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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

CHAPTER 1 – THE PROJECT

From the mid 1990s Ireland has seen unprecedented growth in the number of persons seeking asylum in the state. These numbers, since they peaked at 11,634 in 2002, have begun to decline. At the height of this period the Support Organisation for the Needs of Asylum Seekers in Ireland (SONAS) was established under the European Union funded EQUAL Community Initiative. The promoters of SONAS believed that asylum seekers were ill-equipped to deal with the process in which they found themselves when they arrived in the country. It was to this need that SONAS wished to respond.

SONAS identified its aim as:

To improve the quality of life for particular and identifiable groups of asylum seekers at identifiable phases of the asylum determination process and in so doing to contribute to the development of best humanitarian practice

This aim was broken down into five objectives:

1. To provide information and support for asylum seekers regarding the asylum determination process and in particular to focus on:
 - the process immediately after arrival / reception,
 - provision of information regarding rights and entitlements,
 - provision of information regarding existing support networks
 - understanding the country and location of immigration.
2. To enable asylum seekers interface effectively with:
 - the local community
 - process advisors
 - government representatives
3. To address identified psychosocial and cultural needs of the most vulnerable groups of asylum seekers with a view to improving their readiness and adaptability for the outcome of the asylum determination process.
4. To establish transnational exchanges of relevance to all actions.
5. To inform policy on models of good practice at national and European level.

To achieve the aim and objectives SONAS undertook actions in three main areas:

- Develop a training programme for providers of services to asylum seekers
- Provide an outreach service for asylum seekers
- Influence Government policy on asylum seekers

SONAS sought to address the six key [principles of EQUAL as follows:

- **Partnership** – SONAS was established as a Development Partnership (DP) which consisted of the following organisations, Cork City Partnership, FAS, Partas Dublin, Paul Partnership Limerick, SPIRASI Dublin, Vincentian Refugee Centre Dublin and the Wexford Area Partnership.

- **Transnationality** – SONAS joined with seven other DPs from five other EU countries to establish the ASPIRE! transnational partnership.
- **Innovation** – SONAS established an outreach service which provided one-to-one advice to asylum seekers in the various places in which the asylum seekers lived or in local offices. The project provided these services in four geographical locations around the country – Cork, Dublin, Limerick and Wexford.
- **Empowerment** – SONAS used the facilitated approach to empowerment where the excluded individual or group were facilitated or helped to develop and use power for themselves through inclusive empowerment strategies.
- **Thematic approach** - SONAS was the only EQUAL DP in Ireland working directly with asylum seekers. As a result the thematic work of the project took place at transnational partnership and EU thematic group level.
- **Disseminating/Mainstreaming** – SONAS used a range of opportunities to disseminate information about the project (at various forums, information leaflets, website, training manual developed by SONAS. SONAS also opportunities to influence the mainstreaming of its ideas and practice through collaborating with other organisations on the establishment of an expert working group to examine the delivery of services to asylum seekers, the accreditation of the SONAS training, involving Comhairle in advice provision, and the appointment of two of SONAS's ORWs in similar roles by mainstream agencies.

CHAPTER 2 –PROJECT IMPLEMENTATION

In this chapter the manner in which the project was implemented during 2004 is outlined under the following headings:

- **DP management** – a characteristic of the DP management was the commitment of the organisations and in particular their representatives who managed the DP. A lot of time and energy was required to ensure the solidity and cohesion of the DP management. The positions of chair and vice-chair were rotated every six months which was part of the group's commitment to empowerment and participation.
- **Staffing** – the staff team consisted of a National Coordinator and National Administrator, based in Dublin and four ORWs based in the four national locations. The ORWs received support both from the National Coordinator and the local DP member where the outreach worker was based. Reporting systems were established and these included monthly monitoring forms as well as regular individual meetings with the National Coordinator and as a team.
- **Outreach work** – the ORWs provided their service to individuals and families at a number of locations, such as reception centres, accommodation centres, local offices of host organisations and external agencies. As part of their daily work the ORWs also networked with a range of other organisations in the statutory, community and voluntary sectors.
- **Policy work** – policy work took place at two levels, national and European. A number of important issues emerged based around the general theme of delivery of services to asylum seekers. Direct

provision as a means of support came to the fore as central to the theme of delivery of services to asylum seekers. The policy concerns on this issue has led to a proposal for improvement in planning, coordination and delivery of services for asylum seekers in Ireland, which is being pursued by SONAS DP members even as the EQUAL funded project draws to a close.

- **Training** – the staff of SONAS engaged in training through the three years of the project. The SONAS experience of training has led it to devise a training programme for those who work directly with asylum seekers. This training programme has been developed to the point where it has become an accredited training course.
- **Thematic work** - SONAS was the only DP project in Ireland which worked with asylum seekers in this round of EQUAL. Therefore the project's participation in thematic work was at transnational and ETG5 level.
- **Transnational work** – the ASPIRE! transnational partnership of which SONAS was a member set the following objectives for itself: i) to improve health, well-being and quality of life of asylum-seekers, ii) to develop structures and procedures for mutual exchange, learning and transfer of expertise, methodologies, approaches and results, and iii) to influence both national and European asylum policy.
- **Meeting the objectives of SONAS** – under this heading SONAS outlined the actions it would take to meet the objectives as outlined in Chapter 1.
- **Actions taken to secure the six principles of EQUAL** –
 - *Partnership* – all organisations remained with the project throughout and a structure was developed to ensure that all participating organisations played a significant role in implementing the project.
 - *Transnationality* - SONAS has shown its commitment to transnationality by actively participating in all aspects of the ASPIRE! partnership. It has participated in transnational meetings, played a leading role in the initiation and co-ordination of EU policy development.
 - *Innovation* - there are three key innovative features to the SONAS project; its national base, its outreach work and its training for frontline workers.
 - *Empowerment/participation* - Empowerment and participation took place at a number of different levels in the SONAS project: at DP board level, at staff level, and at policy level.
 - *Thematic approach* - SONAS was the only EQUAL DP in Ireland in the asylum seeker thematic strand, ETG5. As a result it has had to develop its thematic work at transnational level and through ETG5. SONAS's commitment to this work was evident by its provision of secretariat support for ETG5 and by hosting, in March/April 2004, a European thematic conference in Dublin
 - *Dissemination/mainstreaming* - SONAS has had formal and informal meetings with a wide range of groups and service providers for asylum seekers throughout the life of the project. It has produced and distributed leaflets, established a web site, and received substantial media coverage for the launch of its Annual Report 2002. SONAS's meetings with the Reception and Integration Agency were an important step in mainstreaming, as were meetings with Comhairle and local Health Boards.

CHAPTER 3 –PROJECT ACHIEVEMENT AND IMPACT

Chapter 3 records how SONAS met its objectives during the life of the project

OBJECTIVE 1: INFORMATION AND SUPPORT

Action 1: Establish an outreach work service appropriate to the needs of asylum seekers

Performance Outcome of Action 1

To achieve Action 1 SONAS established a network of outreach offices at various locations:

- Dublin
- Cork
- Limerick
- Wexford

Action 2: Using outreach workers to improve information dissemination to asylum seekers

Performance Outcome of Action 2

The ORWs responded to this task in a number of different ways:

a. Production and dissemination of information packs, leaflets and other information

- SONAS produced and distributed packs at local level with information on its services, entitlements for asylum seekers, local groups and information on the local area.
- SONAS produced and distributed 5,000 information leaflets on *The Asylum Journey in Ireland*

b. Assisting clients

- The following are the key outcomes for assisting clients as noted during the life of the project through its information systems:
 - During the life of the project SONAS ORWs assisted 1,772 people.
 - Of the 1,772 people assisted 1,194 were people in the asylum process and 578 who were not asylum seekers.
 - Over the two years of the outreach service Dublin had most referrals followed by Limerick, Cork and Wexford.
 - Of the referrals received 54% were from men and 46% from women.
 - 13% of those using the outreach service had arrived in the previous two weeks.
 - The highest distribution was for the period 'two weeks to six months' at 30% (536 referrals) with the remaining arrival periods having distributions of between 10-15%.
 - People from Nigeria made up the majority of referrals at 553 (31%). The next biggest group at 100 (5.6%) were people from Romania. No other group topped 50 referrals, Somalia being the third biggest referral group with exactly 50 referrals (3.4%).
 - Queries and information on the asylum process, consisted of 26% of all referrals, the next highest number of were referrals on language at 8%.
 - There were 589 people in the pre-interview stage referred to the project or 33% of the 1,772 people who availed of the service. The next closest group at 13% were those in the arrival and reception phase.

Action 3: Using outreach workers to assist organisations within host communities to achieve better support services

The ORWs in the three areas outside Dublin played a central role in assisting with the development of support services in their local areas. Significantly, a number of the groups

assisted by the ORWs were groups consisting of asylum seekers established to provide self-assistance

OBJECTIVE 2: ENABLE EFFECTIVE INTERFACE

Action 1: Develop improved relationships with state agencies and local groups

It was anticipated that by developing closer relationships with the various actors at local level SONAS ORWs could make an impact on how asylum seekers were treated by these different groups and the personnel that worked for them.

In practice the approach used by the ORWs in achieving this task took two forms, firstly, by developing and improving general supports through the existing organisations and secondly, by intervening on behalf of individual asylum seekers and their families to resolve particular issues.

Over the life of the project the SONAS ORWs had a total of 321 networking meetings with local support groups and 348 meetings with statutory organisations.

OBJECTIVE 3: ADDRESSING VULNERABILITY

Action 1: Outreach workers to respond to vulnerable client groups

Three groups were identified as vulnerable:

- Unaccompanied minors
 - 39 (2% of all referrals) unaccompanied minors were seen by the ORWs, 20 of the minors were male and 19 were female.
- Ante-natal/post natal women
 - Of the vulnerable groups ante natal/post natal women (women with babies under three months) formed the largest group, with 188 of the former assisted by the ORWs and 77 of the latter. In total this group made up 15% of all referrals.
- People from the Roma community
 - From the Roma population 62 (3.5%) people presented to the outreach service seeking assistance.
- Those who identified themselves as suffering from trauma or psychosocial problems were also given close attention by the ORWs. In this category 310 (17%) people reported either signs of trauma or stress or were availing of psychological services.

OBJECTIVE 4: ESTABLISHING TRANSNATIONAL EXCHANGES RELEVANT TO ALL ACTIONS

Action 1: The DP to develop transnational exchanges of benefit to the work of SONAS

The overall aim of the transnational partnership to which SONAS belonged during the EQUAL programme was to 'improve health, well-being and quality of life of asylum seekers'. ASPIRE! decided from the beginning that the transnational should be more than a forum for exchange of good practice at DP level. Instead, partners agreed to pursue a 'transnational project' – actively working together to formulate policy recommendations which would arise out the partnership's practical experience and learning.

For SONAS the success of the transnational group was of great importance and benefited the project enormously at a number of levels. The exchange of ideas and learning was one important benefit for the project as was the development of common policy documents. Thirdly, the opportunity to pursue common policy objectives with its partners at EU level gave a depth to the work of SONAS which went beyond the national.

OBJECTIVE 5: INFORM POLICY ON MODELS OF GOOD PRACTICE AT NATIONAL AND EUROPEAN LEVELS

Action 1: Develop an outreach training programme suitable for mainstreaming

As part of its commitment to its own staff and to the policy objective to inform models of good practice SONAS established its own training programme, when it found that there was no overall training package available for those working directly with asylum seekers. To ensure that the training it devised was available to staff in mainstream organisations, SONAS successfully sought to have its training programme established on a formal basis within the education system by having it accredited through Mary Immaculate College, Limerick, where it has been approved as a Certificate Course.

Action 2: Produce appropriate advisory materials in a format that could be widely disseminated

SONAS produced and distributed 5,000 information leaflets; *The Asylum Journey in Ireland*. CNC Global, an information leaflet of relevance to asylum seekers and those supporting them, was distributed widely. SONAS developed its own website on which all materials produced by the project are available to the general public.

Action 3: Establish a DP Policy Review Group

This action was fulfilled when the Policy Review Group was established in late 2003. From March 2004 the Policy Review Group, with the assistance of an external policy consultant, examined a number of policy issues which emerged from the work of the SONAS outreach service.

Action 4:

a) Policy development at national level by SONAS

The Policy Review Group identified two different policy areas which were deemed appropriate for SONAS to pursue. These two areas of 'basic rights and direct provision' and 'asylum seekers, social exclusion and poverty' were the subject of work carried out for SONAS by the external policy consultant and resulted in two documents: *A fair deal: Recommendations for improved support services for asylum seekers in Ireland* and *Poverty, social exclusion and asylum seekers: A discussion document*. Based on the findings of the first of these policy documents SONAS has written a formal proposal to improve the services for asylum seekers in a document entitled *Proposal for Improvement in Planning, Coordination and Delivery of Services for Asylum Seekers*.

b) Policy development at transnational level

Three main policy recommendations and accompanying policy briefs were produced by the ASPIRE! transnational partnership. These were:

- Integrating asylum seekers into social inclusion and anti-discrimination initiatives
- Addressing the health needs of asylum seekers and related communities
- Strengthening the NGO sector to address the needs of asylum seekers

It is the view of ASPIRE! that these policy issues have not adequately incorporated into mainstream EU programmes. Representatives of ASPIRE! lobbied interested MEPs, relevant EU Commission staff, the ECRE Brussels Office and the European Catholic Bishops Conference (COMECE) in late May 2005 on these matters.

CHAPTER 4 –PROJECT EFFECTIVENESS AND LEARNING

1. MEETING ITS OBJECTIVES

SONAS believes that it met its five core objectives during the lifetime of the project:

- As can be observed from the statistical information provided in Chapter 3, SONAS provided information and support for asylum seekers in the asylum determination process.
- The very nature of the work of the ORWs placed them between asylum seekers and local communities, process advisors and government representatives. Where possible, SONAS did its utmost to enable asylum seekers interface effectively with the local community, process advisors and government representatives.
- The ORWs did target vulnerable groups within the asylum seeker population and as can be seen in Chapter 3 were especially effective in meeting a significant number of pregnant/post pregnant women.
- The transnational objective was reached, SONAS played an active role in the ASPIRE! Partnership. Working together with partnership organisations from five different countries posed a challenge to all involved, as each partner had its own distinct objectives; there were differences of language and cultural understanding; there existed differing views on the importance of the ASPIRE! Partnership and what it was about. All of these problems were managed, and in no small part facilitated by SONAS, so that a common policy agenda was agreed and pursued.
- Informing policy on models of good practice at national and EU levels has been a strength of SONAS. In Ireland it has engaged with various actors in the policy sphere about its model of outreach work and how to respond to the needs of asylum seekers in direct provision. It has also put on the agenda the important issue of poverty, social exclusion and asylum seekers. At EU level it reached agreement with its transnational partners on a common policy agenda – strengthening the NGO sector as an effective partner, addressing the health needs of asylum seekers and related communities, and integrating asylum seekers into social inclusion and anti-discrimination initiatives – and this was pursued by ASPIRE!

2. WIDER ECONOMIC, SOCIAL AND POLICY CONTEXT OF THE PROJECT

In the wider social and economic context of its work SONAS has identified a number of problems, which need to be addressed if the work of the DP and others who are attempting to meet the needs of asylum seekers are to be more effective. These problems have been identified as follows:

- the level of provision of services by the state and local organisations is inadequate;
- the level of co-ordination of services is poor;
- access to information in a form that can be understood is inadequate;
- the needs of asylum seekers seem to be poorly understood;
- asylum seekers have very little say in anything that affects them or their families

One of the basic aims of the EQUAL initiative is to tackle exclusion, discrimination and inequalities in the labour market. In Ireland asylum seekers are not permitted to work, so SONAS could not directly be effective in this way. However, exclusion, discrimination and inequalities for asylum seekers go beyond the work place and are evident in many policies and practices of the state, as well as through local

organisations and communities. SONAS believes that it has contributed to tackling some of these challenges.

3. OUTREACH SERVICE

SONAS has shown that there is a need for a service to asylum seekers such as the one it provided. It has also shown that the service can be effective and go some way towards meeting the needs of this group. Through its project SONAS provided an example of how a nationally decentralised support service for asylum seekers might work.

4. MAINSTREAMING

Issues arising in relation to the transfer of learning to the mainstream

SONAS is convinced of the usefulness of the outreach approach which it developed and believes that it could be adapted and used by mainstream service providers.

Progress towards mainstreaming

Mainstreaming of the learning from the work of SONAS has been a central concern from the commencement of the project.

a. Improvement in services for asylum seekers

Improvement in planning, coordination and delivery of services for asylum seekers was one of the areas, which from early on in the life of the project, was highlighted as a major problem for asylum seekers. In response to this SONAS sought and were granted meetings with senior members of staff of the Reception and Integration Agency. As a result of its learning from the work of the outreach service, SONAS produced a *Proposal for the Delivery of Services for Improvement in Planning, Coordination and Delivery of Services for Asylum Seekers*, which it is pursuing with relevant actors in this sector.

b. Mainstreaming outreach work through Comhairle

There have been several meetings with the local manager of Comhairle in Cork about the possibilities of mainstreaming the work of SONAS outreach programme in Cork. Comhairle is a statutory agency which provides information to the public through a network of Citizen Information Centres. A pilot project was established in early 2005 through a local Citizens Information Centre, based at an accommodation centre for asylum seekers.

c. Training accreditation

The final area for mainstreaming pursued by SONAS is that of accreditation. Successful discussions have taken place with Mary Immaculate College in Limerick, about the accreditation of the SONAS training programme for people who work directly with asylum seekers. The process of accreditation was completed as the project drew to a close, with the approval of the accreditation of the SONAS Training Programme as a Certificate Course.

CHAPTER 5 – ACTING ON THE LEARNING OF THE PROJECT

There are a number of key concluding points and main lessons which arise from the SONAS project. These will be addressed in turn:

1. SUMMARY OF MAIN CONCLUSIONS

- The most important conclusion of the work carried by SONAS during the lifetime of the project is the need for outreach services to address the information and support needs of asylum seekers.
- SONAS also concludes that recognised and appropriate training is required for those who work directly with asylum seekers.
- Through its work SONAS has shown that there is a problem with the support and information services provided by the state for asylum seekers and that there is much work required to improve these essential aspects of provision for asylum seekers.
- The NGO sector working with asylum seekers needs to be supported financially as well as being accepted as a legitimate partner by the state sector.
- The transnational aspect of the project has been a challenging but important element of EQUAL.
- Due to the Irish government's approach to asylum seekers, they are not allowed to work, it has been very difficult to directly address labour market issues.
- SONAS has proved to be an important element in the understanding the needs of asylum seekers and in developing approaches to working with asylum seekers by the Development Partnership member organisation.

2. LESSONS LEARNED AND IMPLICATIONS FOR DP MEMBER ORGANISATIONS

- For most of the DP members the outreach service was central to the success of the project. This service confirmed what they had already suspected or known in setting up the project, that an outreach service to asylum seekers was a necessary service if their information and support needs were to be met.
- For other DP members SONAS provided them with the opportunity to reflect on what their organisations were doing to assist asylum seekers. This new and direct involvement with asylum seekers offered some DP members an opening to develop services specifically for asylum seekers. Working directly with asylum seekers improved the organisations' understanding of this group's needs. As a result new and more targeted initiatives have been established by some of the DP member organisations.
- A further learning for the DP was the challenge of mainstreaming. It took a significant period of time before the project was in a position to promote the notion of mainstreaming. This was mainly because the initial focus of the project was on implementation and outreach worker activities.
- The transnational component of the project provided learning for the DP member organisations. It allowed for comparison between the different asylum regimes in the partnership countries, and in particular the comparison between the different approaches to information provision used in each country.
- Setting up an organisation from scratch with a number of other organisations also provided learning for the DP members. It took DP members time to get to know each other and the needs of the constituent organisations in relation to the project. It took time to adjust expectations of what the project could achieve during its relatively short life-span. SONAS also took a lot of the DP members' own time from their parent organisations and this added to the challenge. However, the learning for the individual DP members and their organisations plus the satisfaction of providing a good quality service greatly outweighed the challenges encountered along the way.

