers are faced with the challenge of providing an educational programme to children and young people with a diversity of social, emotional, behavioural and educational needs. Unlike typical school entrants, there is a paucity of prior information regarding the strengths and needs of these children and young people. Each will have their own personal history of the traumas and triumphs faced on their journey to Ireland. Each will also have a unique profile as a learner. The use of the Student Support File is recommended as an instrument to collect and communicate this information both in their current provision and to their receiving schools. EROC staff may benefit from access to support services to

understand and provide for the diversity of need. The following areas were identified by teaching staff and NEPS psychologists as areas in which additional training and support may need be offered:

- Trauma-sensitive schooling
- Teaching students for whom English is a second language
- Working with minorities
- The Continuum of Support, including the Student Support File
- Transfer to mainstream school

It is recommended that EROC staff should be enabled to avail of specific training opportunities in addition to being included in local CPD opportunities, offered by their local Education Centres. Priority should be given to EROC staff who wish to avail of training that is led by NEPS, such as training in Incredible Years, FRIENDS, Critical Incident Support and the Continuum of Support.

Holistic and Other Provision Needs

It is recommended that further consideration be given to how NEPS and other DES Support Services may support teachers of refugee children in a range of settings, including those in EROCs.

Other Necessary Supports

Classroom Assistance

As some children have no previous experience of formal education, their needs in terms of structure, routine and expectations are considerably greater that in the typical population. As many EROC classrooms are not purpose built, there are structural deficits. In some cases toilets are not attached to classrooms (and some may also be used by adults), play areas are some distance from the classrooms. Therefore, additional appropriate adult supervision is desirable for child safeguarding purposes. It is recommended that the DJE give consideration as to how best to ensure that the staffing allocation in the centres takes account of the full needs of the adults and children in this regard

Play Facilities

Not all centres have appropriate play facilities (indoor and outdoor) for the children in residence. It was noted that some children lacked social skills and needed opportunities with structured support to learn to share play equipment, take turns, follow group rules or resolve conflict. It is recommended that, wherever possible, each centre should have a dedicated play area, ideally with a sensory room. This room needs to be available throughout the school day

and to be equipped with a range of play materials. There also needs to be outdoor play spaces that are secure, and well-maintained and offer children a stimulating environment for play activities.

Supporting Transition

A key area is supporting the transition of children from EROCs to mainstream provision. It is recommended that EROCs plan for and help to facilitate the transition of their students to mainstream schools. For example, EROCs should provide information to parents about local schools and admissions practices. They should maintain a Student Support File for students attending their centres so that this can form the basis for record keeping which can be readily shared with mainstream schools in a familiar format. Additionally, the Student Transfer Profile, devised by NEPS and already in use nationwide for children with SEN transferring from primary to post-primary education, can easily be adapted to meet the needs of this population. It is recommended that, where possible, children and their parents have the opportunity to visit their receiving school before transfer and that staff from the receiving school visit the EROC while the child is still attending there. In this way, these children who have experienced much change and upheaval will encounter a familiar face when they transfer to their final destination school.

It is also recommended that there is clarity about who is responsible for identifying a school placement for each child and what structures are in place to support effective transition. It is noted that Education Welfare Officers of Tusla have a responsibility to ensure the enrolment of all children between the ages of 6 and 16 years of age in school in the State. EROC schools should be required to make returns of their student enrolment and student attendance to Tusla as in the case or recognised schools.

Future Monitoring

This document reports on the quality of educational provision and care for a very vulnerable cohort of children at a significant time of transition in their lives. The report draws on evidence jointly collected by inspectors and psychologists through their observations and their conversations with EROC staff. The EROC schools are likely to change rapidly over time if existing students leave and are replaced continually with new groups arriving into the country. In line with the Department's commitment to evaluate a range of other settings for vulnerable learners on an annual basis, the Inspectorate and NEPS should consider annual visits to EROC schools to monitor developments and to provide recommendations for improvement. To further extend the evidence base for future reports, mechanisms should be

further developed to gather and include the opinions of parents and the children about provision, care and their specific needs.

