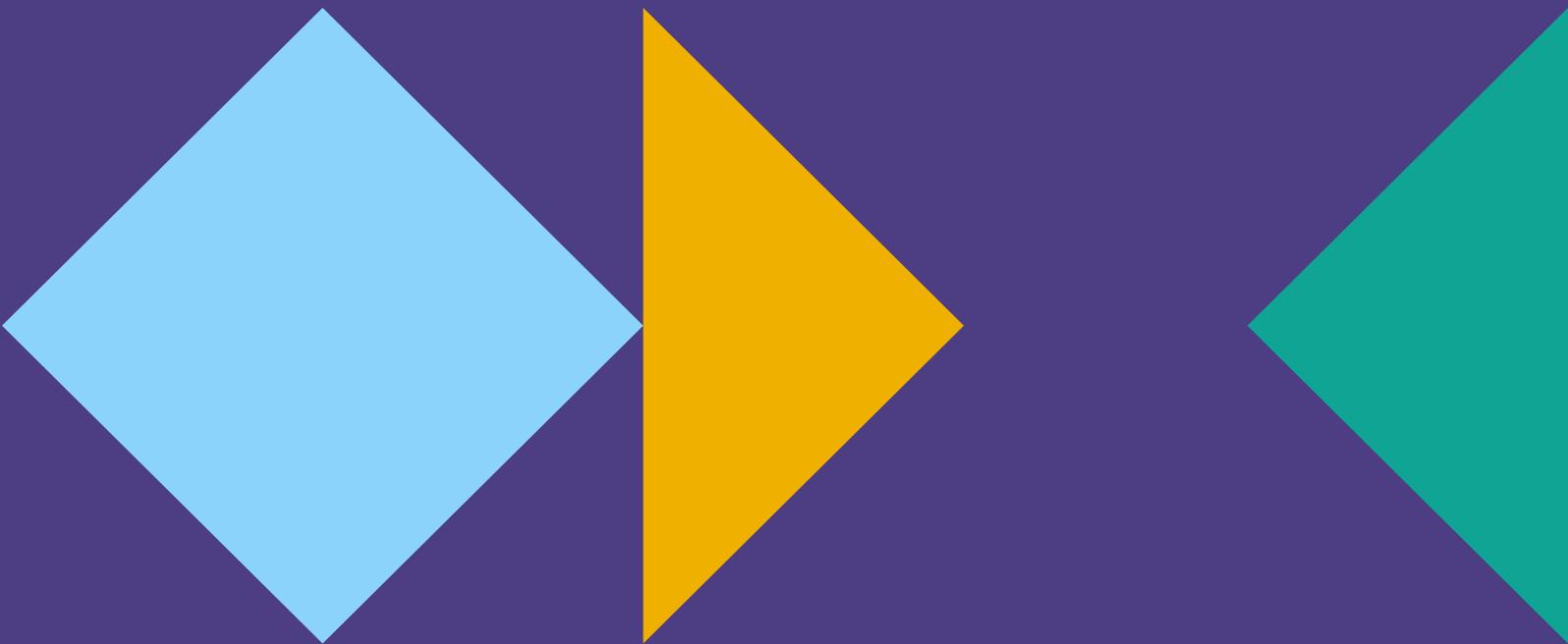


The Reception Gap

Doras
Promoting and Protecting Human Rights

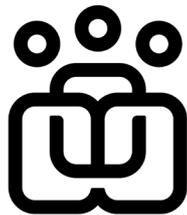
A Report on Permanent International
Protection Accommodation versus
Emergency Accommodation



Research Summary

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Research Summary

This research examines reception conditions within the International Protection Accommodation Service (IPAS), with particular attention to residents' experiences of emergency accommodation. The study assesses accommodation conditions, governance and accountability arrangements, access to services, complaints and remedies, transfers, and the lived impacts of prolonged congregated living.

While permanent IPAS centres have been subject to increased scrutiny in recent years, emergency accommodation now provides for the majority of people seeking international protection and yet remains largely unexamined, weakly regulated, and effectively outside the scope of independent oversight. This research seeks to address the gaps in research on emergency accommodation.

The researchers used a national survey of residents in emergency accommodation, peer-led focus groups, and key informant interviews with key stakeholders working across the reception system to fill the gaps in knowledge. The report documents a system characterised by inconsistency, insecurity, and structural problems. Residents' experiences are contingent on where they are placed, who manages a centre, and the availability of local services. The absence of enforceable standards and routine inspections is identified as significant problems.