3. SUGGESTED LESSONS FOR GOVERNMENT DEPARTMENTS

- SONAS worked with a number of government departments and agencies and believes that it developed good working relationships with all of the agencies of state with which it had contact. The work of the project has shown that there is a sizeable gap in information provision for asylum seekers by the state, who has the primary responsibility in this area.
- SONAS also believes that the provision of financial support for NGOs working with asylum seekers is inadequate. To ensure that asylum seekers are not excluded from the communities in which they live more resources are required by local NGOs in the voluntary and community sectors. To date this does not appear to be a priority for the state and its agencies.
- There is a deficit in the training for those who work directly with asylum seekers. SONAS would hope that the government and its relevant departments would ensure that appropriate training is provided for all of those who work with asylum seekers in the state sector and in reception and accommodation centres.

4. POSSIBLE LESSONS AND IMPLICATIONS FOR NATIONAL AND EU INSTITUTIONS

- At national level the impact of the EQUAL funded programme is limited in relation to asylum seekers as the Irish government does not allow asylum seekers to work. As a result, the benefits which other Irish EQUAL projects enjoyed around mainstreaming and thematic groups, SONAS did not. It was very isolated in this regard. For the future it is important that greater efforts are made at national level to ensure that all projects are in a position to avail of and to benefit from the various elements of EU funded programmes.
- SONAS and its transnational partners are very concerned that the DG Employment has justified the decline of Community initiatives for asylum seekers on the grounds that it has completely incorporated their opportunities for support in the mainstream of the European Social Fund. SONAS does not agree with this stance and believes that as a result of its experience during the life of the project in Ireland that there is much scope for special initiatives for supporting asylum seekers.

5. IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICY AND PRACTICE RELATED TO COMBATING EXCLUSION, DISCRIMINATION AND INEQUALITY IN THE LABOUR MARKET

- Ireland has not adopted the EU's directive on minimum standards on the reception of asylum seekers, mainly because it requires that member states party to the directive allow asylum seekers to work after twelve months. As a result SONAS was not in a position to support asylum seekers in the area of exclusion, discrimination and inequality in the labour market. However, through the practice of outreach work and its development of policies related to this work SONAS has focused on combating exclusion, discrimination and inequality against asylum seekers in Irish society.
- The key learning for practice from the SONAS experience is that there is a need to ensure that the state provides appropriate supports to both state and NGOs to ensure that asylum seekers are not excluded, discriminated against and treated unequally in Irish society. The day-to-day work of SONAS has shown that asylum seekers experience social exclusion, discrimination and inequality in Ireland. From a policy perspective SONAS has outlined in its policy discussion document on poverty, social exclusion and asylum seekers, that there is the possibility of making the argument that the state's policies are contradictory when it comes to issues of social exclusion. SONAS hopes that into the future the state and the social partners would review these policies to ensure that they do not lead to the discrimination and social exclusion of asylum seekers.

CHAPTER 1 – THE PROJECT

INTRODUCTION

Since 1997 there has been an unprecedented increase in the numbers of people seeking asylum in Ireland. Irish society at all levels was unprepared for this challenge and organisations working with asylum seekers during this period found themselves stretched to the limit.

It was at the height of the annual increases in applications for asylum that the Support Organisation for the Needs of Asylum Seekers in Ireland (SONAS) was founded under the European Union funded EQUAL Community Initiative. SONAS consists of a number of established organisations that are concerned about the situation of asylum seekers in Ireland.

From the outset SONAS responded to the needs of asylum seekers by working with them at all stages of the asylum process and also by working to improve their quality of life in Ireland. This was achieved at local level by four ORWs who were based in four different geographical locations around Ireland. These ORWs provided direct support to asylum seekers. Their direct work with asylum seekers informed a broader policy programme in which SONAS has worked to influence public policy on asylum seekers.

MAIN AIM AND OBJECTIVES

SONAS identified its aim as:

To improve the quality of life for particular and identifiable groups of asylum seekers at identifiable phases of the asylum determination process and in so doing to contribute to the development of best humanitarian practice

This aim was broken down into five objectives:

1. To provide information and support for asylum seekers regarding the asylum determination process and in particular to focus on:
 - ❑ the process immediately after arrival / reception,
 - ❑ provision of information regarding rights and entitlements,
 - ❑ provision of information regarding existing support networks
 - ❑ understanding the country and location of immigration.
2. To enable asylum seekers interface effectively with:
 - ❑ the local community
 - ❑ process advisors
 - ❑ government representatives
3. To address identified psychosocial and cultural needs of the most vulnerable groups of asylum seekers with a view to improving their readiness and adaptability for the outcome of the asylum determination process.
4. To establish transnational exchanges of relevance to all actions.
5. To inform policy on models of good practice at national and European level.

DESCRIPTION OF SONAS ACTIONS

In order to achieve its aims and objectives SONAS undertook actions in three main areas which were set out in its action plan as follows:

1. TRAINING PROGRAMME FOR PROVIDERS OF SERVICES TO ASYLUM SEEKERS

SONAS designed, implemented and evaluated a training programme that prepared project staff to deliver an outreach service to asylum seekers. Work on accrediting this programme was begun during the life of the project and continues at the close of the EQUAL funding period with the aim of mainstreaming this training in order that it can be used by others who work directly with asylum seekers.

2. OUTREACH SERVICE

SONAS recruited and trained staff to undertake an outreach and accompaniment service in four locations around Ireland. The ORWs responded to the expressed needs of those they worked with on a daily basis (within the financial capacity of the project – other funding sources were sought and utilized when possible). They assisted in sourcing funding programmes, for example, for training needs identified by asylum seekers in their local area. ORWs also provided information on existing support networks, on Ireland and the local areas in which asylum seekers lived. In the absence of existing support networks, the local host organisation (in which the ORWs were based), assisted, where possible, in establishing a network/support structure for asylum seekers.

SONAS conducted ongoing assessments of the needs of asylum seekers and designed and produced resource materials appropriate to their needs. The organisation also provided support for the ORWs in their direct work with asylum seekers. SONAS showed flexibility in its work and adapted the service in response to the changing needs of asylum seekers in each area

3. INFLUENCING POLICY DEVELOPMENT

From the outset SONAS planned to influence policy at a number of levels. It established a DP Policy Review Sub-Committee. This committee included three asylum seeker representatives. SONAS also developed and maintained good working relationships with relevant agencies and service providers. A programme of liaison with these groups was implemented with the aim of informing the quality of service provided.

SONAS engaged effectively at transnational level to complement the national policy development strategy, by pursuing policies at European level which were based on practical learning experiences by ASPIRE! Transnational partners. SONAS has published and distributed all of the resource materials produced by the project. There was an ongoing programme of policy development driven by the DP Board, and in particular by the DP member with responsibility for Information and Dissemination. Even at the close of the EQUAL funded period of the project this policy commitment continues. Over the final months of the project the DP members devised a proposal for the improvement in planning, coordination and delivery of services for asylum seekers through the establishment of an expert working group. This proposal is being pursued by members of the DP with relevant statutory and voluntary bodies.

POLICY CONTEXT AND RELEVANCE OF PROJECT

The increased numbers of asylum seekers entering the state posed enormous challenges to all involved in providing support services (see Table 1). The response of the Irish Government to develop a system of dispersal and direct provision in 2000 added a new dimension to this challenge. Asylum seekers were being located to all parts of the country often without relevant supports at local level. The more open

model of welfare provision available to asylum seekers in Ireland, up to the point of the introduction of direct provision, was replaced by a more streamlined and controlling method of welfare support. Subsequent measures, such as removing the right to rent supplement in the private rented housing sector and removing child benefit, added to the increasing restrictive nature of welfare provision for asylum seekers.

Table 1 Applications for asylum 1994-2004 (Source ORAC)

| Year | 1997 | 1998 | 1999 | 2000 | 2001 | 2002 | 2003 | 2004 |
|--------|-------|-------|-------|--------|--------|--------|-------|-------|
| Number | 3,883 | 4,626 | 7,724 | 10,928 | 10,325 | 11,634 | 7,800 | 4,766 |

Although through the period of the SONAS project the number of people making application for asylum decreased it became evident to the ORWs in their work that central to the lives of asylum seekers was their experience of direct provision. SONAS identified this as a priority area for informing more appropriate and responsive policies. Through direct provision people who are in the asylum process are allocated to an accommodation centre after a short stay in a reception centre in the Dublin area. The accommodation centres are dispersed throughout all twenty six counties in the state. Basic needs of asylum seekers are provided for in these centres through accommodation and full-board. The residents of the centres receive an amount of €19.10 for adults and €9.60 for each child per week. The centres provide all meals and in most centres residents are not permitted to cook for themselves. Asylum seekers must reside in these centres for the duration of the processing of their claim for asylum.

Through the work of its ORWs, SONAS became aware of a variety of practices within accommodation centres. The restrictive nature of direct provision in addition to a number of other factors including no access to work or mainstream education or training provision and the actual process of claiming asylum and the length of time this process can take, has the potential to generate problems which can have a negative impact on the quality of life for asylum seekers.

In response to issues identified, SONAS assessed in more detail, the needs of asylum seekers staying in accommodation centres. This work was undertaken with the support of the Reception and Integration Agency, in the summer of 2004. (The full report can be seen in Appendix 5) This work led the DP to develop its proposal on setting up an expert working group to look at greater co-ordination and delivery of services and supports for asylum seekers.

RATIONALE FOR THE PROJECT

Asylum seekers face very specific difficulties when they enter the country due in large part to the fact that they immediately enter a legal process that they are often ill-equipped to deal with. Due to limited provision legal advice is only available to some asylum seekers. In addition, other supports are largely absent such as social supports or psychological and medical supports for victims of violence and torture. Other difficulties in relation to adapting to a new social and cultural environment are evident and there has also been a lack of inter cultural experience within host communities in Ireland.

Against this backdrop, the project sought to put in place a series of locally delivered, nationally co-ordinated interventions. These interventions provided a range of support for asylum seekers at key stages in the process. This service, provided by ORWs, and supported by a national co-ordinator; a national administrator and the DP Board, was different in nature from other services in Ireland. It thus served as a “pilot” project. Ultimately the aspiration of the DP was to have a service of this nature for asylum seekers mainstreamed.

ADDRESSING THE SIX KEY PRINCIPLES OF EQUAL

1. PARTNERSHIP

SONAS was set up as a Development Partnership made up of seven organisations that came together to jointly define the aims and objectives of the project. These organisations were:

- Cork City Partnership
- FAS
- Partas, Dublin
- PAUL Partnership Limerick
- SPIRASI, Dublin
- Vincentian Refugee Centre, Dublin
- Wexford Area Partnership

All members of the SONAS DP worked closely together to ensure the effective implementation of the project's aims and objectives.

2. TRANSNATIONALITY

SONAS established links with transnational partners in Germany (two projects), the Netherlands, Sweden (two projects), Portugal and the Czech Republic (an EU applicant state at the commencement of the partnership) to form a partnership called 'Asylum Seeker Participation is the Result' (ASPIRE!). SONAS played an active role in this European transnational co-operation partnership. During SONAS' period as secretariat) ASPIRE! commissioned Nexus Research Co-operative (Irish based consultants) to facilitate the transnational partners in formulating policy recommendations based on practical lessons learnt through the implementation of each of the equal funded projects). The ASPIRE! partnership developed and published a policy document and three policy briefs: addressing the health needs of asylum seekers and related communities; integrating asylum seekers into social inclusion and anti-discrimination initiatives; and, strengthening the NGO sector to address the needs of asylum seekers (the policy document and all three of these policy briefs are available in Appendix 3).

3. INNOVATION

Innovation can be seen through the SONAS approach to service provision. The ORWs provided face-to-face support to asylum seekers in a structured fashion. Moreover, the fact that the organisations that make up SONAS were in different national locations but yet were committed to collaborating in a constructive way in driving the project, was also innovative. Practice in relation to asylum seekers was perceived to be very centralised and the project sought to provide an innovative alternative to this approach. The development of a training programme for service providers was also innovative in that no other such training programme developed with the needs of both asylum seekers and service providers, exists in Ireland.

4. EMPOWERMENT/PARTICIPATION

SONAS used the 'facilitated' approach to empowerment where the excluded individual or group were facilitated or helped to develop and use power for themselves through inclusive empowerment strategies. Asylum seekers were supported to participate in the Policy Review Sub-Committee through positive measures such as transport and childcare subsidies. The approach to assessing the needs of asylum seekers in direct provision was carried out in a way which sought to be empowering. This was done in two ways, one, by inviting a range of people from various centres to participate. The second was through the qualitative approach of open ended questions used to seek information,

which allowed the participants set the agenda on the issues of concern to them and not the issues as perceived by others (see Appendix 5).

The establishment by the project of local networks in some areas also helped facilitate the empowerment of asylum seekers through their active participation in such networks.

5. THEMATIC APPROACH

SONAS was the only EQUAL DP in Ireland working directly with asylum seekers. As a result the thematic work of the project took place at transnational partnership and EU thematic group level.

6. DISSEMINATION/MAINSTREAMING

SONAS was the only project funded under the EQUAL programme in Ireland, which focused on asylum seekers. The project availed of the potential to inform and influence policy, at national and EU level, by the opportunity presented through the EQUAL programme. This allowed for the testing out a new approach in overcoming barriers faced by asylum seekers during the asylum seeking process in Ireland. SONAS ORWs identified needs at local level on an ongoing basis throughout duration of their work with the project. The information they received was used to influence policy with mainstreaming intent.

A number of opportunities were used by SONAS to disseminate information and to further its mainstreaming agenda. Examples of dissemination are:

- Croke Park/Hilton Hotel Dublin 11 & 25 March 2004. This was a Mainstreaming Event in which all 21 Round 1 EQUAL projects met to present the work of their projects to key policy makers. SONAS presented under the thematic group 'providing more and better investment in human capital/lifelong learning', and made the case for asylum seekers, pointing out that policies towards asylum seekers in Ireland do not provide lifelong learning opportunities.
- Helix, Dublin City University 6/7 May 2004. This was a showcasing event in which SONAS and 20 other EQUAL projects participated. The event focused on the learning, good practices and evidence based approaches, which were thought could be proposed for mainstreaming from EQUAL Round One. SONAS was actively involved in this event - a member of the DP addressed the event as a key note speaker, one of the staff and an asylum seeker provided a short video input.
- The information leaflet on the asylum process produced by SONAS.
- The training manual developed by SONAS.
- SONAS website
- EU conference 31st March and 1st and 2nd April, Croke Park, Dublin, dissemination and showcasing event. SONAS was part of a panel of speakers and disseminated information through a SONAS showcasing stand and disseminated the European policy document through an ASPIRE showcasing stand. SONAS also participated as part of a question and answer session with new member states on their experience as a European partner in and EQUAL funded project.

- EU conference in Sweden 7th and 8th April 2005 to discuss policy recommendations emerging through the ASPIRE! Project
- Lobbying week in Brussels May 23rd to 25th with members of the EU parliament and other sub structures

Mainstreaming opportunities have arisen in a number of different ways:

- Through the engagement with other agencies on the establishment of an expert group on the proposal for improved planning, coordination and delivery of services for asylum seekers
- Through the accreditation of the SONAS training course for those who work with asylum seekers
- Through the engagement with Comhairle in the Cork area in piloting an outreach service with a view to mainstreaming the activity
- Two of the ORWs on completing their work with SONAS were appointed in similar roles in Cork and the North-East by mainstream agencies

The DP has always believed that the approach tested during the project life cycle could play a central role in strengthening existing approaches to working with asylum seekers. This would be done by identifying a new strategy that seeks to assist asylum seekers at key and identifiable stages in the asylum seeking process. Existing policy and ways of working with asylum seekers in Ireland has achieved a measure of success but there exists much scope to improve and develop new policy and practice.

CHAPTER 2 – PROJECT IMPLEMENTATION

INTRODUCTION

During 2002, the DP management developed a coherent framework to ensure the success of SONAS. As described in the SONAS 2002 Annual Report it 'was a challenging year for all involved, demanding more work, commitment, flexibility and courage than anyone anticipated'. This hard work paid off as SONAS laid a strong foundation for its work by achieving a number of important goals:

- developing a coherent and hard-working management partnership
- contracting Partas to carry out the day to day management of the project
- establishing its outreach services in five locations
- designing a unique training programme for its ORWs
- establishing its transnational partnership

The achievement of these goals ensured that the project was well-managed and had in place excellent staff as ORWs who were well-trained. At transnational level establishing an effective partnership with seven different groups from six EU states was also an important early achievement.

In this chapter the manner in which the project was implemented during 2004 will be outlined under the following headings:

- DP management
- Staffing
- Outreach work
- Policy work
- Training development
- Thematic work
- Transnational work
- Meeting the objectives of SONAS
- Actions taken to secure the six principles of EQUAL

DP MANAGEMENT

A characteristic of the SONAS DP was (and continues to be) the commitment to the project by its partner organisations and, in particular by the individuals who have been nominated to represent these organisations. Their individual commitment, which required a lot of time and energy through the duration of the project added enormously to the solidity and coherence of the management group. As well as attending DP meetings, the DP member representatives participated in a range of other meetings during the life of the project. These meetings ranged from meetings with staff to meetings of committees, transnational meetings and meetings with external agencies.

Through the life of the project empowerment of its membership was a priority for the DP. This was demonstrated through its inclusive methods of rotating the chair and vice-chair on a six-monthly basis and by rotating the venues for meetings. Empowerment and participation was further enhanced through the commitment to discuss all issues within the DP team even though individuals had certain responsibilities for specific elements of the management of the project. Not only were these methods of working important for the active involvement of DP members, it also ensured that the project was well managed through appropriate planning and monitoring on a regular basis.

The DP membership was as follows:

- Fiona English (Wexford Area Partnership)
Responsibility for the transnational work of the project
- Fr Gregory Iwuozor (SPIRASI) Replaced by Lisa Mauro Bracken
Responsibility for liaison with asylum seekers
- John Kearns (Partas)
General/Company Secretary. Responsibility for the day to day running of the project.
- Fr Brian Moore (Vincentian Refugee Centre)
Responsibility for information, dissemination and mainstreaming.
- Aisling NíChuinn (FÁS)
Responsibility for human resources
- Mary Sheehy (Cork City Partnership)
Responsibility for training for the ORWs and the DP members.
- Claire Walsh (PAUL Partnership) Replaced by John Buttery
Responsibility for finances

STAFFING

The staff of SONAS included a National Coordinator, Noreen Keegan Kavanagh, National Administrator Miriam Collins who were based in Bolbrook Enterprise Centre in Tallaght, Dublin 24 and four ORWs. The ORWs Egidie Dhala was based in SPIRASI in Dublin, Ciaran Casey in Paul Partnership, Limerick, Donncha Foley in the Wexford Area Partnership, and Sorina Selaru in the Cork City Partnership. A fifth outreach worker, Muriel Okafor, left SONAS in July 2003 and was not replaced; she had been based at the Partas office in Tallaght, Dublin. The other ORWs remained in post until within a short time of the ending of their fixed term contract – Egidie Dhala and Donncha Foley ceased employment on 17 September 2004, Ciaran Casey on 19 November 2004 and Sorina Selaru on 30 November 2004. The National Coordinator and Administrator completed their work with SONAS on 31st March 2005.

The National Coordinator was responsible on a day-to-day basis for the project, assisted by the Administrator. The ORWs work from their own base and receive support from the National Coordinator and from the local DP member. The support given to the ORWs from the DP members was important for both the worker and DP members who provided support. It helped them to remain in touch with the work of the ORWs and it gave them a deeper understanding of the issues that emerged on a daily basis.

The ORWs submitted a detailed monthly work report to the Coordinator. These reports were collated to provide management information for the DP members as well as providing the raw material for the EQUAL Quarterly Monitoring Forms. The ORWs and the National Coordinator held monthly team meetings. These meetings moved between the different locations where the ORWs were based. The National Coordinator held individual monthly supervision meetings with each outreach worker in their place of employment. This support was vital for the ORWs to help them to deal with the heavy demands of their day-to-day work.

OUTREACH WORK

In order to meet the objective of information provision and support the ORWs made themselves available to asylum seekers in a range of locations including reception centres, accommodation centres, host organisations and external organisations. This approach by the ORWs was innovative in the Irish context, where outreach work with asylum seekers has never been systematically carried out in this way. The flexibility of the approach taken by the ORWs was a feature of the SONAS project, which sets it apart from other support agencies.