Findings

- The schools in the three EROC centres developed in response to the rapid intake of large numbers of refugee families in response to a humanitarian crisis. It was initially envisaged that families would remain in EROC centres for periods of three to four months but many families remain for significantly longer than that for reasons outside the control of the centres or DJE.
- Education provision within the EROCs was initiated as an interim measure to assist with the initial reception and orientation of refugee families in a situation where enrolment in local schools was not always either possible or practical. The schools have provided an effective response to the educational needs of the children.
- The non-recognition of the schools by the Department of Education and Skills (and the
 consequent non-issuing of roll numbers to them) has proven to be a barrier to teachers
 accessing CPD and to the provision of supports to the students. Non-recognition has
 also given rise to other regulatory challenges.
- Teaching and learning are of a high quality in these settings and it is evident that children have been supported in a safe and positive environment and that their personal and language skills have been developed very effectively.
- Notwithstanding this progress, the provision is segregated and was not intended as a long-term solution.
- One centre has been particularly successful at enabling its primary pupils to transition into mainstream school in a nearby town after three months. All of the EROC schools have plans to increase their links with local schools to further assist their pupils with their transition to mainstream education.
- However, no centre has been able to systematically integrate its pupils into the nearest
 mainstream primary schools. To promote inclusion, the barriers to this integration
 should be further examined by the DES to ascertain if some concessions in grant aid,
 staffing or other supports to the local mainstream schools could provide a solution.
- The curriculum breadth for post-primary students can be quite restricted due to staffing levels and their limited subject expertise. Two centres have successfully integrated their post-primary students into local mainstream schools. There is a need to integrate

- second-level students into local mainstream schools after a very short period of familiarisation in an EROC school.
- The children and young people in the EROCs are presenting with a great diversity of social, emotional, behavioural and educational needs. Systems need to be in place to identify, record and communicate these needs. Their learning programmes must be appropriate to their needs and strengths in order to enable them to make a successful transition into the Irish Educational System.
- Finally, in preparing this report, the focus has been on Inspectors and NEPS
 psychologists jointly outlining the educational needs of the refugee children resident in
 EROCs. Further work is needed to elicit the experiences and viewpoints of refugee
 children and of their parents.

Recommendations

Student enrolment and attendance

- The initial settling-in period in the EROC schools to familiarise children of primary school age with the Irish education system should be retained but, ideally, attendance at the on-site schools should be time-limited to a maximum of three months. Flexibility may be required in certain circumstances, when some extension of placement is clearly in the best interests of the child.
- All second-level EROC students should be enrolled in local mainstream schools, with appropriate supports, after a very short period of familiarisation in an EROC school.
- Management of each EROC school should ensure that the length of the school day is at least equivalent to that provided in mainstream schools for each child's age category.

Student transitions to mainstream schools

- The perceived barriers to the integration of EROC pupils into local primary schools should be further examined to ascertain if some concessions in grant aid, staffing or other supports to the local mainstream schools could provide a solution. Where school places are legitimately not available in the immediate locality, the possibility of funding transport to schools slightly further away should be explored.
- Information on Monasterevin's successful model for the early transition of primary pupils to a local mainstream school be shared with other EROC centres with a view to extending its use throughout the system.
- It is recommended that the Student Support File be shared with children's receiving schools and that children have the opportunity where possible to visit their receiving school before transfer and that staff from the receiving school visit the EROC while the student is still attending there.
- It is recommended that there is clarity about the role of the Education Welfare Officer
 / Tusla's responsibility for the effective transfer of children from EROC provision to local schools.
- There is scope to explore how greater consistency can be applied to the disparate practices around transition to local schools evident across the three centres.

School facilities and staffing

- Each school should have a dedicated and well-equipped play area, ideally with a sensory room together with outdoor play spaces that are secure, and well-maintained and offer children a stimulating environment for play activities.
- It is recommended that the Department of Justice ensure that the staffing allocation in the centres takes account of the full needs of the adults and children especially in regard to child safeguarding purposes.

Supports for students and schools

- It is recommended that the Student Support File be used to record and communicate information about the children and young people's needs and strengths.
- EROC staff should be enabled to avail of specific, tailored training opportunities in addition to being included in local CPD opportunities, offered by their local Education Centre.
- It is recommended that further consideration should be given to how NEPS and other DES Support Services may support teachers in the EROC provision.

Student and parental views

 In developing plans for future monitoring of EROC schools, consideration should be given to how best to elicit the experiences and views of refugee children and of their parents.

School recognition and regulation

- In the context of deciding the future role and function of the EROC schools, the possibility of giving temporary recognition (and assigning a temporary roll number) should be considered so that teachers can access CPD, so that students can access relevant supports; and so that the regulation of the schools may be clarified. If this is not feasible, the possibility of identifying the centres as satellites of existing schools could be explored.
- In line with the Department's commitment to scheduling regular inspections in settings which cater for vulnerable learners, annual inspection for EROC schools should be considered.

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