Understanding Permanent IPAS and Emergency Accommodation Centres

There is widespread confusion about the distinction between permanent IPAS centres, also referred to as Direct Provision centres, and emergency accommodation. While these categories carry important regulatory and contractual differences, they are not always clearly understood by residents, practitioners or even some frontline service providers.

Permanent centres operate under longer-term contracts and fall within the remit of the Health Information and Quality Authority (HIQA) inspections against the National Standards. Emergency accommodation, by contrast, is typically procured on a short-term or rolling basis and is not currently subject to routine inspection. However,

in practice residents may live for extended periods in emergency accommodation, and the distinction between temporary and permanent becomes blurred. This confusion has significant consequences. Residents may not know what standards apply to their accommodation or what oversight mechanisms, if any, are in place. Practitioners and advocates encounter difficulty identifying appropriate routes for complaint or escalation. During the course of this research, it became clear that many people living in emergency accommodation refer to it as “Direct Provision”, reflecting how the system is seen rather than how it is formally categorised and regulated.

Methodology

This research adopted a mixed-methods, participatory and rights-based approach to examine reception conditions in Ireland’s international protection accommodation system. The methodology was designed to capture both structural features of the system and lived experiences within it, recognising that no single method could adequately account for the complexity, scale and variability of reception conditions. The research combined desk based, doctrinal and legal analysis, quantitative and qualitative empirical methods, and engagement with people with lived and professional experience of the system. Each

methodological strand informed and reinforced the others, enabling triangulation and strengthening the validity of the findings.

Reception conditions in permanent IPAS accommodation were explored through desk-based research, relying on the considerable knowledge and data that already exists. This is used as a baseline to investigate conditions in ‘emergency’ IPAS accommodation. Since little is known about conditions in emergency accommodation, various empirical methods were used to access those conditions.

Context and Literature Review

An overview of the key features, evolution, legal basis and attempts to reform Direct Provision (DP) is outlined before turning to a literature review covering the 25 years of the system, with particular attention to recent literature.

The continuity of criticism across time is highlighted with an analysis of recurring themes in the literature: income poverty; physical conditions in DP centres; the policy of dispersal and access to services; food; children and parenting; special reception needs and vulnerability assessments; management, quality standards and oversight.

The analysis indicates that Direct Provision is not a temporary or peripheral system but rather a deeply embedded mode of reception that, for a quarter of a century, has been marked by overcrowding,

poverty, lack of autonomy for residents, inadequate safeguards for vulnerable groups, and weak oversight.

Despite successive reform initiatives, the literature shows that change has been incremental at best, and that many of the same critiques first voiced in the early 2000s remain as relevant today as they were then. The persistence of these systemic shortcomings underscores the need to examine not only what has been promised but what is actually delivered in practice. This literature review also provides a crucial backdrop against which to assess whether current reforms and forthcoming obligations under the EU Migration and Asylum Pact will finally prompt substantive change, or whether Ireland risks not only reproducing long-standing failures under a new guise, but deepening them by embedding lower standards and more restrictive practices into the system.

Review of HIQA Inspection Reports

A synthesis of all reports of HIQA inspections published in 2025 was conducted, revealing considerable variability in compliance with the National Standards across (and sometimes within) permanent IPAS centres. The results of the above synthesis were also compared with the synthesis published by HIQA of its inspection findings in 2024 in its report 'Monitoring of International Protection Accommodation Service Centres in 2024.'

Overall, the picture of compliance in 2025 looks broadly similar to that in 2024, reflecting the fact that 2025 was only the second year of HIQA inspections of permanent IPAS centres. In its inspections, HIQA found many examples of embedded good practice but also many worrying practices, including in relation to risk assessment, child protection and overcrowding.

When the 2025 data was compared with the 2024 data, it was found that areas of improvement and dis-improvement more or less cancelled each other out and that compliance with many standards remained even. This is to be expected since it takes time to cultivate and embed systemic change, especially when the required change relates not only to the physical infrastructure but to a radical transformation in management and service culture. Nonetheless, the HIQA inspections mark the beginning of the transition, while also shining a light on what is happening in an otherwise opaque sector – providing transparency and oversight and prompting accountability.

Survey and Focus Group Findings

A national survey and peer-led focus groups were conducted to assess reception conditions in emergency accommodation, which is excluded from HIQA's remit and is not captured in the literature review. Both the survey findings and residents' qualitative accounts present a stark and consistent picture of life in emergency accommodation. Across a large and diverse national survey sample (246 responses), and supported by a thematic analysis of survey responses to an open-ended question and insights from a number of peer-led focus groups, residents described a system marked by overcrowding, lack of privacy, restricted freedom, inadequate food provision, limited access to services, barriers in making complaints and significant power imbalances between residents and emergency accommodation providers.