As well as outreach work, a second key element of the ORWs daily work was their networking with other providers of services. They used every opportunity to build on their contacts with individuals, groups and agencies. Referrals were made by the ORWs to statutory and NGOs and vice versa. In some instances the ORWs helped to develop new support groups and new initiatives at local level. The policy agenda developed by the DP through the course of the project was informed by the face-to-face contact of the ORWs with asylum seekers.

POLICY WORK

To assist with the development of its policy the SONAS DP established a Policy Review Sub-Committee, with a membership of two DP members, the National Coordinator, two ORWs, three asylum seekers and a consultant policy advisor, who was appointed in February 2004. This Sub-Committee oversaw the development of the policy agenda on behalf of the DP.

Policy work took place at two levels, nationally and transnationally. In this section the national policy work will be briefly outlined. It was always intended that the policy work of SONAS would be driven by its direct contacts with asylum seekers. The development of these contacts took time as the ORWs settled into their work and key issues emerged. However, a number of important issues did emerge based around the general theme of delivery of services to asylum seekers.

It became evident from the daily work of the ORWs that the system of direct provision was central to the theme of delivery of services to asylum seekers. This led the DP to the decision to investigate the experiences of asylum seekers in direct provision. SONAS produced a report on these experiences which highlighted common concerns amongst asylum seekers, such as the management of accommodation centres, information and support services, and isolation.

The response of the DP to the policy work carried out on the experiences of asylum seekers in direct provision has led to the proposal for improvement in planning, coordination and delivery of services for asylum seekers in Ireland, which is to be pursued by the establishment of an expert group led by SONAS. This work is ongoing at the end of the EQUAL funded phase of the project.

In the second half of the life of the project a process of engagement with other agencies was begun in order to examine how the work of SONAS DP might be used to influence policy at national and local level. This was pursued through two main avenues:

- To use the experience gained from the implementation of the outreach worker programme to highlight general improvements that could be made in the provision of services to asylum seekers.
- To promote the model of best practice in information giving developed by the project so that it might be used by mainstream agencies.

Engagement took place with a number of agencies to encourage the development of these ideas. The agencies engaged with were the Reception and Integration Agency, Comhairle and the local Health Boards in the project areas.

TRAINING

The staff of Sonas engaged in training throughout their two years with the project, 2002 – 2004. The training covered a range of training needs that had been identified as necessary by the DP and the staff. The organic growth of the training developed by the responsible DP member has formed the basis of the training for which accreditation has been achieved. The content of the training programme meets the requirements of those who work directly with asylum seekers and is grounded in practical experience. These training units were identified by the staff as most important to enhance the quality of their work (see Table 2 for a general outline of the training modules and see Appendix 1 for a detailed description of the training provided).

The Vincentian Refugee Centre co-ordinated the Induction Training at the beginning of the project. Organisations with specialist knowledge or training expertise were asked to deliver different elements of the training. The National Consultative Committee on Racism and Interculturalism (NCCRI) delivered the training session on anti-racism awareness. In the group work module, Meitheal, a Dublin based group, delivered the training session on presentation skills and report writing. Community Action Network (CAN) delivered the remainder of the group work module.

Table 2 Outline of training delivered to outreach workers

| Module | Units of learning |
|---------------------------------|--|
| Supporting asylum seekers | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> The asylum process <input type="checkbox"/> Introduction to some NGOs supporting asylum seekers in Ireland <input type="checkbox"/> Children and the asylum process |
| Cultural awareness | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Anti-racism awareness <input type="checkbox"/> Developing cultural awareness <input type="checkbox"/> Garda Racism & Inter-cultural Office |
| Group work | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Introduction of group dynamics <input type="checkbox"/> Conflict management <input type="checkbox"/> Presentation skills <input type="checkbox"/> Report writing <input type="checkbox"/> Facilitation skills |
| Supports/boundaries for workers | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Time management <input type="checkbox"/> Supervision/personal boundaries |

The training programme that has been developed by SONAS is ideal for organisations that have staff and volunteers working with asylum seekers. The programme provides best practice guidelines on training for

staff as recommended by SONAS. Negotiations took place between Mary Immaculate College, Limerick and members of Sonas DP Ireland about accrediting the Sonas training programme. A proposal was submitted to Mary Immaculate College and was successful in obtaining accreditation for the training as a Certificate Course in May 2005.

THEMATIC WORK

SONAS was the only DP project in Ireland which worked with asylum seekers in this round of EQUAL. Therefore the project's participation in thematic work was at transnational and ETG5 level. The involvement of SONAS in thematic work was highlighted in 2004 when a DP member represented the Department of Enterprise, Trade & Employment in a small group which met in Brussels to examine learning from partnership development in EQUAL. The group completed their research and a final report was published which makes recommendations on developing partnerships for EQUAL round two.

SONAS, as part of the ETG5 Group, participated in the International Conference held in Dublin in early April 2004. There was much work involved in the preparation of a conference of this nature and SONAS played an active role in this. The Sonas DP member with responsibility for training represented Sonas DP Ireland Ltd at the ETG event in Dublin and participated in the workshop on capacity building. In this workshop the Sonas training programme was presented as a model of best practice under this theme. This event provided an opportunity to learn good practice models regarding training from DP's in other European countries.

This thematic group played a role in the identification and dissemination of good practice and policy lessons that were of help to the integration of asylum seekers. The lessons from these EQUAL activities were used to promote horizontal mainstreaming (sharing good practice between geographic, sectoral or political contexts) and vertical mainstreaming (informing policy developments within the EU). The three priority areas for the work of the ETG were:

- Education, training and advice (covering issues related to training for integration and reintegration, language and cultural training and motivation)
- Employment (including employer relations and working conditions, recognition of the skills and qualifications of asylum seekers)
- Capacity building (including the interface with the local community, influencing systems of 'service providers', and empowerment)

In order to achieve its aims, the ETG5 developed a work programme that included:

- The organisation of practical events for practitioners.
- Larger events to show-case the good practices within the theme to influence policy-makers, such as the major Conference held in Croke Park, Dublin in March/April 2004, at the suggestion of SONAS.
- The creation of Working Groups to develop some of the priority areas, such as 'advice, education and training'.
- Research and other dissemination activities.

TRANSNATIONAL WORK

From the outset SONAS was committed to transnational cooperation with its partners in the ASPIRE! partnership. ASPIRE! had as its members development partnerships from each of the following five EU countries – Germany, Netherlands, Portugal, Ireland and Sweden, and the EU applicant country, the Czech Republic. The overall aim of the partnership was to ‘improve, health, well-being and quality of life of asylum seekers’. The partnership attached central importance to exploiting the potential for sharing experience, ideas and possible solutions in pursuit of its aim (see the Executive Summary of the ASPIRE! Final Report in Appendix 2). The objectives ASPIRE! set for itself were as follows:

- To improve health, well-being and quality of life of asylum-seekers by working together for
 - the improvement of services and service delivery
 - the promotion of and active encouragement of cross-cultural understanding
 - positive influence on both national and European policies and legislation

- To develop structures and procedures for mutual exchange, learning and transfer of expertise, methodologies, approaches and results, achieved by working together towards:
 - the sharing and joint analysis of outcomes and results being achieved;
 - a greater collective understanding of the reasons for successful and less successful results;
 - the production of tools and methodologies – arising out of this understanding;
 - evaluation of the trans-national project and its activities;

- To influence both national and European asylum policy through:
 - the translation of learning from the outcomes of activities, at national and European levels, into policy recommendations - aimed at those with decision-making capacity in the asylum seeking field.
 - the collection and dissemination of best practice.

In late May 2005, as the project drew to a close, representatives from ASPIRE! engaged in lobbying activities in Brussels.

MEETING THE OBJECTIVES OF SONAS

In Table 3 the objectives of SONAS and how they were realised during the life of the project are outlined.

Table 3 Objectives of SONAS

| | |
|--|--|
| <p>1. To provide information and support for asylum seekers regarding the asylum determination process</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ❑ Established an outreach service in four locations around the country ❑ Provision of information, by ORW regarding rights and entitlements ❑ Information provided by ORW on existing support networks ❑ In the absence of existing support networks, local host organisation, where possible, assisted in establishing network/support structure ❑ identified flexible ways of providing information on the country and location of immigration |
|--|--|

| | |
|--|--|
| <p>2. To enable asylum seekers to interface effectively with local community; process advisors; government representatives</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ❑ Developed and maintained relationships with relevant agencies/service providers ❑ Monitored the progress of the ORWs in dealing with asylum seekers ❑ A programme for liaison with relevant agencies and providers to improve quality of service |
| <p>3. To address identified psychosocial and cultural needs of the most vulnerable groups of asylum seekers, with a view to improving their readiness and adaptability for the outcome of the asylum determination process</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ❑ ORWs responded to the common expressed needs of those they come in contact with (within the financial capability of the project) ❑ Adapted the service to the possibly changing needs of asylum seekers in each area ❑ Assisted in sourcing funding programmes, e.g. for training needs identified by asylum seekers in the local area |
| <p>4. To establish transnational exchanges of relevance to all actions</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ❑ A mutual exchange, learning and transfer of expertise, methods, approaches and results |
| <p>5. To inform policy on models of good practice at national and European level</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ❑ Designed a training programme which prepared project staff to deliver this service. Implemented and evaluated the training programme, for mainstreaming purposes ❑ Ongoing assessment of the needs of asylum seekers. ❑ Designed resource materials appropriate to the needs of asylum seekers ❑ Worked efficiently at transnational level ❑ Liaised with relevant agencies ❑ Established a DP Policy Review committee ❑ Published and distributed the resource materials produced by the project ❑ Ongoing programme of policy development, co-co-ordinated by the National Coordinator, driven by the DP board, and in particular by DP member with responsibility for Information and Dissemination (document project learning/evaluation) |

ACTIONS TAKEN TO FULFIL THE SIX PRINCIPLES OF EQUAL

There are six principles under which the EQUAL programme operates and all projects funded under this programme are required to fulfil these principles. These principles are: partnership, transnationality, innovation, empowerment/participation, thematic approach and dissemination/mainstreaming. SONAS has met these principles as follows:

1. PARTNERSHIP

The DP has maintained the partnership, which was developed early in the project. All DP organisations remained committed to the project throughout the life of the project, with a minimum change of personnel. SONAS developed a structure to ensure that all participating organisations played a significant role in implementing the project.

2. TRANSNATIONALITY

Throughout its period of membership of the transnational partnership SONAS has shown its commitment to transnationality by actively participating in all aspects of the ASPIRE! partnership. It has participated in transnational meetings, played a leading role in the initiation and co-ordination of EU policy development. It also took responsibility with the Portuguese Refugee Council for the Working Group on Capacity Building and Orientation. SONAS held the secretariat of ASPIRE between November 2003 and April 2004 which involved the General Assembly meeting in Ireland (Wexford) and close co-ordination with the EU conference held in Dublin. Finally, SONAS actively involved itself in lobbying with other partners in Brussels.

3. INNOVATION

There are three key innovative features to the SONAS project; its national base (apart from the agencies under the Department of Justice, Equality and Law Reform that deal with the issue of asylum and asylum supports no other organisation or agency has set out to provide a direct service to asylum seekers that goes beyond its immediate geographical area or region); its outreach work and its training for frontline workers.

4. EMPOWERMENT/PARTICIPATION

Empowerment and participation took place at a number of different levels in the SONAS project: at DP board level, at staff level, and at policy level. Structures were put in place to ensure that all DP members were provided with the opportunity to participate fully at management level through rotating chair and vice-chair, through specific areas of responsibility, through collective decision making and through moving the location of meetings around the country to different partner organisations. Similarly with staff, structures were in place to ensure that they were empowered to participate fully in SONAS' operations through training, support, policy inputs, and reporting systems. The experiences of asylum seekers were presented at staff and at policy level (two of the ORWs had been through the asylum process and there were three asylum seekers on the policy committee). There was also ongoing evaluation of the work of the project carried out by external consultants who, on a monthly basis, received feedback through questionnaires from the various participants in the project.

5. THEMATIC APPROACH

SONAS was the only EQUAL DP in Ireland in the asylum seeker thematic strand, ETG5. As a result it has had to develop its thematic work at transnational level and through ETG5. SONAS' commitment to this work was evident by its provision of secretariat support for ETG5 and by hosting, in March/April 2004, a European thematic conference in Dublin.

6. MAINSTREAMING AND DISSEMINATION

Through the life of the DP project SONAS worked hard at mainstreaming and dissemination. At DP member and staff levels much effort has gone into informing other agencies of the work of the project. SONAS has had formal and informal meetings with a wide range of groups and service providers for asylum seekers throughout the life of the project. It has produced and distributed leaflets, established a web site, and received substantial media coverage for the launch of its Annual Report 2002. SONAS'

meetings with the Reception and Integration Agency were an important step in mainstreaming, as were meetings with Comhairle and local Health Boards.

In Chapter 3 this report will turn to the achievements and impact of SONAS between 2002 and 2005.

CHAPTER 3 – PROJECT ACHIEVEMENT AND IMPACT

MEETING OBJECTIVES AND ACTION TARGETS

The overall aim of the SONAS project as agreed by the constituent partners is:

‘To improve the quality of life for particular and identifiable groups of asylum seekers at identifiable phases of the asylum determination process and in so doing to contribute to the development of best humanitarian practice’

This aim is addressed by five objectives. These are to:

1. Provide information and support for asylum seekers regarding the asylum determination process and in particular to focus on;
 - a) the process immediately after arrival/reception
 - b) the provision of information regarding rights and entitlements
 - c) the provision of information regarding existing support networks
 - d) understanding of the country and location of immigration
2. Enable asylum seekers to interface effectively with:
 - a) the local community
 - b) process advisors
 - c) government representatives
3. Address the psychosocial and cultural needs of the most vulnerable groups of asylum seekers with a view to improving their readiness and adaptability for the outcome of the asylum determination process.
4. Establish transnational exchanges of relevance to all actions.
5. Inform policy on models of good practice at national and European level.

OBJECTIVE 1: INFORMATION AND SUPPORT

Action 1 -Establish an outreach work service appropriate to the needs of asylum seekers

Performance Outcome of Action 1

To achieve Action 1 SONAS established a network of five outreach offices at various locations:

- Dublin (two offices)*
- Cork
- Limerick
- Wexford

* Note: In June 2003, the outreach worker in Dublin South left SONAS and was not replaced. From this point on the remaining outreach worker in Dublin provided the outreach service on his own.

Action 2 - Using outreach workers to improve information dissemination to asylum seekers

The ORWs were required to undertake the following tasks:

- Respond directly to enquiries coming from asylum seekers in their geographic areas.
- Refer the more specialised enquiries to other information and service providers within existing local support networks.
- Ensure that information was presented in a suitable and appropriate format.
- Seek flexible and effective ways of contacting the client community to disseminate the necessary information and make the necessary referrals.

Performance Outcome of Action 2

The ORWs responded to this task in a number of different ways:

a. Production and dissemination of information packs, leaflets and other information The ORWs produced and disseminated information packs containing the following information:

- The resources available from the SONAS network.
- Advice on improved approaches to handling the various phases of the asylum determination process.
- The asylum seekers' rights and entitlements.
- Listings and location details of the resources available from various members within the support networks
- General background information on the local districts where the asylum seekers were residing.

The information packs were made available in the SONAS outreach offices and were also distributed in face-to-face contacts between the local ORWs and their clients.

SONAS produced and distributed 5,000 information leaflets on *The Asylum Journey in Ireland* to reception centres, accommodation centres and other information giving outlets in the areas in which the outreach service was provided.

b. Assisting clients

During the life of the project SONAS ORWs assisted 1,772 people, broken down as follows over the three years in Table 4.

Table 4 Number of people assisted by SONAS 2002-2004

| Year | Number of people assisted |
|--------------|---------------------------|
| 2002 | 25 |
| 2003 | 1,213 |
| 2004 | 534 |
| Total | 1,772 |

It is important to point out that the project outreach service had only commenced eight days before the Christmas/New Year holiday period at the end of 2002. Furthermore, two ORWs had left SONAS to take up new posts by the end of the third quarter in 2004. The remaining two ORWs completed their contracts at the end of November 2004.

Of the 1,772 people assisted 1,194 were people in the asylum process and 578 who were not asylum seekers. Table 5 gives a breakdown of those who sought assistance from SONAS but

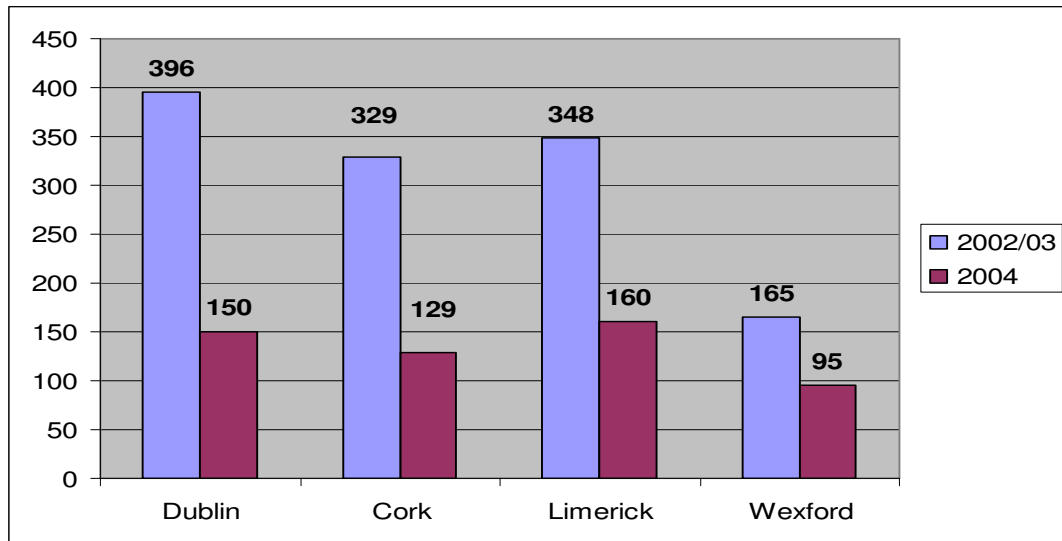
were not in the asylum process; the people who were not asylum seekers fell into a number of different categories, those with refugees status, those seeking leave to remain, those with residency, those facing deportation and others/unknown, which includes referrals on other immigration matters. It is evident from these figures that SONAS responded to a broader need for support from other categories of immigrants.

Table 5 Non asylum seekers who presented to SONAS for assistance

| Categories | Non asylum seekers who sought assistance |
|-----------------|--|
| Refugee status | 59 |
| Leave to Remain | 240 |
| Residency | 87 |
| Deportation | 22 |
| Other/Unknown | 170 |
| Total | 578 |

Figure 1 gives a breakdown of the distribution of those who sought assistance from the SONAS outreach service in the four geographical areas in which the project operated. Over the two years of the outreach service Dublin had most referrals followed by Limerick, Cork and Wexford. In each of the four areas the majority of referrals were made in the first year 2002/2003*. This can be explained by a backlog of people who were in need of the service provided by the ORWs.