These conditions are not isolated problems. The researchers note that they need to be understood as

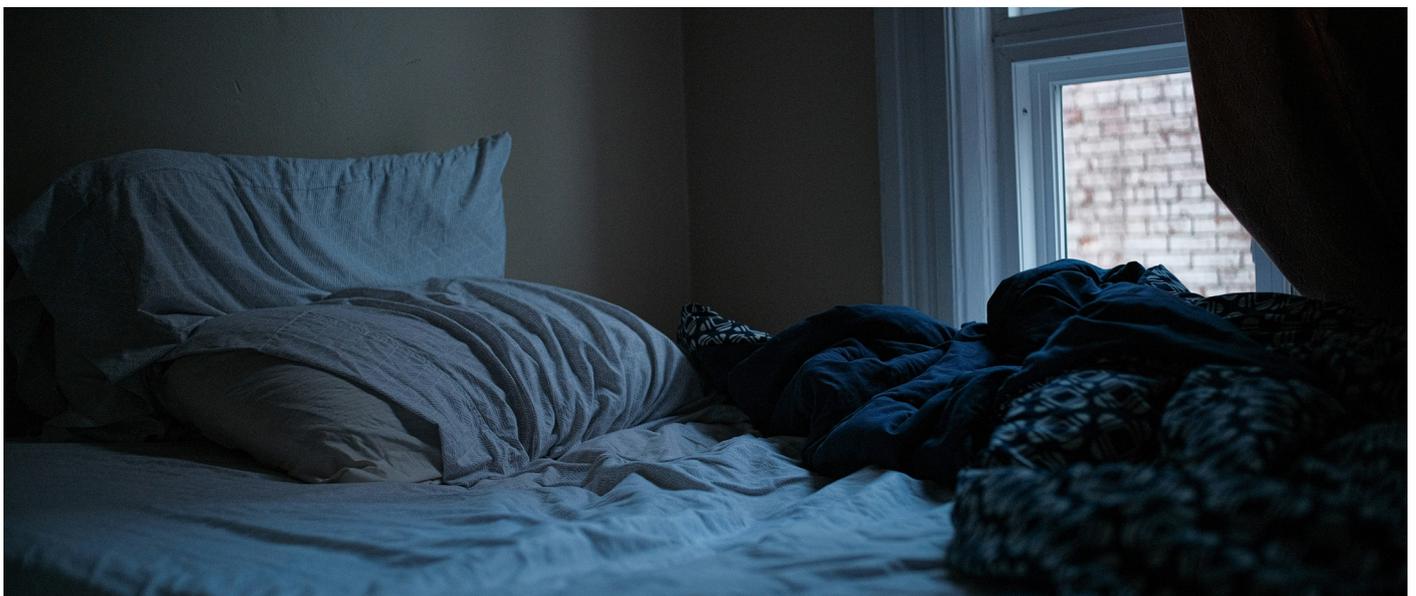
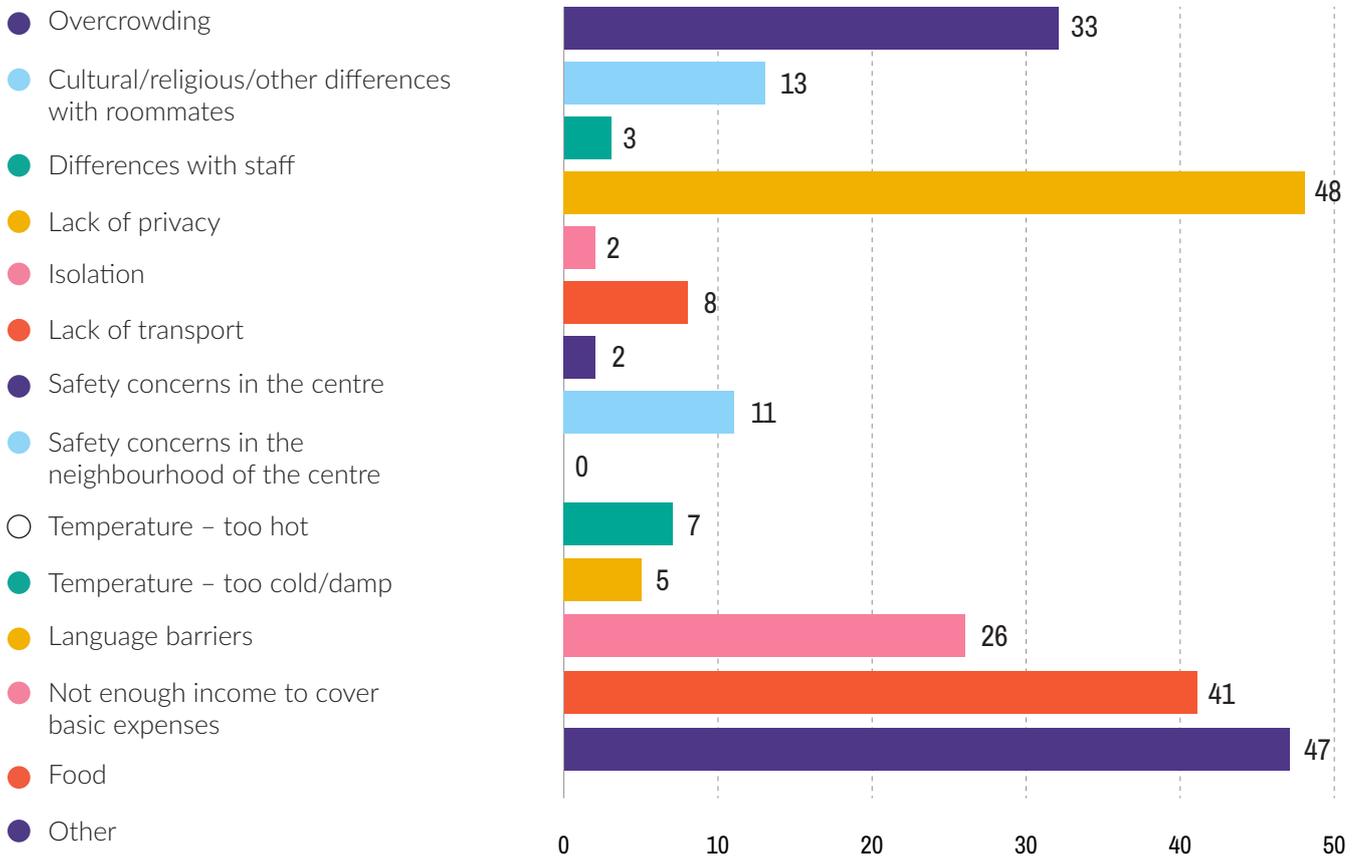
interrelated and cumulative harms that undermine people's dignity, strain relationships, and negatively affect physical and mental health. For parents and children in particular, emergency accommodation was described as very harmful, negatively impacting their development, with long-term implications for their wellbeing and integration as new members of the community. The strong convergence between quantitative patterns and residents' own words indicate that these issues are not confined to particular centres, but are structural features of emergency accommodation as currently provided and governed. Therefore, this report provides empirical evidence that emergency accommodation, as experienced by many residents, falls significantly short of the national standards. Residents' voices provide a further evidence base to urgently ensure enforceable standards, meaningful oversight, and a shift away from prolonged congregated living as the default model.

Can you come and go from your centre as you please?

- Yes
- No

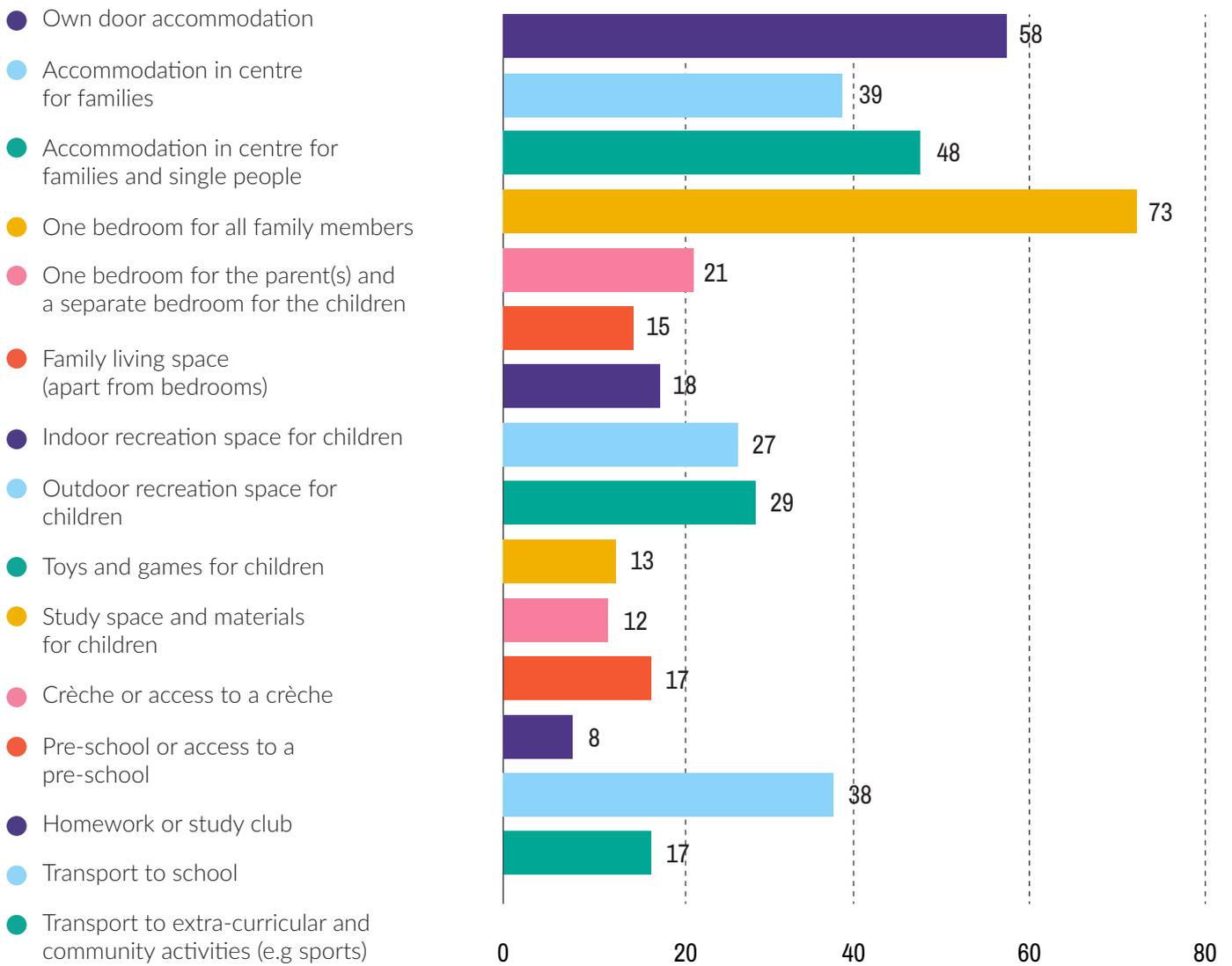


What are the biggest challenges you face in your accommodation?
(Tick all that apply)



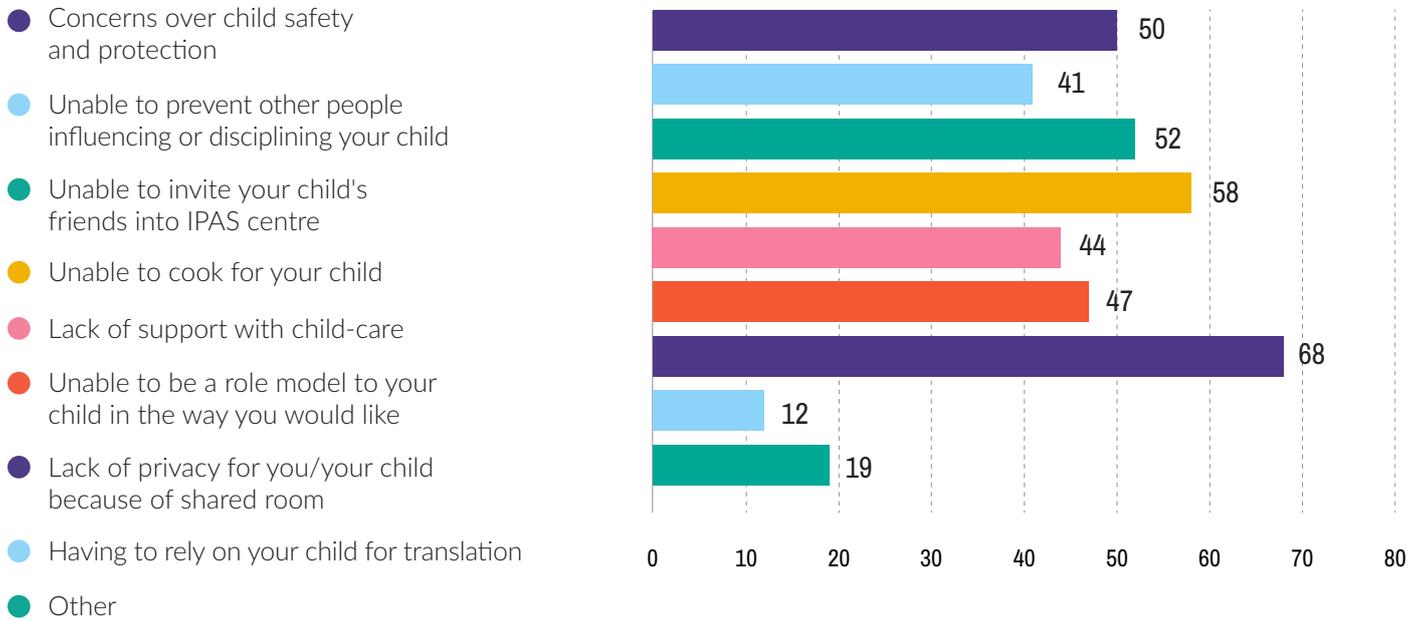
Which of the following do you have access to in your accommodation?