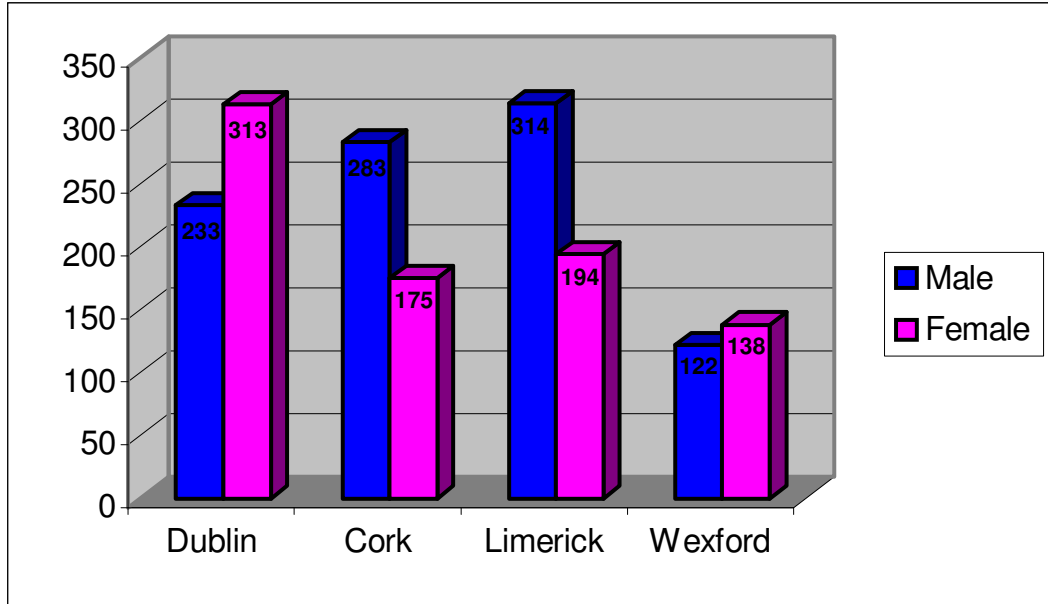
Figure 1 Distribution of referrals to the outreach service by geographic area



Of the referrals received 54% were from men and 46% from women. Figure 2 gives a breakdown of referrals by gender and by geographic area. In total there were 952 male referrals and 820 female. In Dublin and Wexford there were more women referred than men.

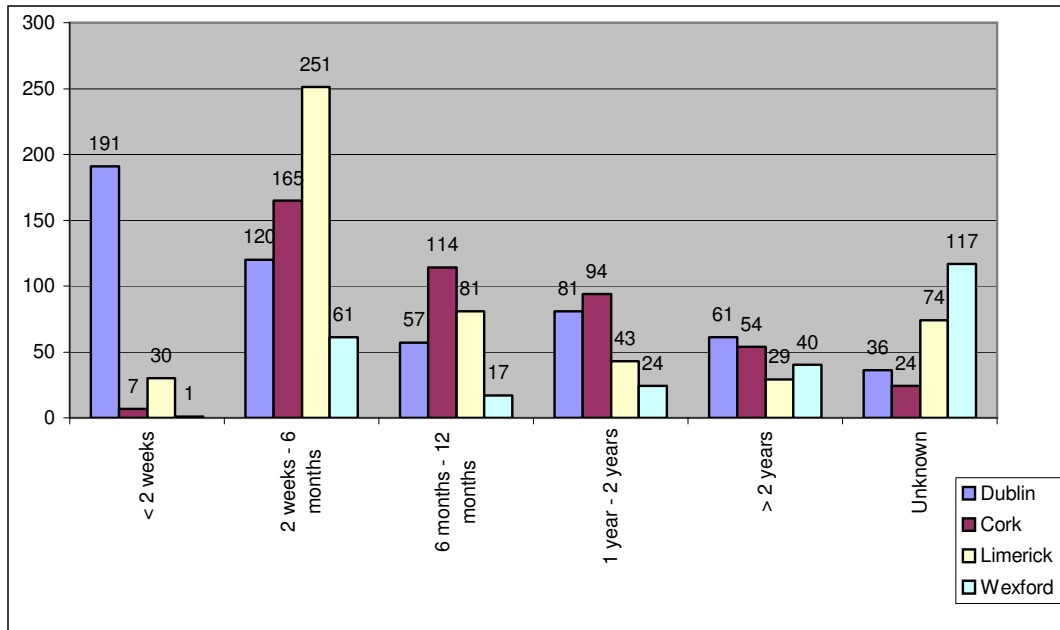
* Because the project only took referrals for eight days at the end of 2002, totalling 25 referrals in all, the years 2002 and 2003 are being referred to as one for statistical purposes.

Figure 2 Breakdown of referrals by gender and geographic area



The original target for the SONAS outreach service was people who were in the state for less than two weeks. The breakdown of the figures collected by SONAS shows that only 13% of those using the outreach service had arrived in the previous two weeks. The highest distribution was for the period 'two weeks to six months' at 30% (536 referrals) with the remaining arrival periods having distributions of between 10-15%. It is noticeable that the majority of referrals seen by an outreach worker during the first two weeks were in Dublin, again because of the location of reception centres. See Figure 3 for a breakdown of the period in which referrals were first seen by geographic area.

Figure 3 Period in which referrals were first seen by geographic area



In keeping with national statistics on the most common country of origin of asylum seekers, people from Nigeria made up the majority of these at 553 (31.2%) of referrals. The next biggest group at 125 is DR Congo (7.1%) closely followed by Romania at 100 (5.6%). No other group topped 100 referrals with Somalia being the next biggest referral group with 60 referrals (3.4%).

Figure 4 Country of origin

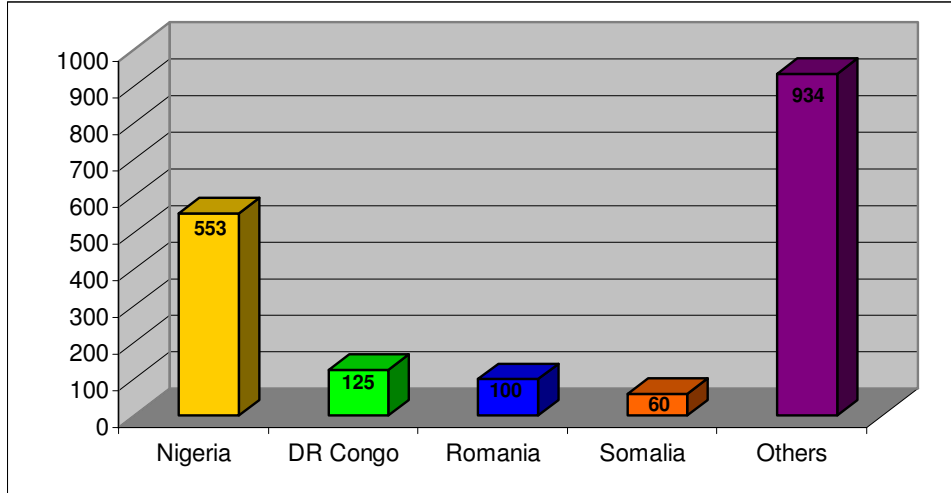


Figure 5 Stage at which referrals were made to the outreach service

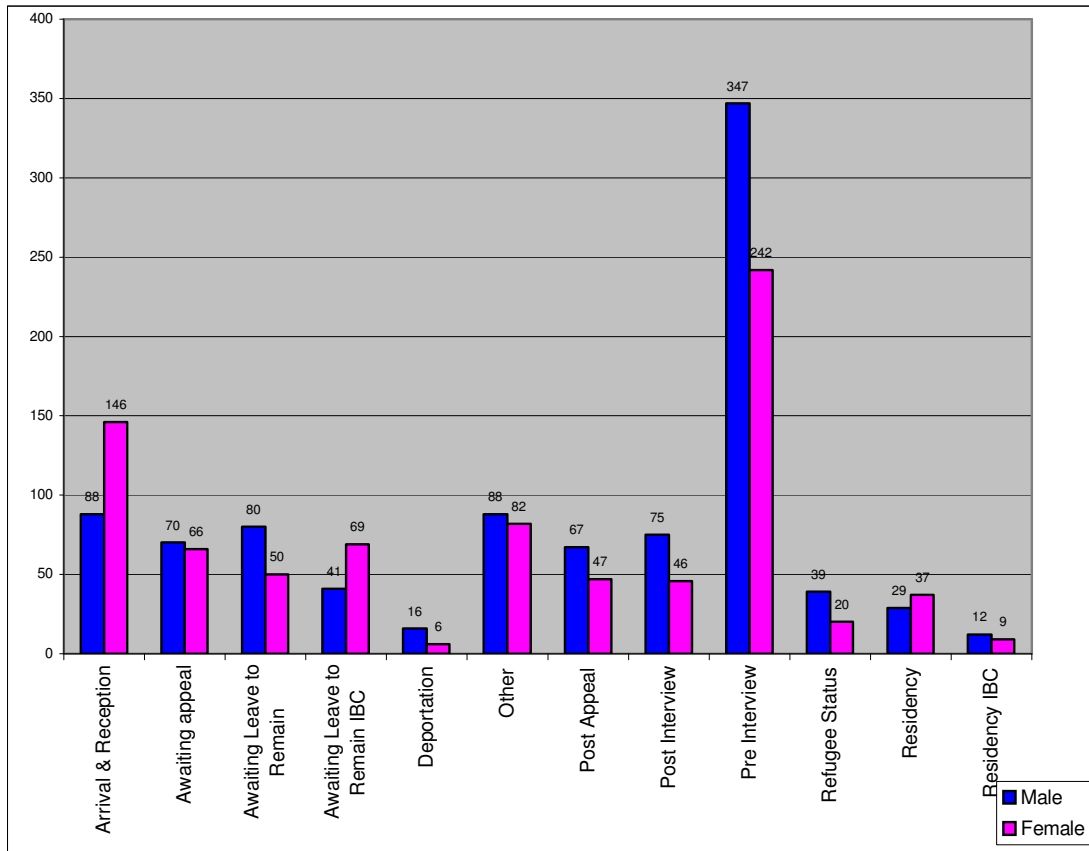
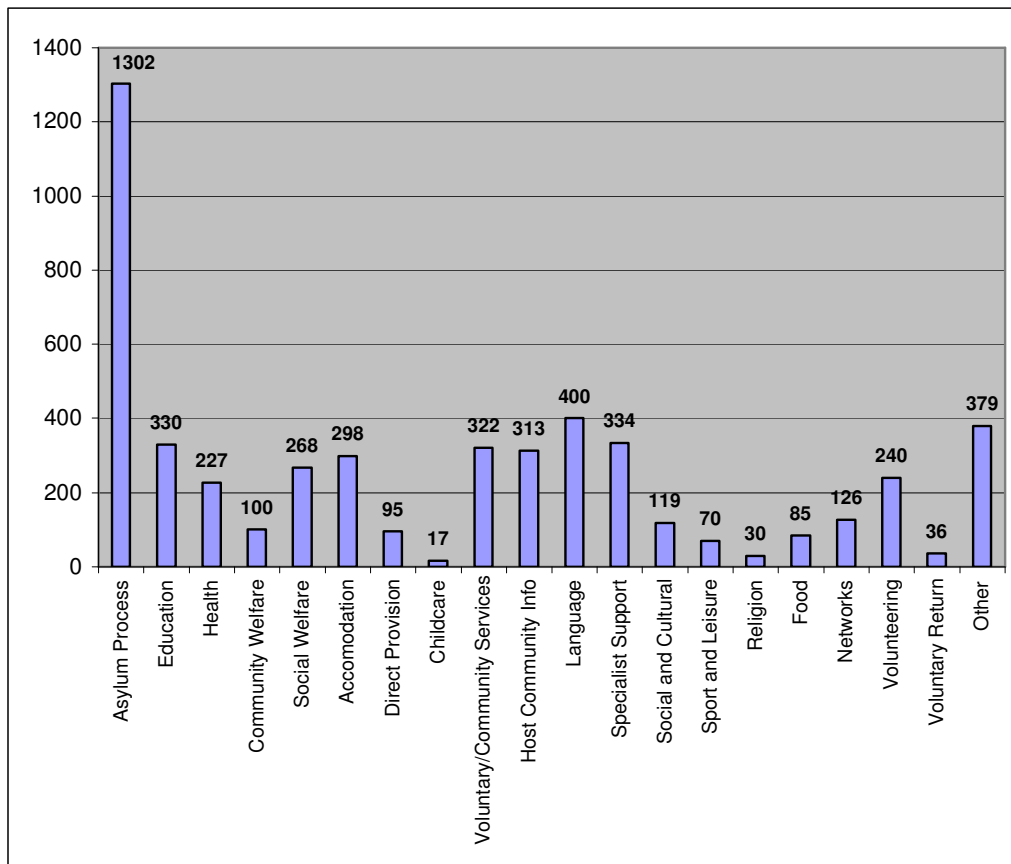


Figure 5 outlines the various stages at which referrals were made to the outreach service and Figure 6 gives a breakdown of the types of issues which were included in the referrals made. There appears to be a strong correlation between the most frequent referral, which was to do with the asylum process and the stage at which referral was made, pre-interview. Queries and information on the asylum process, consisted of 26% of all referrals, the next highest were referrals on language at 8%. Of the different stages at which people were referred to the service the pre-interview stage again far outstripped all of the other referral categories. There were 589 people in the pre-interview stage referred to the project or 33% of the 1,772 people who availed of the service. The next closest group at 13% were those in the arrival and reception phase.

Figures 5 and 6 show that SONAS met an information and support need across a range of issues, but most significantly it met the need of those who sought information and support on the asylum process at the pre-asylum interview stage. These figures confirm that the first of SONAS' original objectives 'to provide information and support for asylum seekers regarding the asylum determination process' was based on a well-founded knowledge of a gap in services.

Figure 6 Types of issues in referrals made to outreach service



(Note: more than one issue may be included in a referral)

Action 3 - Using outreach workers to assist organisations in host communities to achieve better support services

Performance Outcome of Action 3

The ORWs in the three areas outside Dublin played a central role in assisting with the development of support services in their local areas. Significantly, a number of the groups assisted by the ORWs were groups consisting of asylum seekers established to provide self-assistance.

□ *Wexford*

In County Wexford two asylum seeker led organisations were assisted by the outreach worker in this area, one of them in Wexford town and the other in New Ross. The *Wexford All Cultures Group* has been supported by SONAS and the Wexford Area Partnership (a member organisation of the SONAS DP). Some leading members of the *Wexford All Cultures Group* were assisted with a five-day capacity building training programme. Representatives from the group became involved with the Wexford Area Community Team (a community team based in the Wexford Area Partnership representing geographical communities and communities of interest). Some members of the group also played an active role in the Wexford Area Community Conference in 2004. This annual event celebrates and assesses community activity in the Wexford area.

In New Ross the *New Ross Intercultural Group*, an asylum seeker led group, also received support from the SONAS outreach worker. The work of SONAS was recognised by the group when it was presented with an award for its work at the *New Ross Intercultural Group* awards ceremony in 2004.

As well as supporting these two formal groups in County Wexford, the outreach worker also assisted a group of asylum seeking women. By working with the child care coordinator of the Wexford Area Partnership a group of women received a grant towards the establishment of a mother and toddler group. The same women took part in childcare training workshops.

□ *Cork*

In Cork, the outreach worker was actively involved in the large range of groups that operate in the city. The outreach worker played a leading role in establishing the *Cork Networking Committee* (CNC), which since December 2003 has produced and published *CNC Global*, an information network newsletter.

As well as her involvement in this network, established during the life of the SONAS project, the outreach worker used every opportunity to network and to actively cooperate with any group or organisation that provided or had the potential to provide supports to asylum seekers. Among the broad range of state organisations the outreach worker engaged with were:

- The Refugee Legal Service
- The Health Services Executive Southern Area (Southern Health Board as it was known through the period the outreach worker worked with SONAS)
- Different Departments at University College Cork
- The Community Gardai

Among the numerous voluntary groups the outreach worker had working contacts were the following:

- NASC (The Irish Immigrant Support Centre)
- Society of St. Vincent de Paul
- Cork City Partnership (a member organisation of the SONAS DP)
- Foroige (a national youth organisation)
- Comhlamh
- East European Association of Ireland
- Cork Centre for the Unemployed
- Cork Alliance for Justice and Peace
- Women in Focus Group

□ *Limerick*

The outreach worker in Limerick was instrumental in initiating the *Limerick Integration Action Committee*. This committee focused on providing mutual self-help for Sudanese and other immigrants and asylum seekers in the Limerick area. The outreach worker also played an active role in a programme developed by the *Mid West Development Education Centre* (MWDEC) and run in Limerick and Scariff. The 'Mentoring in the Community Programme' was attended by asylum seekers and refugees.

Working together the two ORWs from Cork and Limerick helped establish a number of asylum seeker self-help groups or gave support to these groups. In all there were eleven such groups apart from those already referred to above and the following are a sample of the range of these groups:

- Ivory Coast Group
- African Group Bandon
- Cameroon Group
- Togolese Group
- Scariff Cultural Exchange Group
- Asylum Seeker Women's Group
- Mwingano Le Cheile All Nations Group

All of these self-help and cultural groups have focused on gaining support for the immigrant asylum seekers communities in the Cork and Limerick areas.

□ *Dublin*

Unlike in other parts of the country services had already been well-established in Dublin when SONAS began its work there, so the outreach worker did not place the same emphasis on assisting organisations to develop their supports for asylum seekers. Furthermore, asylum seekers are provided with supports by the Reception and Integration Agency in reception centres in the Dublin area for a period of two to three weeks before they are moved to accommodation centres throughout the country, thus providing a more limited role for the SONAS outreach worker.

The Dublin-based outreach worker was a member of the management committee of one significant project, the *Canal Connections Project* which is part of the Canal Partnership. This project established a multicultural community drop-in centre in the Canal Partnership area in Dublin.

It is evident from the range of organisations and groups that the ORWs provided support so that they quickly became accepted at local level. Opportunities to provide such assistance depended on the number of groups and the level of support activity in the areas in which the ORWs were based. The ORWs have shown persistence and imagination in the range of activities they developed during the life of the project. They also showed flexibility in the ways they worked with people, and were willing to go to great lengths to provide whatever support they could – through inter-cultural quizzes, football teams, or cultural events for the African community.

OBJECTIVE 2: ENABLE EFFECTIVE INTERFACE

Action - Develop improved relationships with state agencies and local groups

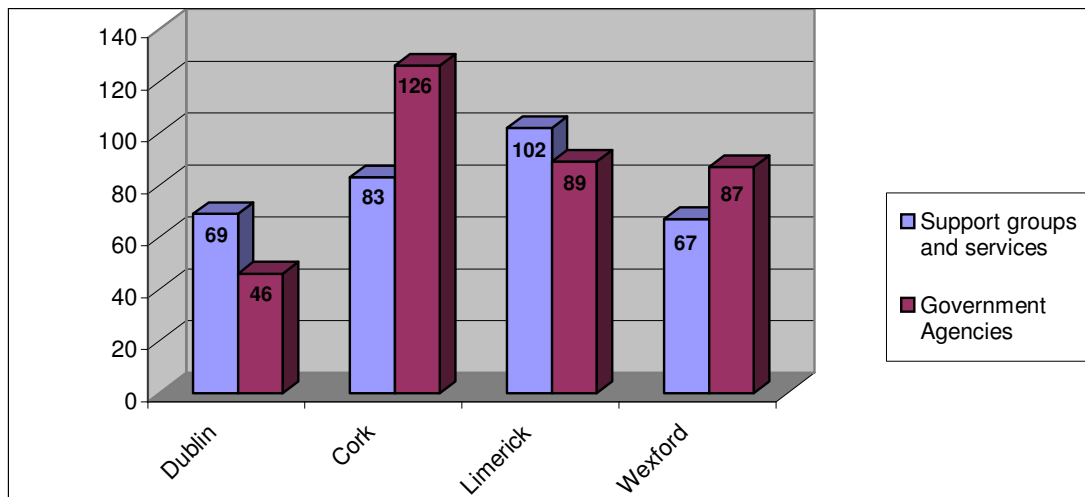
Performance Outcome of Action

Objective 2 sought to enable asylum seekers to interface effectively with a range of groups in Irish society. These groups include local communities, process advisors, and government representatives. The approach used by SONAS to assist this process of effective interface was to focus on developing improved relationships with state agencies and local groups. This was seen to be the most effective approach given the resources available to SONAS. It was anticipated that by developing closer relationships with the various actors at local level SONAS ORWs could make an impact on how asylum seekers were treated by these different groups and the personnel that worked for them.

In practice the approach used by the ORWs in achieving this task took two forms, firstly, by developing and improving general supports through the existing organisations and secondly, by intervening on behalf of individual asylum seekers and their families to resolve particular issues. Through each intervention, directed at either group or individual, an important part of the role of the outreach worker was to try and break down barriers between the asylum seeker and individuals in organisations providing services and the local community.

Over the life of the project the SONAS had a total of 321 networking meetings with local support groups and 348 meetings with statutory organisations – see Figure 7 for a breakdown by area.