(Tick all that apply)



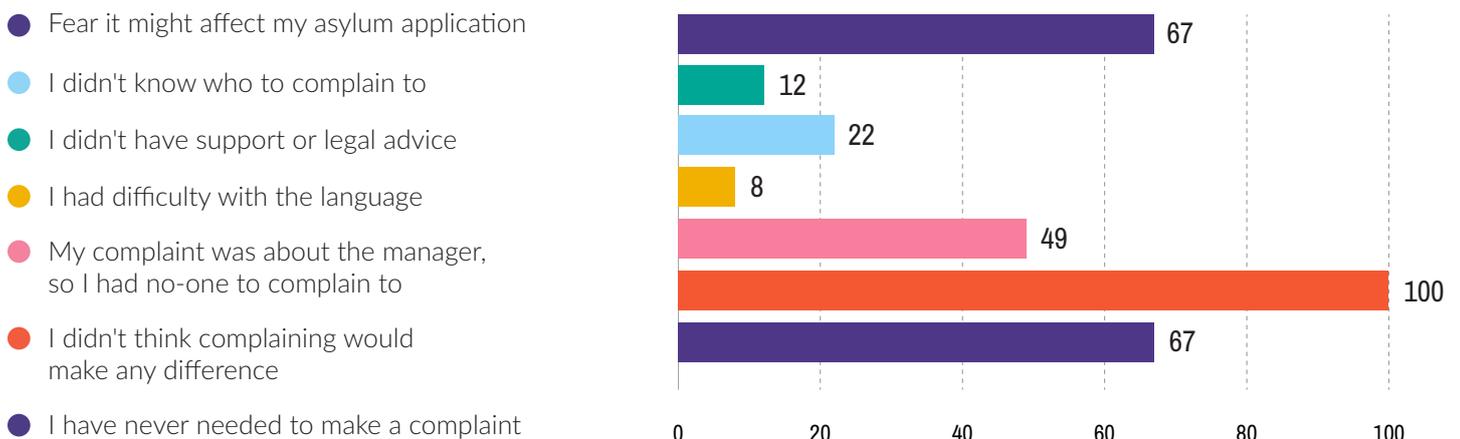
What are the challenges you face as a parent in IPAS accommodation?

(Tick all that apply)



If you had a problem but did not make a complaint, why was that?

(Tick all that apply)



“My teenagers aged 18 and 16 are boys and we all stay in the same room. They need to burn their energies. The restriction is challenging. They cannot play outside and are confined. I allow my children to be on the phone 24/7 because that is the only alternative. They play games long into the night because they are bored.”

Focus Group 5, Participant 2

“I feel very isolated from the local culture. I have friends among the other asylum seekers, but due to very poor transit and the strict schedule imposed by meal times, I'm heavily discouraged from exploring my community. It's disheartening in its own right, and I'm afraid that this lack of social integration will be a mark against me when it comes time to review my asylum plea.”

Survey Respondent 181

Key Informant Interviews Findings

A thematic analysis of 11 key informant interviews was conducted as part of this research. The interviews captured perspectives from professionals, practitioners, advocates and institutional actors with direct knowledge of international protection reception conditions and related systems of support, including both longer term centres and emergency accommodation. The key informant interviews deepen and contextualise the lived experience evidence by situating it within the governance, policy, and practice of the international protection reception system.