Figure 7: Networking meetings with governmental and non-governmental support groups and agencies



OBJECTIVE 3: ADDRESSING VULNERABILITY

Action 1 - Outreach workers to respond to vulnerable client groups

Performance Outcome of Action 1

To address Objective 3 the ORWs were required to pay special attention to the needs of identified vulnerable groups. These groups were identified as:

- Unaccompanied minors
- Ante-natal/post natal women
- People from the Roma community

Through this action the ORWs were required to be particularly aware of the needs of these groups and responded to the requests of individual clients. In all 39 unaccompanied minors were seen by the ORWs, 20 of the minors were male and 19 were female. The total number of unaccompanied minors came to only 2% of all those assisted by the ORWs. Of the vulnerable groups ante-natal/post natal women (women with babies under three months) formed the largest group, with 188 of the former assisted by the ORWs and 77 of the latter. In total this group made up 15% of all referrals. From the Roma population 62 (3.5%) people presented to the outreach service seeking assistance.

As well as these vulnerable groups a further category of people were given close attention, namely those who identified themselves as suffering from trauma or psychosocial problems. In this category 310 (17%) people reported either signs of trauma or stress or were availing of psychological services. When asylum seekers presented themselves with such problems the ORWs encouraged and assisted individuals to avail of appropriate services where they existed.

Action 2 - Adapting structures to the changing client needs as they progressed through the asylum determination process

Performance Outcome of Action 2

It was the original intention of the SONAS project to provide supports at the earliest stage of the asylum process. However, it became apparent from early on that the need for SONAS support was not most acute at this early stage, because asylum seekers spend this period in a reception centre in Dublin, where set procedures are in place. It was in the period after this, when asylum seekers were dispersed to accommodation centres outside of Dublin that supports were most needed – see Figure 3. In order to meet these needs the approach taken had to be flexible and also had to take into account the changing needs of people over a longer period of time as they settled into new community settings in their accommodation centres.

Action 3 - Outreach workers sourcing funding for identified programme developments

Performance Outcome of Action 3

An important element in addressing vulnerability is to ensure that asylum seeking communities have the capacity to provide at least some supports for their own group members. At the very least such supports provide a focal point for vulnerable people within communities and can often provide much more by way of practical assistance, depending on available resources. In each of the non-Dublin localities where SONAS ORWs provided a service, efforts were made to support the establishment of asylum seeker led support groups. Central to the development of any group is the need for funding. The ORWs took on this challenging task of sourcing funding for identified programme developments. Examples of programme developments include:

The Limerick outreach worker in conjunction with *Mid West Development Education Centre* was successful in its funding application to *Grundtvig Learning Partnership* to run a capacity building programme for a group of asylum seekers residing in the Limerick and Scariff areas. The programme focused on planning and mentoring skills.

In Wexford the SONAS outreach worker also secured funding for a capacity building programme for asylum seekers in the *Wexford All Cultures Group*. This programme had a number of modules related to group development and leadership issues.

OBJECTIVE 4: ESTABLISH TRANSNATIONAL EXCHANGES RELEVANT TO ALL ACTIONS

Action - The DP to develop transnational exchanges of benefit to the work of SONAS

Performance Outcome of Action

The overall aim of the transnational partnership to which SONAS belonged during the EQUAL programme was to 'improve health, well-being and quality of life of asylum seekers'. As would be expected in a transnational partnership consisting of seven different Development Partnerships from five EU countries it was a demanding task to ensure that it held together and achieve concrete outcomes. Much effort was made to help to bind the group together and to facilitate participation by all. A key element to participation by all was the rotating secretariat, which SONAS held for six months during 2003/4. This secretariat was further facilitated through the transnational coordinators group which ran the process; and each transnational partner was represented in this group. General Assemblies and Working Groups were also used by the partnership to carry out its work in a coherent and structured way. Exchange/study visits allowed staff observe at first hand the work of their partners in service provision and other activities.

ASPIRE! decided from the beginning that the transnational should be more than a forum for exchange of good practice at DP level. Instead, partners agreed to pursue a 'transnational project' – actively working together to formulate policy recommendations which would arise out the partnership's practical experience and learning. Through this work three very specific policy goals were identified and policy briefs were written to accompany these goals – these are expanded further in the following section.

SONAS DP Member John Buttery accompanied three colleagues from ASPIRE! TCA on a policy working group visit to the Parliament and Commission in Brussels. The policy recommendations of ASPIRE! were discussed with the following groups:

- 12 MEPs from different states and party groupings
- Assistants to Wolfgang Kreissl-Dörfler, Rapporteur to the Committee on Civil Liberties, Justice and Home Affairs
- Representative from the DG Justice Freedom and Security
- ECRE Brussels Office
- COMECE (European Catholic Bishops Conference).

MEPs in particular were very interested and supportive of the work of ASPIRE! and had agreed to take the recommendations and to use them to raise awareness among colleagues and to see how they can be incorporated into amendments in legislation.

For SONAS the success of the transnational group was of great importance and benefited the project enormously at a number of levels. The exchange of ideas and learning was one important benefit for the project as was the development of common policy documents. Thirdly, the opportunity to pursue common policy objectives with its partners at EU level gave a depth to the work of SONAS which went beyond the national. For further detail of the ASPIRE! transnational see Appendix 2.

OBJECTIVE 5: INFORM POLICY ON MODELS OF GOOD PRACTICE AT NATIONAL AND EUROPEAN LEVEL

Action 1 - Develop an outreach training programme suitable for mainstreaming

Performance Outcome of Action 1

The staff of Sonas engaged in training through the three years of the project, 2002 – 2004. The training covered a range of training needs that had been identified as necessary by the DP and the staff. The organic growth of the training developed by the responsible DP member has formed the basis of the training for which accreditation is being sought for mainstreaming. The content of the training meets the requirements of those who work directly with asylum seekers and is grounded in practice experience. These training units were identified by the staff as most important to enhance the quality of their work, see Appendix 1 for an outline of the training provided. The Sonas training programme was piloted by training all five of the Sonas ORWs in 2002. The Sonas National Co-ordinator also attended all the sessions of the programme.

SONAS had found that not alone were there few people with adequate training to work with the new population of immigrants coming to Ireland but also that there was no overall training package to meet the training needs of those who worked directly with asylum seekers. As part of its commitment to its own staff and to the policy objective to inform models of good practice SONAS went about establishing its own training programme. To ensure that the training it devised was available to staff in mainstream organisations, SONAS successfully sought to have its training programme established on a formal basis within the education system by having it accredited through Mary Immaculate College, Limerick. The Academic Council of Mary Immaculate College approved the accreditation of the SONAS Training in May 2005 as a Certificate Course. This new training programme will offer best practice guidelines in training for organisations who wish to train their own staff and/or volunteers who work with asylum seekers.

Action 2 - Produce appropriate advisory materials in a format that could be widely disseminated

Performance Outcome of Action 2

Information on the asylum process was found to be the main priority for asylum seekers at all stages of the asylum process. SONAS produced an information leaflet; *The Asylum Journey in Ireland* is mainly a pictorial leaflet with minimum text. This leaflet, 5,000 of which were printed, has been distributed widely throughout the geographical areas in which SONAS has operated.

CNC Global, an information leaflet of relevance to asylum seekers and those supporting them, was distributed widely to accommodation centres, health clinics, social welfare offices, information centres, libraries, government agencies and various NGOs and support groups.

SONAS developed its own website on which all materials produced by the project are available to the general public.

Action 3 - Establish a DP Policy Review Group

Performance Outcome of Action 3

This action was fulfilled when the Policy Review Group was established in late 2003. The Policy Review Group included three DP members, three members of the asylum seeking community from different locations in which SONAS operated (Dublin, Cork and Limerick), and two ORWs.

From March 2004 the Policy Review Group, with the assistance of an external policy consultant, examined a number of policy issues which emerged from the work of the SONAS outreach service. These issues will be outlined under Action 3 below.

Action 4(a) - Policy development at national level by SONAS

Performance Outcome of Action 4(a)

The Policy Review Group identified two different policy areas which were deemed appropriate for SONAS to pursue. These two areas of 'basic rights and direct provision' and 'asylum seekers, social exclusion and poverty' were the subject of work carried out for SONAS by the external policy consultant. This work was concluded in two separate reports, *A fair deal: recommendations for improved support services for asylum seekers in Ireland* and *Poverty social exclusion and asylum seekers in Ireland: A discussion document*, both of which are to be found in the appendices.

The first policy area on basic rights and direct provision was investigated through meetings with asylum seekers living in direct provision and staff managing the accommodation centres. Permission was given by the Reception and Integration Agency for SONAS to carry out interviews with both asylum seekers and accommodation centre staff at the five accommodation centres chosen by SONAS in Cork, Limerick and Wexford. The key issues which emerged from this consultation process were around:

- management of centres
- information and support services
- isolation and the promotion of integration

From this policy document SONAS has written a formal proposal to improve the services for asylum seekers in a document entitled *Proposal for Improvement in Planning, Coordination and Delivery of Services for Asylum Seekers*. Through this proposal SONAS is attempting to impact on policy in this area of provision for asylum seekers, and although the EQUAL funded project comes to a conclusion the DP members are committed to pursuing this issue with the relevant government agencies.

The second policy document produced by SONAS on poverty, social exclusion and asylum seekers, is a discussion document. It is hoped that this document will add to the debate around government policies on combating poverty and social exclusion and how these policies do or do not relate to asylum seekers. The policy document suggests that although asylum seekers are occasionally referred to in government anti-poverty policies these references are few, inadequate, and at times contradictory in light of the state's overall policy approach to asylum seekers.

Action 4 (b) - Policy development at transnational level

Performance Outcome of Action 4(b)

SONAS led the way in producing policy at transnational level, when during its six months of holding the key secretariat role the ASPIRE! partnership produced a policy document. The process of producing this document was facilitated by *Nexus Europe Ltd.* (an Irish based research co-operative).

Three main policy recommendations and accompanying policy briefs were produced by the ASPIRE! transnational partnership. These were:

- ❑ Integrating asylum seekers into social inclusion and anti-discrimination initiatives
- ❑ Addressing the health needs of asylum seekers and related communities
- ❑ Strengthening the NGO sector to address the needs of asylum seekers

It is the view of ASPIRE! that these policy issues are not adequately incorporated into mainstream programmes. Furthermore, the ASPIRE! partnership believe that not alone have these policy recommendations not been incorporated into the mainstream but that the main EU vehicles for developing and promoting such actions make it even more difficult to ensure mainstreaming. EU initiatives relating to asylum seekers are justified by DG Employment and Social Affairs on the grounds that it has completely incorporated the opportunities for the support for asylum seekers into the mainstream of funding. From its experience of working with asylum seekers the ASPIRE! transnational partnership does not agree with this viewpoint. Representatives of ASPIRE! are to lobby interested MEPs, relevant EU Commission staff, and the Committee on Employment and Social Affairs in the European Parliament in late May 2005 on these matters, after the publication of this report.

CHAPTER 4 – PROJECT EFFECTIVENESS AND LEARNING

At the end of its three year project SONAS believes that it has added significantly to the welfare of asylum seekers in Ireland. It has done this by providing direct assistance to 1,772 individuals and families, through a range of interventions in response to each request for help. SONAS also believes that it has added significantly to the understanding of the process and practice of providing assistance to asylum seekers through its outreach work. Furthermore, SONAS is of the opinion that what it has learned from its outreach work and is now incorporated into policy proposals can provide other agencies responsible for the welfare of asylum seekers with a model of best practice. These beliefs and opinions cannot be easily counted, unlike the number of people who seek assistance, but they can be measured in other ways.

A significant way to measure the influence or impact of a voluntary organisation on public policy is through the willingness or unwillingness of state agencies to engage with it. By entering into a relationship with agencies such as the Reception and Integration Agency, Comhairle, local Health Boards and Mary Immaculate College, SONAS has shown that its work is of merit. While those involved in the provision of services are open to new ideas and the emergence of new groups it does not follow that they will necessarily engage with the new ideas or new groups. SONAS believes that its achievement in this respect is therefore significant and suggests that the project has been effective in what it set to do at a number of different levels.

PROJECT EVALUATION

SONAS has always been committed to evaluating its work and contracted external consultants, the Institute of Social Auditing of Ireland (ISAI) to evaluate the impact of its operations. This evaluation has helped the project to listen to the various parts of the configuration that must be considered in providing a service. Early on in 2003 questionnaires were distributed seeking the opinions of the stakeholders on the service being offered. These included:

- Clients
- ORWs
- DP members
- Host organisation
- Service providers

The ISAI also completed a final assessment based on the views of the ORWs and the DP members. In general the staff and DP members of SONAS were positive about the work of the project during its life. They did acknowledge that there were a number of challenges faced by the project which did impact on programme delivery. See Appendix 4 for a summary of the final appraisal of ORWs and DP members.

There were other informal methods of feedback which proved positive for the project. One way in which this manifested itself was when the outreach service ended. Clients, host organisations and service providers acknowledged the value and importance of the project's work when it was no longer available.

A second source of informal feedback emerged during the investigation into the experiences of asylum seekers in direct provision. Feedback from residents and accommodation centre staff who took part in the individual and group interviews were very positive in the service provided by SONAS through the ORWs.

MEETING THE OBJECTIVES OF SONAS

The original aim of the SONAS project was to

To improve the quality of life for particular and identifiable groups of asylum seekers at identifiable phases of the asylum determination process and in so doing to contribute to the development of best humanitarian practice

This aim was broken down into five objectives:

1. Provide information and support for asylum seekers regarding the asylum determination process and in particular to focus on;
 - a) the process immediately after arrival/reception
 - b) the provision of information regarding rights and entitlements
 - c) the provision of information regarding existing support networks
 - d) understanding of the country and location of immigration
2. Enable asylum seekers to interface effectively with:
 - a) the local community
 - b) process advisors
 - c) government representatives
3. Address the psychosocial and cultural needs of the most vulnerable groups of asylum seekers with a view to improving their readiness and adaptability for the outcome of the asylum determination process.
4. Establish transnational exchanges of relevance to all actions.
5. Inform policy on models of good practice at national and European level.

Over the course of the project SONAS has achieved what it set to do under all five objectives. As can be observed from the statistical information provided in Chapter 3, SONAS provided information and support for asylum seekers in the asylum determination process. The assistance provided immediately after arrival was limited as the ORWs worked primarily in locations where there were accommodation centres rather than reception centres. However, the statistics show that most of the referrals to the ORWs were related to the asylum determination process.

The very nature of the work of the ORWs placed them between asylum seekers and local communities, process advisors and government representatives. As can be determined from the level of satisfaction with the service provided by the ORWs they did this most effectively. This work was a constant challenge, and the monthly reports from the ORWs showed the extent of the barriers and difficulties faced by asylum seekers. It was not possible for, nor indeed was it the role of SONAS to take on the sole responsibility for breaking down such deeply rooted barriers. However, where possible, SONAS did its utmost to enable asylum seekers interface effectively with the local community, process advisors and government representatives.

The ORWs did target vulnerable groups within the asylum seeker population and as can be seen in Chapter 3 were especially effective in meeting a significant number of pregnant/post pregnant women. To a lesser extent was it successful in meeting unaccompanied minors and people from the Roma community. The majority of unaccompanied minors are based in Dublin and have dedicated social work and accommodation services available to them so the need for contact with the SONAS service was less

needed. There were few Roma families in the accommodation centres in the areas in which Sonas had its outreach services, Cork having the only numbers of any significance. One of the difficulties encountered with those who claimed to suffer from trauma and psychosocial problems was the lack of services for onward referral.

The transnational objective was reached, SONAS played an active role in the ASPIRE! Partnership. Working together with partnership organisations from five different EU countries posed a challenge to all involved, as each partner had its own distinct objectives; there were differences of language and cultural understanding; there existed differing views on the importance of the ASPIRE! Partnership and what it was about. All of these problems were managed, and in no small part facilitated by SONAS, so that a common policy agenda was agreed and pursued.

Informing policy on models of good practice at national and EU levels has been a strength of SONAS. In Ireland it has engaged with various actors in the policy sphere about its model of outreach work and how to respond to the needs of asylum seekers in direct provision. It has also put on the agenda the important issue of poverty, social exclusion and asylum seekers. At EU level it reached agreement with its transnational partners on a common policy agenda – strengthening the NGO sector as an effective partner, addressing the health needs of asylum seekers and related communities, and integrating asylum seekers into social inclusion and anti-discrimination initiatives – and this was pursued by ASPIRE! SONAS together with other representatives of the ASPIRE! transnational group presented the policy recommendations of ASPIRE! to a number of groups in Brussels in May 2005.

WIDER SOCIAL, ECONOMIC AND POLICY CONTEXT OF THE PROJECT

When one considers the policy context in which SONAS operated during its three years it has been remarkably successful in what it has achieved. The issue of refugees, asylum seekers and economic immigrants is still a relatively new and changing one in Ireland. Right through the period from 2002 to 2005 new legislation and administrative procedures were being put in place by the state in its efforts to manage and control asylum seekers and the movement of other immigrants. Ireland does not have an immigration policy, although as this report is being written a process of public consultation on this issue has begun with the publication in April 2005 of a discussion document by the state.

Services for asylum seekers are provided primarily by and through the Reception and Integration Agency. A number of services, such as health and education services, are provided by the relevant agencies locally. The provision of other supports is for the most part provided by local community and voluntary organisations. There is as yet in Ireland a lack of institutional support for organisations that work with asylum seekers. Very few of the organisations in the voluntary and community sector are funded to an extent that would allow them to provide the services that are required to meet the needs of asylum seekers. The policy proposal by the ASPIRE! Partnership on strengthening the NGO sector as an effective partner has yet to be realised in Ireland.

SONAS has identified a number of problems, which need to be addressed if the work of the DP and others who are attempting to meet the needs of asylum seekers are to be more effective. These problems have been identified as follows:

- the level of provision of services by the state and local organisations is inadequate;
- the level of co-ordination of services is poor;
- access to information in a form that can be understood is inadequate;

- the needs of asylum seekers seem to be poorly understood;
- asylum seekers have very little say in anything that affects them or their families

Organisations like SONAS are not encouraged to contribute to the development of policy on asylum seekers. The state is reluctant to engage with the voluntary and community sector. It sees a role for local support groups, but only at the level of providing social activities and social integration and not at the level of providing well-resourced services to asylum seekers, nor at the level of contributing to policy.

The policy context is at this point shut off to those who work with asylum seekers, but for asylum seekers it is the economic and consequent social contexts that have the most impact on them. Ireland does not allow persons in the process of claiming asylum to work. This restriction impacts enormously on adult asylum seekers and their families. SONAS commissioned a discussion document on the issue of poverty and social exclusion of asylum seekers in Ireland (the paper is in Appendix 7). It is suggested in this document that while the Irish state has committed itself to eliminating poverty and promoting social inclusion, asylum seekers are for the most part excluded from these policies. Asylum seekers are referred to in many of the relevant policy documents but usually only in passing and without any critique or understanding of the impact of state asylum policy on the individuals involved. SONAS through its work could not ameliorate the negative consequences of Irish asylum policy, which intentionally or not, appears to add to the social exclusion of people in the asylum process. What it did do was to provide immediate individual support and information, and where necessary intervene with service providers. It also provided a bridge between asylum seekers and local communities.

One of the basic aims of the EQUAL initiative is to tackle exclusion, discrimination and inequalities in the labour market. In Ireland asylum seekers are not permitted to work, so SONAS could not directly be effective in this way. However, exclusion, discrimination and inequalities for asylum seekers go beyond the work place and are evident in many policies and practices of the state, as well as through local organisations and communities. Such practices should be challenged irrespective of the economic, social, or civil rights of individuals or groups. Yet, realistically it is asking too much of organisations like SONAS to tackle exclusion, discrimination and inequalities on the scale which is needed.

OUTREACH SERVICE

SONAS has shown that there is a need for a service to asylum seekers such as the one it provided. It has also shown that the service can be effective and go some way towards meeting the needs of this group. To date the services for asylum seekers are provided mainly by the state in a centralised way, or by local groups working in isolation from each other. Through its project SONAS provided an example of how a nationally decentralised support service for asylum seekers might work. It would be of benefit to the state, local organisations and in particular to asylum seekers themselves, if this model was explored further with a view to mainstreaming it.

Through a carefully thought out, well-recorded and well-documented system of maintaining information, SONAS has at its disposal evidence of the needs of asylum seekers and how it has responded to those needs. This information would be of assistance to any future development of a service like SONAS's outreach service. This evidence also shows the many difficulties faced by asylum seekers in their daily lives in Ireland.

MAINSTREAMING

From its three years of work SONAS has learned a number of things about the group with which it worked and about an effective approach to providing supports to this group of people:

- Asylum seekers lack information
- Asylum seekers living in accommodation centres are isolated from the wider community
- Asylum seekers are unhappy with many aspects of their accommodation provision
- Asylum seekers in accommodation centres lead monotonous lives

- Outreach work provides information as it is required
- Outreach work provides a mediator between asylum seekers and others in a number of different spheres
- Outreach work provides the opportunity to observe what is happening in people's 'home' environment
- Outreach work allows for the easier development of trust

Issues arising in relation to the transfer of learning to the mainstream

SONAS is convinced of the usefulness of the outreach approach which it developed and believes that it could be adapted and used by mainstream service providers. There are issues in relation to the transfer of learning to the mainstream, which include the following:

Although it took some time to build up the trust of asylum seekers, the staff of accommodation centres and service providers, SONAS ORWs did engender the trust of these disparate groups. It is not certain if a mainstream organisation, especially from the state sector would manage to achieve the same level of trust with asylum seekers.

- One outstanding feature of the approach of the ORWs was their flexibility and commitment to the work in which they were engaged. Any transfer to the mainstream of the outreach model would have to ensure that such practices would continue. For some agencies this may pose a challenge.

- The greatest challenge to transferring learning from the project to the mainstream is undoubtedly the overall policy towards asylum seekers, where minimum intervention appears to apply. Until there is acceptance by the state of the need to provide adequate support, information and advice services to asylum seekers then the model piloted by SONAS will not become part of the mainstream.

Progress towards mainstreaming

Mainstreaming of the learning from the work of SONAS has been a central concern from the commencement of the project. However, it took time to establish the project, and to build up a base of evidence from which to develop policies on mainstreaming. The actual work of engagement with key agencies regarding mainstreaming did not begin until early 2004. From SONAS' work three areas of importance emerged which the DP believed merited mainstreaming. These areas were:

a. Improvement in services for asylum seekers

Improvement in planning, coordination and delivery of services for asylum seekers was one of the areas, which from early on in the life of the project, was highlighted as a major problem for asylum seekers. In response to this SONAS sought and were granted meetings with senior members of staff of the Reception and Integration Agency. In these meetings, which took place in 2004 and 2005, the

Reception and Integration Agency acknowledged the good work done by SONAS, highlighting both the services provided and the methods used by the project. The Reception and Integration Agency said that based on the experience of SONAS it would like to see the lessons learned applied to the existing statutory support structures. The Reception and Integration Agency said that it would like to have information provision presented in an integrated way rather than in isolation. To move forward this idea the Reception and Integration Agency was prepared to create a forum to encourage existing service providers to adopt the model of service provision developed and used by SONAS. While the Reception and Integration Agency expressed an interest in the SONAS training programme it made no commitments on this aspect of the project.

SONAS has further continued its push towards mainstreaming in this particular area through its investigation into the lives of asylum seekers in direct provision. This investigation was given support by the Reception and Integration Agency by allowing unhindered access to staff and residents in the accommodation centres. It also expressed an interest in the findings of the investigation. As a result of this investigation and learning from the work of the outreach service, SONAS produced a *Proposal for the Delivery of Services for Improvement in Planning, Coordination and Delivery of Services for Asylum Seekers*. This proposal sets out a course of action based on the following objective 'to promote policy and practice change in services to asylum seekers through an Expert Working Group based on collaboration between statutory and non-governmental bodies with experience of working with the target group'. This objective reflects the ASPIRE! Partnership policy recommendation on collaboration between governments and NGOs.

b. *Mainstreaming outreach work through Comhairle*

There have been several meetings with the local manager of Comhairle in Cork about the possibilities of mainstreaming the work of SONAS outreach programme in Cork. Comhairle is a statutory agency which provides information to the public through a network of Citizen Information Centres. As a result of these discussions a decision was taken to establish a pilot project which would run for several months to assess the need, type of information and referral support required by asylum seekers, as well as the training needs of the information giver. This pilot project was established in early 2005 through a local Citizens Information Centre, based at an accommodation centre for asylum seekers. Initial feedback from the early outreach clinics has been very positive.

c. *Training accreditation*

The final area for mainstreaming pursued by SONAS is that of accreditation of the SONAS training programme for people who work directly with asylum seekers. Because of the relatively new phenomenon of large-scale immigration into Ireland, through economic migrants and asylum seekers, few people have adequate training to work with these new populations. As SONAS found out when it sought to train its own staff there was a lack of appropriate training available. In response to this SONAS went about establishing its own training programme. As part of its commitment to ensuring best practice in this field and to make the training it devised available to staff in mainstream organisations, SONAS has sought to have its training course more formally established within the education system and have it accredited. The Academic Council of Mary Immaculate College, Limerick has approved the accreditation of the SONAS Training Programme as a Certificate Course.

CONCLUSION

SONAS has both learned and achieved much during what has been to date a relatively short lifetime. Setting up an organisation from scratch with a board consisting of membership from a variety of diverse interests, putting administrative structures in place, recruiting, training and managing staff, successfully engaging with transnational partners from five other countries, carrying out the day-to-day work of the project and developing policy, highlights the size of the task which the DP members set themselves. The DP believes that it has carried out its work effectively and with some positive results.

The project has given a good service to asylum seekers, has worked well with other service providers and has engaged effectively with state agencies in order to pursue its mainstreaming agenda. It is evident from the progress that SONAS has made with its mainstreaming agenda that key agencies are well disposed towards the work of the project. The DP members do not intend ending their efforts to have key elements of the project mainstreamed, and this commitment is to continue past the conclusion of the EQUAL funding period.

CHAPTER 5 – ACTING ON THE LEARNING OF THE PROJECT

There are a number of key concluding points and main lessons which arise from the SONAS project. These will be addressed in turn:

1. Summary of main conclusions
2. Lessons learned and implications for the Development Partnership member organisations
3. Suggested lessons for government departments
4. Possible lessons and implications for national and EU institutions
5. Implications for policy and practice related to combating exclusion, discrimination and inequality in the labour market

1. SUMMARY OF MAIN CONCLUSIONS

The work carried out by SONAS over the three years of the EQUAL project has led the organisation to conclude a number of important points. These conclusions are important at a number of different levels from asylum seekers through to EU institutions. Central to the learning derived from the project was the direct work with asylum seekers. This contact on a daily basis with asylum seekers helped the staff and Board of SONAS to concentrate on the reality of life for asylum seekers in Ireland. SONAS found that there are many problems confronting asylum seekers in Ireland at most levels of their interaction with Irish society. Through this work and its transnational partnership within the ASPIRE! partnership the following are a summary of the main points, which will in turn be further expanded in points 2-5 below:

- The most important conclusion from the work carried out by SONAS during the lifetime of the project is the need for outreach services to address the information and support needs of asylum seekers.
- SONAS also concludes that recognised and appropriate training is required for those who work directly with asylum seekers.
- Through its work SONAS has shown that there is a gap in the support and information services provided by the state for asylum seekers and that there is much work required to improve these essential aspects of provision for asylum seekers.
- The NGO sector working with asylum seekers needs to be supported financially as well as being accepted as a legitimate partner by the state sector.
- The transnational aspect of the project has been a challenging but important element of EQUAL.
- Directly addressing labour market issues has been very difficult as part of EQUAL because the Irish government's policies state asylum seekers are not allowed to work. SONAS has proved to be an important element in understanding the needs of asylum seekers and in developing approaches to working with asylum seekers by the Development Partnership member organisation.

2. LESSONS LEARNED AND IMPLICATIONS FOR THE DP MEMBER ORGANISATIONS

The learning for the DP members was to a large extent related to whether or not they already had prior experience of direct work with asylum seekers. Two of the DP member organisations were NGOs whose client group consisted mainly of asylum seekers; all of the other DP member organisations would have had asylum seekers as one of a range of target populations for which they provided services.

For most of the DP members the outreach service was central to the success of the project. This service confirmed what they had already suspected or known in setting up the project, that an outreach service to

asylum seekers was a necessary service if their information and support needs were to be met. This view was further confirmed when the outreach service ended in the second half of 2004; the service was missed by organisations that had come to rely on the expertise of the ORWs to provide information support to asylum seekers.

For other DP members SONAS provided them with the opportunity to reflect on what their organisations were doing to assist asylum seekers. This new and direct involvement with asylum seekers offered some DP members an opening to develop services specifically for asylum seekers. Working directly with asylum seekers improved the organisations' understanding of this group's needs. As a result new and more targeted initiatives have been established by some of the DP member organisations. For example, Cork City Partnership secured funding to employ one of the SONAS ORWs in that role when the SONAS project ended. A second example of targeted service provision is the securing of funding by Partas to provide pre-employment training for refugees and those with residency status. The Wexford Area Partnership provides a third example of a more targeted intervention which developed as a result of its involvement in the SONAS project. Its support for the Wexford All Cultures Group has brought this group very much into the mainstream of the work of the Wexford Area Partnership. One example of how this has happened is the nomination of a representative of the Wexford All Cultures Group onto the Board of the Wexford Area Partnership.

A further learning for the DP was the challenge of mainstreaming. It took a significant period of time before the project was in a position to promote the notion of mainstreaming. This was mainly because the initial focus of the project was on implementation and outreach worker activities. Time was needed, therefore, to establish the appropriate structures and systems necessary to ensure an effective project. It was only in the last six months of the project, after the outreach service had ended, that the issue of mainstreaming took centre stage for the DP.

The transnational component of the project provided learning for the DP member organisations. It allowed for comparison between the different asylum regimes in the partnership countries, and in particular the comparison between the different approaches to information provision used in each country. SONAS learned that meeting Members of the European Parliament soon after they were elected to the parliament was not the most appropriate as the new MEPs lacked the knowledge of policy development at EU level. However, the overall involvement at the policy level through the transnational element did introduce a number of DP members to a new form of interaction in the policy making process. There were of course challenges in the transnational partnership, such as language and cultural differences, different asylum regimes, and different agendas. These differences could have made the partnership ineffective but SONAS took the lead role during its six month secretariat to push the issue of policy development in the transnational partnership, with some very concrete results.

Setting up an organisation from scratch with a number of other organisations also provided learning for the DP members. It took DP members time to get to know each other and the needs of the constituent organisations in relation to the project. It took time to adjust expectations of what the project could achieve during its relatively short life-span. SONAS also took a lot of the DP members' own time from their parent organisations and this added to the challenge. However, the learning for the individual DP members and their organisations plus the satisfaction of providing a good quality service greatly outweighed the challenges encountered along the way.

3. SUGGESTED LESSONS FOR GOVERNMENT DEPARTMENTS

SONAS worked with a number of government departments and agencies and also witnessed the impact of decisions and actions of government departments and agencies on asylum seekers. SONAS believes that it developed good working relationships with all of the agencies of state with which it had contact. However, from its work SONAS would make the following observations about the state's approach to the provision of services to asylum seekers. The state does provide the basics for asylum seekers. However, In the absence of adequate information services by the state SONAS provided information on the asylum process and on other matters of importance to asylum seekers. The work of the project has shown that there is a sizeable gap in information provision for asylum seekers by the state, who has the primary responsibility in this area.

SONAS also believes, as does its transnational partners, that the provision of financial support for NGOs working with asylum seekers is inadequate. To ensure that asylum seekers are not excluded from the communities in which they live more resources are required for local NGOs in the voluntary and community sectors.

There is a deficit in the training for those who work directly with asylum seekers; SONAS found this when it sought to provide training for its own staff and through its engagement with those who work in accommodation centres. In response to this deficit SONAS developed its own training course and as the project comes to a close it is in the process of negotiating its inclusion in mainstream training. SONAS believes that appropriate training should be provided for all of those who work with asylum seekers in the state sector and in reception and accommodation centres.

4. POSSIBLE LESSONS AND IMPLICATIONS FOR NATIONAL AND EU INSTITUTIONS

At national level the impact of the EQUAL funded programme is limited in relation to asylum seekers as the Irish government does not allow asylum seekers to work. As a result, the benefits which other Irish EQUAL projects enjoyed around mainstreaming and thematic groups, SONAS did not. It was very isolated in this regard. For the future it is important that greater efforts are made at national level to ensure that all projects are in a position to avail of and to benefit from the various elements of EU funded programmes.

SONAS and its transnational partners are very concerned that the DG Employment has justified the decline of Community initiatives for asylum seekers on the grounds that it has incorporated their opportunities for support in the mainstream of the European Social Fund. SONAS believes that as a result of its experience during the life of the project in Ireland that there is much scope for special initiatives for supporting asylum seekers.

5. IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICY AND PRACTICE RELATED TO COMBATING EXCLUSION, DISCRIMINATION AND INEQUALITY IN THE LABOUR MARKET

Ireland has not adopted the EU's directive on minimum standards on the reception of asylum seekers, mainly because it requires that member states party to the directive allow asylum seekers to work after twelve months. The Irish government has consistently resisted allowing asylum seekers to work, believing that such a policy would prove to be a factor in attracting people to Ireland. As a result SONAS was not in a position to support asylum seekers in the area of exclusion, discrimination and inequality in the labour market. However, through the practice of outreach work and its development of policies related to this work SONAS has focused on combating exclusion, discrimination and inequality against asylum seekers in Irish society.

The key learning for practice from the SONAS experience is that there is a need to ensure that the state provides appropriate supports to both state agencies and NGOs to ensure that asylum seekers are not excluded, discriminated against and treated unequally in Irish society. The day-to-day work of SONAS has shown that asylum seekers experience social exclusion, discrimination and inequality in Ireland. From a policy perspective SONAS has outlined in its policy discussion document on poverty, social exclusion and asylum seekers, that there is the possibility of making the argument that the state's policies are contradictory when it comes to issues of social exclusion. SONAS hopes that into the future the state and the social partners would review these policies to ensure that they do not lead to the discrimination and social exclusion of asylum seekers.

CONCLUSION

The past three years have proved an exciting and challenging period for the organisations that made up the SONAS DP. The period has not been without its challenges but it has also been very rewarding to pursue new and innovative practices in working with asylum seekers. It has been rewarding to know that the work undertaken has made an impact on the lives of many people.

APPENDIX 1: TRAINING PLAN

SONAS DP Ireland Ltd Training Plan Outline

(Proposed Training programme for front line staff working with asylum seekers, based on training delivered by SONAS DP Ireland Ltd to the SONAS Outreach Workers.)

Introduction:

SONAS DP Ireland Ltd is a development partnership funded under the EQUAL Community Initiative to implement a project to support the needs of asylum seekers in Ireland. The project implements a series of locally delivered nationally co-ordinated interventions to provide a range of support for asylum seekers at key stages of the asylum process. This service is provided by ORWs and supported by a National Co-ordinator, a part time Administrator and the DP Board.

This document contains an outline of the Training Programme compiled by SONAS DP Ireland Ltd for the SONAS ORWs. The training programme has met the needs of the ORWs, working with the asylum seekers as it has been compiled in consultation with the workers and has been evaluated at each stage of delivery. The training has been compiled during the period from December 2002 to November 2004, which was the timeframe for employment of the ORWs in this pilot project. The training is innovative in that it has been developed over a two year period based on the needs of the ORWs with their clients.

| Module & Units of Learning | Training Objectives | Content |
|---|--|---|
| <p><u>1. Supporting Asylum Seekers</u> <i>The Asylum Process:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Definitions • Stages in the Asylum process • Refugee Act • Applications for Refugee status in Ireland • Dispersal & direct provision in Ireland | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> □ Understanding distinction between asylum seeker & refugee □ Good knowledge of the stages in the process. □ Awareness of the content of the Refugee Act. □ Awareness of statistical information regarding applications for Refugee status in Ireland. □ Understanding of the system of accommodation for asylum seekers in Ireland. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Definition of asylum seekers and refugees ■ The stages of the asylum process ■ The Refugee Act ■ Statistics on applications for refugee status in Ireland ■ Information on the system of accommodation for asylum seekers in Ireland. |
| <p><i>Introduction to some NGOs supporting asylum seekers in Ireland:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Irish Refugee Council • Integrating Ireland | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> □ Understanding the work of the IRC particularly in relation to policy and research. □ Understanding the work of Integrating Ireland in | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Introduction and history ■ Key areas of work ■ Policy and research ■ History of Integrating Ireland ■ Activities of Integrating |

| | | |
|--|--|---|
| | particular in relation to local and regional networks. | Ireland <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Links between local organisations and Integrating Ireland |
| Children & the Asylum Process | <input type="checkbox"/> Knowledge of the asylum process for unaccompanied minors and knowledge of the entitlements and supports available for all asylum seeking children. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Childcare Act ■ Unaccompanied Minors ■ Entitlements ■ Support organisations |
| 2. Cultural Awareness <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Anti-Racism Awareness • Develop cultural awareness. • Garda Racism & Intercultural Office | <input type="checkbox"/> Enhance awareness of own attitudes and prejudices and of institutionalised racism. <input type="checkbox"/> Increased understanding of cultural awareness. <input type="checkbox"/> Understanding of the role of the GRIO in relation to promoting cultural awareness and integration in local communities. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ individual attitudes ■ institutionalised racism ■ in a school context ■ in a local community context ■ ethnic minorities & policy ■ developing trust |
| 3. Group Work. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Introduction to group dynamics • Conflict management • Presentation Skills • Report Writing | <input type="checkbox"/> Appreciate one's own ways of participating in group's. <input type="checkbox"/> Recognise the characteristics of effective groups. <input type="checkbox"/> Understanding some key elements of group development and group processes. <input type="checkbox"/> Develop awareness of personal style of managing conflict <input type="checkbox"/> Understand how personal style impacts on managing conflict. <input type="checkbox"/> Develop an analytical framework for understanding and managing conflict within the work place. <input type="checkbox"/> Recognise one's own strengths and weaknesses in relation to presentation skills. <input type="checkbox"/> Develop skills on how to give an effective presentation. <input type="checkbox"/> Recognise one's own strengths and weaknesses in | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Stages in groups. ■ Task and Process ■ Roles and behaviours in groups. ■ Style of conflict management. ■ Skills appropriate to conflict management. ■ Exploring what helps / hinders good communication in a multi-cultural environment. ■ Preparing, giving and evaluating presentations. ■ Exploration of what helps / hinders participants in writing |

| | | |
|--|---|--|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Facilitation Skills | <p>relation to Report Writing skills.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ❑ Develop skills on how to give a clear Report. ❑ Understand the principles of facilitation and the facilitation process. ❑ Develop facilitation techniques | <p>reports.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Report Writing practise: Preparation of a report , outlines on a theme relevant to one's work / discussion and evaluation of these. ■ Principles and processes of facilitation ■ Facilitation techniques. ■ Prepare, implement and evaluate a facilitation exercise in a safe supportive environment. |
| <p>4. <u>Supports/Boundaries for Workers</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Time Management • Supervision • Personal Boundaries. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ❑ Develop skills on how to manage one's time more efficiently. ❑ Develop an awareness of the importance of supervision regarding best practice guidelines for workers. ❑ Understanding of personal boundaries in relation to one's work | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ The time management matrix. ■ Time planning. ■ Three approaches to managing yourself in the time allocated to you. ■ What is supervision and its purpose? ■ Sample contract for supervision. ■ Discussion of boundary issues in relation to one's work. |

APPENDIX 2: ASPIRE! SUMMARY OF ACHIEVEMENTS AND RESULTS

FINAL REPORT 2005 - EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

ASPIRE! is a trans-national co-operation partnership established in 2002 under the Asylum Seekers Theme of the EU EQUAL Programme. The partnership brings together a range of organisations implementing services and projects in Germany, the Netherlands, Portugal, Ireland, Sweden - and the Czech Republic as internal experts.