The interviewees describe a reception system that can adversely impact the lives of people seeking international protection. Inconsistency emerges as one of the defining features of reception conditions, impacting everything from accommodation quality and food provision to access to healthcare, information, and the possibility of moving on. The experiences of people seeking international protection is largely dependent upon where they are placed, who manages the centre, and what local infrastructure or supports happen to exist. According to the key informants, poor practice persists in the absence

of enforceable standards, effective oversight and effective accountability mechanisms. As a result, residents often live with uncertainty about what they can expect, what they can safely challenge, and what consequences may follow from making complaints.

The analysis also shows how reception conditions interact with broader problems in housing, healthcare, transport and legal aid. These failures compound the vulnerability of people seeking international protection. The key informants spoke about how congregated living arrangements negatively impact privacy, autonomy and family life over time, while fear, information deficits and ineffective complaint mechanisms limit residents' capacity to seek remedies. Transfers and move-on processes further destabilise people at the time when they get status and when security should increase for them. Transfers result in severing emerging ties to work, education, community and integration. From a human rights perspective, the interviews speak to a system that formally recognises rights but fails to deliver the conditions necessary for those rights to function in practice.

Conclusions and Recommendations

The report concludes that emergency accommodation can no longer be treated as a temporary feature of the reception system. It has become a core component of Ireland's response to international protection and must be governed accordingly. Enforceable standards, independent inspection, and accessible remedies are required.

The recommendations set out in this report call for a decisive shift away from reactive, emergency-driven responses towards a coherent, rights-based reception framework. This includes extending independent inspection and oversight to all IPAS accommodation, redesigning complaints mechanisms to address fear and power imbalances.

The researchers note this report comes at a critical juncture as Ireland prepares to implement the EU Pact on Migration and Asylum, raising the real risk that the failures of Direct Provision will be further entrenched under a new legal and policy framework. In this context, the aim of the recommendations of this report is to move the debate decisively beyond the repetition of long-standing critiques towards concrete, actionable reform.

Key Recommendations

1

Emergency accommodation should be used only as a measure of last resort, where an unforeseeable surge in demand temporarily exceeds available supply, and should never function as a routine or default component of the reception system. Government should continue to strengthen forecasting and contingency planning for increases in applications for international protection to ensure, insofar as possible, that emergency accommodation is not required.

2

Emergency accommodation should be genuinely short-term and tightly time-limited. Its routine or prolonged use is incompatible with human rights obligations. The State should prioritise non-congregated, self-contained accommodation models that support privacy, family life, autonomy and integration, recognising that living in congregated settings for prolonged periods generates cumulative and foreseeable problems as detailed in this report.

3

All IPAS accommodation, irrespective of ownership, duration or operational model, should be delivered within a social care framework and supported by a suitably qualified and professionally regulated workforce. The appointment of centre management and staff should be subject to relevant experience and qualifications, with a requirement that a proportion of centre staff be CORU-registered social care professionals, or demonstrably eligible for registration and required to complete registration within a defined transitional period, particularly for roles that involve direct and ongoing engagement with residents, the exercise of decision-making authority or responsibility for safeguarding and care. All management and staff should be required to undergo initial and ongoing training and continuous professional development in relevant areas of competence.

4

All accommodation centres should be required to have private meeting spaces, where State bodies with statutory roles and responsibilities towards IPA and NGOs in the international protection space can provide support services on site. This is particularly important in accommodation centres in isolated areas, where residents may struggle to travel to the cities where State bodies and NGOs tend to be based. NGOs providing critical supports to IPA, for example, in the area of trauma support or legal advice to vulnerable applicants, should be resourced by the State to acquit these important roles on site where necessary.

5

All accommodation used to house international protection applicants, including emergency and short-term provision, must be brought within a single, mandatory inspection and enforcement regime aligned with the National Standards (see further point 8 below). The continued exclusion of emergency accommodation from inspection has produced a two-tier system of oversight in which substandard conditions are normalised for some residents while others benefit from better governance. This regulatory and inspection gap must be closed as a matter of urgency by extending enforceable oversight to all international protection accommodation without exception.

6

Compliance with the National Standards must be a mandatory condition of procurement, contracting and continued operation across all IPAS accommodation. While standards exist, this research demonstrates that they do not currently operate as binding and enforceable requirements across the system, particularly in emergency accommodation. Therefore, the National Standards should be explicitly included as contractual obligations and operational requirements and service providers should be trained accordingly. Clear and escalating consequences for non-compliance should be introduced, including defined remedial timelines, financial sanctions and contract termination or non-renewal where persistent non-compliance is evidenced. This should apply equally to State owned centres, permanent IPAS centres and emergency accommodation.

7

IPAS itself and all accommodation centres, irrespective of ownership, duration or operational model, should be made subject to the Public Sector Duty as outlined in Section 42 of the Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission Act 2014. This duty is imposed on all public bodies and requires that they protect the human rights of the persons to whom they provide services, identify relevant human rights in their strategic plan and report on how those rights have been met in their annual report. This reorients the focus from reactive, ad hoc responses to proactive and planned service delivery. This duty subsists when public bodies outsource essential public services, such as IPA accommodation, to private-service providers. Accordingly, compliance with this duty should be included as a requirement in all procurement processes and service level agreements.

8

Reception standards must be applied uniformly across the across the reception system, other than specialist reception standards for vulnerable applicants, and must not be varied according to IPA cohort or used in a punitive or deterrent manner. All people seeking international protection should be entitled to the same level of accommodation conditions, safeguards and supports, regardless of country of origin or transit or mode of entry.

9 Complaints and remedial mechanisms must be redesigned to address the fear, power imbalances and information barriers identified throughout this research. The current arrangements are fragmented, discretionary and regarded as risky, inaccessible and ineffective by residents. A coherent statutory oversight framework is required. The Health Information and Quality Authority (HIQA) should be provided with additional dedicated funding and an expanded statutory remit to inspect all international protection accommodation, including emergency and short-term provision. Inspection should be underpinned by a targeted, evidence-based model, with complaints data, risk indicators and thematic concerns used to prioritise inspections where concerns about conditions arise. In parallel, a statutory complaints mechanism should be established within HIQA, placing it under a clear legal obligation to receive, investigate and respond to complaints within defined timeframes, with effective protections against retaliation for residents. The relationship between HIQA and the monitoring/inspection mechanisms pertaining to the screening stage and the border procedure that are envisaged in EU law should be clarified.

10 The roles of the Office of the Ombudsman and the Ombudsman for Children should be given greater clarity in relation to reception conditions. This is particularly important to ensure independent review of individual complaints and systemic failures, especially where the rights and welfare of children arise. These functions should be coordinated through a formal memorandum of understanding between the Department of Justice, Home Affairs and Migration, HIQA, the Ombudsman, the Ombudsman for Children and other relevant State bodies, enabling information sharing, pooled expertise and strategic deployment of inspection and oversight resources. The Ombudsman offices should be appropriately resourced to carry out their statutory duties towards IPA.

11 Special reception centres in the community for people with vulnerabilities or special reception needs, as envisaged in government policy, must be fully compliant with the standards set out in the recast Reception Conditions Directive 2024. Where vulnerabilities are identified after the initial screening stage and indicate a special reception need, there should be a prompt re-evaluation of whether the person is placed in the most appropriate accommodation.

12 Further resources and structured supports should be put in place across the full range of relevant public bodies and housing charities to enable timely and sustainable exit from IPAS accommodation following the granting of international protection status or leave to remain. Further clarity is required on the respective responsibilities of and connections between the IPAS transition team, the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage, Local Authorities, Chief Executives of Local Authorities and organisations such as DePaul Ireland and the Peter McVerry Trust. Where roles and responsibilities are devolved or outsourced, they

should be appropriately resourced and their impact should be periodically reviewed. Support for a mapping exercise could be provided by the Local Government Management Agency and could usefully result in a memorandum of understanding or circular outlining respective competences and resourcing.

13

Ireland should treat the implementation of the EU Pact on Migration and Asylum as an opportunity to correct longstanding structural failures in the reception system rather than further entrench reactive emergency responses. The evidence demonstrates that reliance on ad hoc and uncoordinated emergency accommodation is inherently reactive rather than strategic, leading to haphazard decision making, weakened standards and avoidable tensions within local communities. Instead, the Pact should be used as a reset point for reception policy and governance, grounded in proactive planning, clear and enforceable standards, transparent decision making and meaningful early engagement with communities.

14

Finally, in light of demonstrations, riots, arson attacks and intimidation directed at international protection applicants in certain existing and proposed IPAS centres, it is essential that all members of government exercise leadership and restraint in public discourse. Language used by political actors has real consequences. Careless or inflammatory framing of immigration law and policy risks legitimising hostility and exacerbating tensions, while responsible leadership is necessary to protect safety, social cohesion and the rights of people seeking international protection.