Development partnerships in each of these countries brought together a range of organisations and service providers who work directly with asylum seekers either through

- *Providing information* – information to asylum seekers themselves about the host country; and information to service providers and the general public about the needs of asylum seekers;

or through

- *Providing training for asylum seekers* – covering a range of subject areas and themes including vocational, language and supplementary training; with some effort also being invested in the validation of vocational skills

Overall Aim of the Partnership

Initial discussions and sharing of ideas amongst partners led to a fairly broad aim for the partnership: that is to “**improve health, well-being and quality of life of asylum seekers**”. An analysis of common problems faced by both asylum-seekers and organisations working with them determined that, from the beginning, the partnership attached central importance to exploiting the potential for sharing experience, ideas and possible solutions in pursuit of this aim. Furthermore, the successful integration of asylum seekers was seen as being key to effecting improvements in ‘health, well-being and quality of life’. The ASPIRE!! partnership, at its first trans-national meeting, committed itself to:

“(…) get inspiration, to find new ways of improving the situation for asylum seekers as well as to get new ideas of how to better integrate asylum seekers into society and labour market.”

Objectives and ‘Target Groups’:

The depth and richness of experience of ASPIRE!! Partners themselves was important in both setting and pursuing project objectives. Partners experience and expertise was, on the one hand, important in collective efforts to improve the situation of asylum seekers. But it was also important, on the other hand, that the capacities of each partner involved should be enhanced through the partnership experience. The trans-national dimension to the partnership was therefore seen as an important vehicle through which learning working in a cross-cultural environment could be effectively promoted:

“(…) to work together in a trans-national group which itself consists of a variety of partners is a difficult but also fascinating task for all members. A good communication and an awareness of cultural differences are two key factors for a successful co-operation.”

In this context, ASPIRE!! worked to three sets of objectives:

1. *To improve health, well-being and quality of life of asylum-seekers by working together for:*

- The improvement of services and service delivery;
 - The promotion of and active encouragement of cross-cultural understanding;
 - Positive influence on both national and European policies and legislation.
2. *To develop structures and procedures for mutual exchange, learning and transfer of expertise, methodologies, approaches and results, achieved by working together towards:*
- The sharing and joint analysis of outcomes and results being achieved;
 - A greater collective understanding the reasons for successful and less successful results;
 - The production of tools and methodologies – arising out of this understanding;
 - Evaluation of the trans-national project and its activities;
3. *To influence both national and European asylum policy through:*
- The translation of learning from the outcomes of activities, at national and European levels, into policy recommendations - aimed at those with decision-making capacity in the asylum seeking field.
 - The collection and dissemination of best practice

Even though these objectives were made explicit and universally agreed, it was also agreed that a certain degree of flexibility, and a responsiveness to needs and ideas arising during the project, would be necessary.

In pursuing objectives, the principle target groups for the trans-national project have been **asylum-seekers** (or other categories when applicable, **service providers**, **decision-makers** and **the general public**).

Main Project Activities

Activities of the ASPIRE!! project have been carried on through:

- ❑ *Working Groups (WGs)* - Thematic groups, focusing on improving the situation of asylum seekers in a range of areas: these are Health; Education and Employment; and Orientation and Capacity Building (see below);
- ❑ *Exchanges / Study Visits* - Several exchange visits were organised, allowing opportunities for the staff involved to learn by observing service delivery and activities their partners' countries;
- ❑ *General Assemblies* - General meetings of all staff involved in trans-national work (about 35-40 people), taking place bi-annually
- ❑ *Products / Dissemination* – Interim reports of WGs and visits, policy recommendations and a final project report are the most relevant products to be disseminated.

The Working Groups, established within General Assembly meetings, were made up of representatives from DPs with most experience and expertise on the particular theme.

- The main objective of the working group *Education and Employment* was to develop educational responses to challenges faced by asylum seekers integrating into to the labour market - either in the country of asylum or in the country of origin.
- The main objective of the *Health* working group health was to develop actions contributing to the improvement of the health and wellbeing of asylum seekers, refugees and immigrants in general.

- The main objective of the *Orientation and Capacity Building* working group was to develop methods of information delivery and mediation that could enable asylum seekers to interface effectively with service providers and host communities.

In all three working groups the first step was to share information and arrive at common positions in relation to the issues. Needs and realities about the living situation of asylum seekers in the different countries were therefore outlined in relation to each working group.

Study visits, organised within each working group and taking place between the general assemblies, aimed to bring participating staff together at the basic level of the DP's. Thus teachers, trainers, outreach-workers, doctors, social workers, members of different measures and others took part in different visits. All in all 10 mutual exchange programs were organised.

Products

From the beginning it was decided that ASPIRE! should be more than a mere basis for the exchange of good practice at DP level. Instead, partners agreed to pursue a "transnational project" - actively working together to formulate policy recommendations arising out of our practical experience and learning in EQUAL-funded projects. These recommendations were brought together in a report and have been subsequently pursued at European level. The need for action on three fronts was identified in this policy document:

1. Firstly, actions to strengthen the NGO sector as an effective partner in a sustainable statutory/NGA partnership.
2. Secondly actions to improve the health of asylum seekers, and enhance capacity of the target group through the creation of specialist positions in the health sector.
3. Thirdly, actions to integrate asylum seekers into social inclusion and anti-discrimination initiatives.

In Addition, ASPIRE! produced interim and final reports of the Working Groups, reports about visits as well as this final report.

The Learning Process

The TRANSNATIONAL -partnership was a basis for learning in several areas.

The first three General Assemblies were needed for planning and exploring the methods of working together – including the establishment of working groups. After establishing ways of communication, a process whereby learning points could be captured and policy recommendations produced was initiated. Nexus Europe Ltd. (based in Dublin) was contracted by ASPIRE! to facilitate this process.

Organisational and Structural Development

The process of working together included ongoing review of structures, and led to change and experimentation in methods of joint co-operation. It was decided after the second General Assembly, for example, that it was necessary to establish a *steering group*, made up of transnational co-ordinators of the DPs. This allowed for better preparation for General Assemblies - each involving the participation of 35 to 40 people.

For the process of developing the policy recommendation a *policy sub-committee* was established in August 2003 as a further working group that met between general assemblies. This group consists of

some transnational coordinators and two other DP members. The objectives were to prepare a policy recommendations, and to pursue a dissemination strategy in relation to recommendations.

An additional working group was set up in order to prepare and accompany the *evaluation process*. To ensure that all DP's were represented in decisions about evaluation, one person from each DP took part in this group. It was then decided to capture the learning process in a structured way, and an external expert was engaged to help with this.

Conclusions

The initiative of ASPIRE! was taken by DP AIRA in Portugal. The DPs responding to the invitation met in Prague in March 2002. People gathering were inspired by the opportunities the Equal program offered to work together with persons representing a wide range of countries in the European Union, together with one of the accession countries, and to investigate, elaborate and try to influence a issues regarded to be of great importance.

Equal is a learning program! People taking part in transnational work must be interested in and willing to learn. We learned that the most important quality is to be a good listener. The atmosphere at the first meeting set the standards for the whole working process so that this could happen. People were very dedicated from the beginning. Everyone tried to engage everybody else. All but the Irish party were using a foreign language; but the willingness to help each other to find the proper words to explain and to understand was commendable. It was important to create the space for asking for explanations, and for listening patiently; this was essential for the process from the beginning and has shaped all ASPIRE! activities and achievements.

At the very beginning we set up the aims and organised the work process. All along we reviewed the process and decided about changes we found necessary. The size of ASPIRE! and the tasks we took on required a division of the partnership into three working groups. The danger that ASPIRE! Would fall apart into three transnational partnerships was obvious, but strict organisation of the meetings prevented this happening. Working groups were given the time and opportunity to work together, and the whole General Assembly was kept informed at all times about what was going on in the WGs. Various study visits provided experiences which made the situation for the Asylum seekers in the different more universally understood.

The organisation placed high demands on each participating DP, especially through the rotating secretariat. But overburden in this respect led us to establish a coordinators group to run the process. The particular DP holding the secretariat was still in charge of the daily administrative work. But the result of the coordinators interim meetings was that the tasks ASPIRE! had taken on were carried out efficiently and effectively.

It has been very important to keep in touch at a whole range of levels. We have achieved this through meeting at GA for three whole days. Meetings have been prolonged by participants arriving the evening before the first meeting day, and not leaving the morning after the third meeting day. This meant that we dedicated five days twice a year to ASPIRE! meetings. There has been a core group attending every meeting consisting of, amongst others, the transnational coordinators.

We have met at places that have enabled everybody to participate. Babies and even families have taken part to facilitate their mothers' participation. Mailing contacts and phone calls has been used to keep in touch. Information at the single DPs local meetings have been another way of making ASPIRE! a part of

the DP work. Sharing interim reports from the working groups with people attending ASPIRE! Meetings, and people at the local level in each country have proved effective means of staying in touch.

We have been persistent. Even in the face of very daunting tasks, where we frequently did not agree at first, we persisted. We decided in some cases to take on experts. This pushed the process forward, and finally achieved the aim of agreeing and presenting policy recommendations to promote Health, Well being and quality of life for our target group - Asylum seekers and others not enjoying permanent permission to stay in the country where they are living.

Resources and commitments have come together to create a result, a product to be proud of. ASPIRE! means Asylum Seekers Participation Is the Result! ASPIRE! has presented a result – the Policy Recommendations. This will now be mainstreamed in the participating countries and at the European Parliament even after the closure of the ASPIRE!-co operation.

Results from the entire venture, as indicated in the policy document and the WG reports, are impressive by any standards. But the fact that these were achieved in a situation which required the participation and agreement of so many from so many different backgrounds is perhaps the greatest achievement of ASPIRE! For this reason, we think it is important to summarise some suggestions for other initiatives – based on our own experiences and learning:

- Bring together people who are dedicated
- Be curious and inquisitive.
- Establish clear and understandable tasks and aims.
- Organise the work tightly – scheduling for the entire working period with timetables, duties and responsibilities.
- Read the agreement over and over again, and do what you decided to do
- Be patient with each other but not compliant.
- Inspire each other with high expectations
- Accept that the process is as important as the result.
- Listen! Listen! Listen!
- Explain, explain again and explain once more
- Be patient - Thoughts take time!
- Have trust in each other
- Be loyal to the agreement and to your workmates and friends.
- Have some fun together, relax and enjoy the work.

APPENDIX 3: TRANSNATIONAL POLICY BRIEFS

POLICY BRIEF -1

ADDRESSING THE HEALTH NEEDS OF ASYLUM SEEKERS AND RELATED COMMUNITIES

ASPIRE!

Funded under the EQUAL initiative, ASPIRE! Is a trans-national cooperation partnership bringing together a range of organisations working with asylum seekers in Germany, the Netherlands, Portugal, Ireland, Sweden and the Czech Republic. Based on the experience of the organisations ASPIRE! has produced best practice policy recommendations for the provision of information, services and integration of asylum seekers. In particular ASPIRE! has identified 3 priority areas for action for EU Policy: Strengthening the non-state sector, addressing the health needs of asylum seekers and integrating asylum seekers into social inclusion and anti-discrimination initiatives.

In relation to the health needs of asylum seeker, there is a need to increase the capacity of health services to deliver appropriate responses, drawing on existing successful programmes. In particular ASPIRE! highlights the need for health advisors or mediators with responsibilities for health education, advice, interpretation, promotion and outreach.

Rationale

Work in ASPIRE! has demonstrated the value of this kind of approach – with measured improvement in health and well-being and through cost-effective outcomes. In particular:

- Treatment costs are reduced; especially through avoidance of mis-diagnosis as a result of unreliable information, of asylum seekers moving from one doctor to another, and through adoption of preventive approaches
- Improvement in health care standards through a more client centred approach
- More effective integration can be achieved through better cultural and social understanding
- Lessons learned in the health field using mediators can achieve better and more cost-effective results in other areas, such as education and housing.

What needs to be done?

Autonomous and dedicated health advisor/mediator positions

Ensure that the position of mediator or advisor is both autonomous and dedicated, stressing the need for ongoing trust to be maintained with clients

A strategic approach to multi-cultural and multi-lingual capacities

A multi-lingual and multi-cultural strategic approach is needed that would allow for recognition of diversity and the particular circumstances in different service contexts, but which facilitates a sharing of knowledge and competence between different services dealing with asylum seekers.

Formalise the Function

The skills and knowledge required to fulfil the function are as specialised as any other in the health system. There is therefore a need to take into account educational recognition and accreditation and a means for monitoring and maintaining standards.

How policy objectives can be achieved

Demonstrating the value of health mediation

- Proposals for health mediation should be discussed in the relevant sub-committees of the European Parliament.
- Opportunities for those Development Partnerships involved in health mediation under Equal to demonstrate value, cost-effectiveness and key lessons.

Working with other EU Programmes

Opportunities should be created to incorporate lessons and approaches into other EU programmes, and not just those dealing with health. For example those dealing with education are also relevant if professional recognition and support are to be secured.

Promoting health mediator/advisor profession as a labour market strategy

The European Commission should promote the success of the EQUAL project in developing health mediator/advisor role as an innovative labour market strategy through EU labour market policies.

Best Practice Examples

- Various benefits and successes are evident from the training and employment of health mediators in **RE-KOMP** (Sweden), **SPuK** (Germany) and **DP Perspectief** (Netherlands).
- In Lower Saxony, Germany, a network was established by **DP SPuK** between communities, advocates, health sector professionals and organisations working with asylum seekers to facilitate the exchange of information and to improve responses to asylum seekers
- Experience of **ARRIVAL Gothenburg** with professional health mediators

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INTEGRATING ASYLUM SEEKERS INTO SOCIAL INCLUSION AND ANTI-DISCRIMINATION INITIATIVES

ASPIRE!

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In relation to integration the intention is to address the right of asylum seekers to contribute to and belong to society; not just in terms of the labour market but in terms of overall social inclusion.

Rationale

Work in ASPIRE! has demonstrated that a very narrow approach to issues around the labour market, education and training can damage rather than enhance the capacity of asylum seekers. This has been seen through:

- ❑ Demotivation, poverty, low self-esteem, de-skilling and ongoing exclusion from progression opportunities
- ❑ Responses, particularly in training and education, have lacked relevance either to future participation in the host society or to future repatriation
- ❑ The tendency to ignore asylum seekers in social inclusion policies and programmes, resulting in 'gathering up future problems' for whichever state ultimately hosts the asylum seeker.

What needs to be done?

Anti-discrimination measures

As well as promoting inclusion, there is a need to combat discrimination as a means of exclusion through the promotion of anti-discrimination measures

Develop appropriate orientation and progression programmes

Ensure that orientation, and further progression programmes, take into account relevant conditions in both host country and country of origin.

Review National policies on inclusion for asylum seekers

The European Union and Member states should be encouraged to review policies, bearing in mind the need to avoid inconsistencies between approaches to foreign aid, social inclusion and seeking asylum

How policy objectives can be achieved

Promoting anti-discrimination across EU Programmes

Ensure that anti-discrimination policies and practices are adequately reflected in funding and in opportunities for mainstreaming lessons

Inclusion of Asylum Seekers in Policies at National and EU Levels

- ❑ The challenges identified in the area of integration under EQUAL should be explored and addressed in the Third Country Nationals Programme and the European Refugee Fund

- Asylum-seekers should be a target group in any policy or programme that combats discrimination and social exclusion.

Ensure Consistency Across Programmes

A working group should be established to explore how the capacity building support to asylum seekers provided within the EU under social inclusion programmes can be linked to foreign aid programmes to host countries in the event of voluntary or compulsory repatriation.

Best Practice Examples

- **"Berufliche Qualifizierung von Flüchtlingen"** in Erfurt, Germany has experience in intercultural training for teaching staff to fight discriminatory attitudes and prejudices.
- **Perspectief**, Netherlands provides a vocational training for young asylum seekers within the regular national education programme. **"Berufliche Qualifizierung von Flüchtlingen"** in Erfurt/Germany offers places in regular vocational training courses for asylum seekers together with other Germans.
- **Arrival Gothenborg** provides a programme for dignified return to rejected asylum seekers which is linked to voluntary repatriation programmes and to foreign aid initiatives.

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**STRENGTHENING THE NGO SECTOR TO ADDRESS THE NEEDS OF ASYLUM
SEEKERS**

ASPIRE!

Funded under the EQUAL initiative, ASPIRE! Is a trans-national cooperation partnership bringing together a range of organisations working with asylum seekers in Germany, the Netherlands, Portugal, Ireland, Sweden and the Czech Republic. Based on the practical experience of these partners, ASPIRE! has produced best practice policy recommendations for the provision of information, services and integration of asylum seekers. In particular ASPIRE! has identified 3 priority areas for action for EU Policy: Strengthening the non-state sector, addressing the health needs of asylum seekers and integrating asylum seekers into social inclusion and anti-discrimination initiatives.

In relation to the NGO sector, the intention is to achieve recognition of the strengths of the sector in terms of its flexibility, independence and responsiveness, while ensuring professionalism and quality of service delivery.

Rationale

Work in ASPIRE! has demonstrated the effectiveness of joint approaches and cooperation between the statutory and voluntary/NGO sectors in responding to the real needs of asylum seekers in different circumstances. Important reasons for promoting joint approaches and linkages include:

- The voluntary/NGO sector is acknowledged to have a degree of flexibility that allows for timely response to diverse and changing needs. This, together with the capacity to engage in effective outreach activities, can provide an effective compliment to many mainstream services.
- Gaining the trust of asylum seekers depends on a separation of functions, in particular that agencies providing support are seen to be independent from decision-making processes around asylum determination. The NGO sector offers a neutral space in this context and thus a platform for the freer expression of need. Good relations with the statutory agencies can lead to more effective targeting of services to where need is greatest. It can also inform mainstream agencies of changing needs over time.
- Statutory service providers are limited in the extent to which they can support integration with host communities. The NGO sector, drawing on a broad range of voluntary and community-based support, is an effective partner in this respect.

What needs to be done?

Longer-Term Contracts

Make funding available to NGOs on longer-term contracts, ensuring consistency and effectiveness in working relationships, sustainability of partnership projects and approaches, the capacity to engage in long-term planning, and the formal recognition of NGOs as legitimate partners in development.

Mechanisms for learning

By bringing actors together who represent the different levels of policy and legislation, and by making them aware of what is happening on the ground, the influence practical experiences can be substantially increased. There is therefore a need to develop networks to ensure that learning, in relation to needs, can be translated into policy and practice changes in mainstream services.

Autonomy for the NGO Sector

To realise the full benefits of their experience, it is essential that NGOs retain autonomy, especially in:

- Accurate articulation of need
- Good outreach practice
- Maintenance of independent profile

How policy objectives can be achieved

EU Programmes to Fund NGOs

- The European Parliament should ensure that funding be made available for NGOs to deliver programmes, preferably on a multi-year basis
- EU Programmes should support networking programmes involving state and non-state actors at national and trans-national levels

Support networks and policy working groups

- Policy recommendations can be brought to national decision makers through the national Thematic Networks.
- Policy working groups could be established in each Member State; within which joint learning can take place on an ongoing basis and through which mainstreaming lessons can be realised.

Using best practice

The cooperation model promoted by NGOs under the EQUAL programme should be adopted in future programmes

Best Practice Examples

- Local area-based partnerships in Ireland provided a more open and 'neutral' space for effective information provision.
- A Guide to the Reception and Integration of Refugees was produced in Portugal with a range of service providers which improved co-ordination between services.
- The Trans-national Cooperation Work of the ASPIRE! Project and EQUAL National Thematic Groups in Germany and Sweden

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APPENDIX 4: EXCERPT FROM FINAL AUDIT REPORT

RESULTS OF FINAL ASSESSMENTS

Final Appraisal from the Sonas Outreach Workers (four replies)

1. All of the ORWs have indicated that the work and activities of Sonas DP Ireland Ltd. have had a big or very big impact on their awareness of asylum seeker issues.
2. All of the ORWs rated highly or very highly the performance of Sonas in providing support for asylum seekers
3. All of the ORWs rated highly or very highly the impact of the networking activities between Sonas DP and other support groups and agencies.
4. Three of the ORWs rated highly or very highly the impact of the Sonas outreach service in assisting clients with the integration process itself.
5. All of the ORWs considered the project objectives to be highly or very highly relevant to tackling the support needs of asylum seekers.
6. Three of the ORWs rated highly or very highly the impact of the project in tackling the needs of the most vulnerable groups within the asylum seeker community. The remaining outreach worker declined to provide a rating for this impact.
7. All the ORWs rated the impact of their own contribution to the project as being positive or very positive.
8. Three of the ORWs rated the impact of Sonas on asylum seeker policy issues as being neutral. Only one outreach worker rated the policy impact of Sonas as positive.
9. Three of the ORWs rated the impact of the networking activities between Sonas and other organisations as being positive or very positive. The remaining ORW rated the networking of Sonas as having a neutral impact.
10. In evaluating the challenges to be faced in programme delivery, the ORWs came to the following conclusions:
 - a. Three ORWs considered the most serious challenge was gaining access to asylum seeker clients in private accommodation (2) or in their reception centres (1)
 - b. One of the ORWs assessed the greatest challenge to have been referring the asylum seekers to appropriate support agencies.
 - c. Three of the ORWS considered that the second greatest challenge had been communicating in different languages.

Final Appraisal from the DP Members (five replies)

1. Four of the five DP Board representatives indicated that the work and activities of Sonas DP Ireland Ltd. have had a positive or very positive impact on the awareness of asylum seeker issues within their own organisation. One representative evaluated the impact of Sonas in this area as neutral because their own organisation had already been working with asylum seekers for several years.
2. Four out of the five DP Board representatives indicated that the performance of Sonas in giving general support to asylum seekers had been rated very highly by their own organisations. The other representative rated the impact of Sonas in a less positive manner but commented that the outreach component of the work was most successful.
3. Three of the five DP Board representatives rated the impact of the networking activities of Sonas as being positive. Two rated the impact of these as neutral.
4. All five DP Board representatives rated the impact of Sonas in assisting clients with the integration process as having been positive or very positive.

5. Three of the five DP Board representatives considered that the Sonas aims and objectives had been very relevant whilst the other two considered them to be relevant to asylum seekers needs.
6. All five DP Board representatives rated the impact of the project in tackling the needs of the most vulnerable groups of asylum seekers as being positive (but not very positive).
7. All five of the DP Board representatives evaluated the impact of the partnership arrangements of the DP as being positive or very positive to the success of the project.
8. All five of the DP Board representatives rated the outreach worker training provided by Sonas as having had a positive impact.
9. Four out of the five DP Board representatives indicated that the impact of the project on policy issues has been neutral. The other representative has indicated that the project has had some positive policy impact.
10. The DP Board representatives were split in their assessment of whether the networking activities of Sonas with other support agencies and groups had achieved much impact.
11. In evaluating the main challenges to the success of the programme delivery, the DP Board representatives came to the following conclusions:
 - a. All five DP Board representatives considered that the most serious challenge faced was gaining access the asylum seeker clients.
 - b. Three of the DP Board representatives evaluated the second greatest challenge to be communicating in different languages.
 - c. The other two DP Board representatives evaluated the second greatest challenge to be getting the most up-to-date information to clients.

APPENDIX 5: A FAIR DEAL: RECOMMENDATIONS FOR IMPROVED SUPPORT SERVICES FOR ASYLUM SEEKERS IN IRELAND

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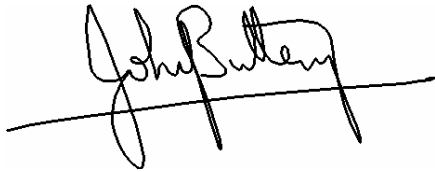
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INTRODUCTION

This document represents a synthesis of learning developed over the last two years by the SONAS Development Partnership (DP). SONAS is a partnership of organisations from different sectors across the country which came together with a common interest to improve the level of services to asylum seekers in Ireland. The group was successful in securing funds under the Asylum Seekers strand of the European Union's EQUAL Initiative and over the last two years has successfully implemented a pioneering outreach approach to the provision of information to asylum seekers.

In addition to the promotion of learning and best practice, one of the key objectives of EQUAL funding is to use the learning to influence policy development at national and EU level. It is with this in mind that we have prepared this document. It is based on the experience of dedicated ORWs who have been working constantly with asylum seekers in different environments and in different stages of the asylum process.

The SONAS ORWs were acutely aware not only of the difficulties encountered by asylum seekers on arrival and while going through the asylum process, but also of the constraints and challenges facing those providing services. In setting out these recommendations we have tried to look for solutions that derive benefit for both asylum seekers and those providing services, and to use them as a springboard to positive discussion with decision makers to put the collective resources of the state and voluntary sector to achieve a more supportive environment for asylum seekers.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'John BATTERY', written over a horizontal line.

John BATTERY
Chairperson
SONAS DP Ireland Ltd

SONAS D.P. IRELAND LTD.

The Support Organisation for the Needs of Asylum Seekers (SONAS) was established in 2002 under the European Union funded EQUAL Community Initiative. The following organisations make up the SONAS D.P. – Cork City Partnership, FÁS, Partas (Dublin) PAUL Partnership Limerick, SPIRASI (Dublin), Vincentian Refugee Centre (Dublin), and Wexford Area Partnership.

The partnership organisations set up SONAS to provide a support service for asylum seekers and to inform policy at local, national and European level. Asylum seekers face many difficulties when they enter the country including a complex asylum determination process, the absence of appropriate support services, the new social and cultural environment in which they find themselves, and the lack of intercultural experience within host communities. SONAS put in place a nationally co-ordinated, locally delivered programme through its outreach workers and Development Partnership. From these practical experiences the SONAS Development Partnership has informed the asylum policy debate.

The work of SONAS has a number of components:

Outreach work

The outreach programme was based in Cork, Dublin, Limerick and Wexford. Between December 2003 and September 2004, 1,745 people sought assistance from SONAS outreach workers (ORWs). The role of the ORWs was to provide information and support to asylum seekers in a range of locations, such as accommodation centres, office-based clinics and on the streets. The ORWs actively sought out asylum seekers to respond to their needs. This approach has been innovative in the Irish context. A further function of the ORWs was to develop supports for asylum seekers through existing community groups and to support the establishment of self-supporting groups where none existed.

Policy work

One of the key objectives of the outreach work has been to provide basic data by recording issues as they presented themselves and informing the policy learning for the Development Partnership. The learning provided by the outreach model developed by the SONAS Development Partnership gives legitimacy and credibility to policy formulation and subsequent recommendations. To assist with this process a Policy Sub-Committee was established which included asylum seekers. Key to the policy function has been the engagement with statutory organisations responsible for the welfare of asylum seekers, in particular the Reception and Integration Agency.

Training

SONAS has developed a training course for its ORWs. This training was a key element of SONAS's commitment to develop the skills of the ORWs to assist them carry out their role. This training is in the process of accreditation. The training includes modules on supporting asylum seekers, cultural awareness, group work and support/boundaries for workers.

Transnational work

SONAS has a crucial European dimension to its work which is carried out through its membership of the ASPIRE! Project. ASPIRE! is a transnational co-operation partnership established in 2002 under the Asylum Seekers Strand of the EU EQUAL Programme. ASPIRE! has eight member projects from six EU states. There are three main aims of ASPIRE!:

- o the implementation of projects and services to improve the health, well-being, and quality of life of asylum seekers;
- o the evaluation of the impact of these activities in order to draw out lessons in terms of good practice and effectiveness; and,

- o to promote national and transnational practice and policy relevant to meeting the needs of asylum seekers.

The following document is a contribution by SONAS from the learning gained from its outreach model on the impact of the asylum process on asylum seekers.

THE SOCIAL EXCLUSION OF ASYLUM SEEKERS

There is evidence from the work of the outreach workers employed by SONAS that social exclusion is an issue of concern. This section of the report will briefly review Ireland's policies of social inclusion and asylum seekers. This will be done by referring both to the European Council Directive (2003) *Laying down minimum standards for the reception of asylum seekers* and also to the main social inclusion policies pursued by the Irish Government.

The Council Directive (2003) *Laying down minimum standards for the reception of asylum seekers*¹ was the third piece of legislation from the asylum agenda of the Amsterdam Treaty to be adopted. It applies to all member states except Ireland and Denmark, who have opted out of this directive. The Directive establishes minimum standards for the reception of asylum seekers in the EU which are thought to be sufficient to ensure 'a dignified standard of living and comparable living conditions in all Member States'.² The Directive specifies what the minimum conditions are for Member States. They include the following: information, provisions on residence and freedom of movement, family unity, material reception conditions, schooling and the education of children, employment and access to vocational training. The adoption of the Directive by the EU Council was welcomed by the European Council on Refugees and Exiles (ECRE) suggesting that it 'represents a significant milestone in the path towards a Common European Asylum System. ECRE believes that the adopted text generally provides an adequate minimum standard of reception for applicants for asylum'.³

Although Ireland has derogated itself from this Directive, the standards of reception of asylum seekers in Ireland are broadly in line with the Directive and in some instances more favourable. The significant departure from the Directive is on the important issue of employment where the minimum standard requires that at the very least an applicant for asylum be allowed to work after one year of waiting for his/her application to be determined, if the delay is not attributed to the applicant. Ireland does not allow an applicant for asylum to work whatever the length of the asylum determination process. Apart from this issue Ireland's policies towards asylum seekers in general match the standards of the Directive but at times have proved difficult to put into practice. For example, all asylum seekers are entitled to free medical care, but asylum seekers may not in practice easily access medical services due to language, cultural difficulties and other barriers.

Since the mid-1990s successive Irish governments have developed an array of policies and introduced legislation across a range of social policy areas which are intended to be consistent with promoting social inclusion and combating poverty. The most important and substantial of these policies have been developed as a result of or through various national partnership agreements. The incorporation of the social partners into the policy making process has ensured that the most important and pressing social, as well as economic, needs and challenges are included for action by government. There are four primary influential sources for the development of policies related to poverty and social exclusion:

- o the *National Anti-Poverty Strategy/Inclusion*,
- o the current national partnership agreement *Sustaining Progress* alongside its predecessor the *Programme for Prosperity and Fairness*,

¹ Council Directive 2003/9/EC of 27 January 2003 *Laying down minimum standards for the reception of asylum seekers*. Brussels: EU Council

² *ibid* p.1

³ ECRE (2003) *ECRE Information Note on the Council Directive 2003/9/EC of 27 January 2003 Laying down minimum standards for the reception of asylum seekers*. www.ecre.org/eudevelopments/reception/infonote.shtml

- o the supporting National Economic and Social Council's review *An Investment in Quality: Services, Inclusion and Enterprise*, and
- o the *National Development Plan*

References to asylum seekers in these policy documents are scarce. In the National Anti-Poverty Strategy asylum seekers are not referred to in the original document but were included in the Reviewed NAPS as a new key area of disadvantage, under 'migrants and members of ethnic minority groups'. There is only one direct reference to asylum seekers in the NAPS Review, where a commitment is given to providing the resources for 'an efficient, fair independent and transparent procedure for processing asylum applications'.⁴ Asylum seekers are also included in the NAPS/Inclusion, the anti-poverty strategy for the period 2003-2005. Again in this document the main initiative on asylum seekers is to achieve a target date of six months for the processing of asylum claims. They are also referred to in relation to education under the section on anti-racism and inter-culturalism in education and in the section on literacy and language training.⁵

In *Sustaining Progress* there is no direct reference to asylum seekers but there are a number of references in the *Programme for Prosperity and Fairness* (PPF) where a number of commitments were made, the most directly relevant to asylum seekers are as follows:

- o policy on providing for asylum seekers' needs will be developed in consultation with Government Departments, State agencies, NGOs and social partners.
- o the role and funding of NGOs and community organisations will be reviewed and any funding available will be allocated in a cohesive and co-ordinated manner with due regard to their role in supporting asylum seekers and refugees and promoting a tolerant and inclusive society.⁶

The National Economic and Social Council (NESC) in its commentary, *An Investment in Quality: Services, Inclusion and Enterprise*, which informed the Sustaining Progress Partnership Agreement, refers to asylum seekers as a vulnerable group:

*once in Ireland they find themselves under suspicion of being economic migrants seeking to evade immigration controls; their differential treatment by the Irish state (direct provision, finger printing, denial of the right to work, liability to deportation, etc.) marks them out as a special group and can lower their status in the eyes of some people.*⁷

The NESC makes a number of statements about asylum seekers the most relevant to improving the social inclusion of this group are:

- o that 'the single best way to bring asylum seekers to enjoy the same treatment and rights as others in the state is through ensuring the speedy, courteous and impartial processing of their claims' and it recommends that the availability of sufficient resources to address this issue should be a priority;
- o its recommendation to encourage and facilitate community and voluntary groups 'to form contacts with asylum-seekers in the state and foster public understanding of their situation'.⁸

⁴ Department of Social, Community and Family Affairs (2002) *Building an Inclusive Society: Review of the National Anti Poverty Strategy under the Programme for Prosperity and Fairness*. Dublin: Department of Social, Community and Family Affairs, p.26

⁵ Office for Social Inclusion (2004) *National Action Plan Against Poverty and Social Exclusion: First Annual Report – Implementation of Plan 2003-2004*. Dublin: Office for Social Inclusion

⁶ Government of Ireland (2000) *Programme for Prosperity and Fairness*. Dublin: The Stationery Office p.102-103

⁷ *ibid.* p.410

⁸ *ibid.* p.412-413

There are no direct references to asylum seekers in the *National Development Plan*.

When one considers the strides made by the state in recent years to combat social exclusion and poverty the attention given to asylum seekers in this regard is limited. The main policy option appears to be the speeding up of the asylum application process, while the policy of direct provision and dispersal seems to be the preferred state welfare option for asylum seekers. One of the priority areas for action identified by ASPIRE is that of 'integrating asylum seekers into social inclusion and anti-discrimination initiatives'. The ASPIRE! Project recommends that this be done in a number of different ways including 'campaigning for the inclusion of asylum seekers as a named target group in EU and national policies on social inclusion'.⁹This priority area for action identified by ASPIRE! has yet to be realised in Ireland.

⁹ Nexus (2004) *ASPIRE! Transnational partnership: Policy Recommendations April 2004*. Dublin: Nexus/SONAS, p.22 [The ASPIRE! policy document is available from SONAS]

LEARNING FROM THE WORK OF SONAS

SONAS D.P. identified as a priority policy area the issue of basic rights of asylum seekers in direct provision. Direct provision is the Irish Government's response to providing for the welfare of people who are in the process of claiming asylum. Through direct provision people who are in the asylum process are allocated to an accommodation centre after a short stay in a reception centre in the Dublin area. The accommodation centres are dispersed throughout the state. Basic needs of asylum seekers are provided for in these centres through accommodation and full-board. The residents of these centres receive an amount of €19.10 for adults and €9.60 for each child per week. All meals are provided by the centres and residents are not permitted to cook for themselves. Asylum seekers must reside in these centres for the duration of the processing of their claim for asylum.

Through the work of its Outreach Workers (ORWs) SONAS has become aware of the different practices, which apply in the various accommodation centres. These centres are a mixture of properties such as hotels, hostels, convents, and newly developed accommodation centres consisting of mobile homes and purpose built. The different standards also apply to how people are treated between the different centres. The combination of the many factors within the direct provision system, i.e., the type and location of the accommodation centre, the management style used in the centre, and the attitude of local communities, impacts enormously on the residents. These factors combined with the actual process of claiming asylum and the length of time this process normally takes, have the potential to generate problems in addressing the basic needs of asylum seekers in direct provision.

The purpose of this section is to examine some of the key issues which impact on asylum seekers living in direct provision leading towards the recommendation of a structure for good practice based on the experience of SONAS. This experience is supplemented by the views of 28 residents and managers from five accommodation centres who were consulted for this report.¹⁰ Furthermore, relevant good practice learning from the ASPIRE! Project was taken into account. The key issues to be outlined in this section are

- o management of centres,
- o information and support services, and
- o isolation and promotion of integration.

Management of Centres

Impact of accommodation centre staff on the lives of the residents

One of the features of the consultation with residents for this paper was the central role of accommodation centre staff in their lives. There were mixed perceptions about staff based on two broad parameters, staff who listened and were sensitive to the needs of residents, and staff who did not listen and were not sensitive to their needs.

Residents were aware of the limitations imposed on staff. They knew that staff have rules and regulations to follow. Residents expected staff to implement those rules in a fair and even-handed manner. Difficulties arose for residents when standards were not adhered to and staff treated them in an uneven manner.

The managers who were consulted for this paper have backgrounds in the hotel and hospitality business. They are in some cases employed directly by owners of the centres or by catering companies on behalf of the owners. None of them have had any training specifically for the work in the accommodation centres with asylum seekers, such as in cultural awareness. Given the nature of the work and the needs of the

¹⁰ Consultation meetings took place during June 2004.

residents in the centres there appears to be gaps in the expertise of the staff. Some staff have overcome this lack of expertise due to their own natural instinct for working with people in difficult circumstances, but some do not.

Feedback and Communication Procedures

When problems arise in accommodation centres residents may not know to whom they should turn to raise their concerns. As most people do not see the system as being helpful to them there may be a lack of trust in official sources. One resident said 'I cannot trust anyone to complain'. This lack of trust is compounded by fear according to FLAC, 'asylum seekers who are unhappy with the accommodation provided by the State are often afraid to complain in case this will detrimentally affect their application for asylum.'¹¹ SONAS ORWs and residents report that complaints are often not followed up. One resident in a centre complained of the lack of hygiene in the shower facilities at the centre in which she resided. She said that she has complained to the manager but that nothing happened. It is acknowledged that there are complaints and inspections procedures in place in accommodation centres but there are questions about the efficacy of these procedures.

Privacy

Residents point to a lack of privacy in the accommodation centres. This is manifested in a number of different ways as reported by the residents: adults and children having to share the same bedrooms; a number of non-related individuals sharing rooms that are too small; staff entering rooms as they wish; and walls that are described as paper-thin. It was apparent from comments made by residents that lengthy periods of time living in such conditions have made people feel angry and stressed.

The difficulties experienced by those interviewed for this report have been expressed in previous reports carried out on direct provision. The Irish Refugee Council report by Fanning et al, *Beyond the Pale* (2001),¹² the Partnership Trá Lí (2001) report *Meeting the Needs of Asylum Seekers in Tralee*,¹³ and the NASC report *The Needs of Asylum Seekers in Cork* (2002)¹⁴ all point to the stress generated by the accommodation arrangements in direct provision centres. According to Fanning et al (2001) parents and children are affected psychologically due to the tensions and pressures experienced in overcrowded conditions. They point out that children's developmental well being was negatively impacted upon as a result of the lack of appropriate housing conditions.¹⁵

While there may be good reasons for staff to enter people's rooms; for example, for cleaning purposes or for health and safety purposes. This should only be done with the permission of those who normally live in that room based on strict guidelines for staff of centres. One resident reported that 'they control you; they can enter your room any time they like when we are not at home'.

Diet

Food and its provision is a contentious issue with residents of accommodation centres. At best the food is described as bland and monotonous and at worst it is seen as wholly inadequate. Food also plays a central role, both real and symbolic, in relation to many of the other difficulties faced by the residents. The reality for most residents is that they have no control over the type of food they are served nor do they have control over when it is served. Food is not important solely for social purposes it is also important from a diet and health perspective, and as such great care needs to be taken to ensure that residents eat

¹¹ FLAC (2003) *Direct Discrimination? An analysis of the scheme of Direct Provision in Ireland*. FLAC: Dublin, p 36

¹² B. Fanning et al (2001) *Beyond the Pale – Asylum Seeking Children and Social Exclusion in Ireland*. Dublin: Refugee Council

¹³ A. Collins (2001) *Meeting the Needs of Asylum Seekers in Tralee*. Tralee: Partnership Trá Lí

¹⁴ A. Collins (2002) *The Needs of Asylum Seekers in Cork*. Cork: NASC

¹⁵ *supra* 10

appropriately. In some centres residents report that efforts have been made to vary the food provided and to cook dishes from the countries represented by the residents.

It has been reported by some residents that they are denied meals in their centres if they arrive late for their meals (even as reported in one centre, if they are attending English classes and cannot make it back on time). Meal-times were referred to again and again by residents in all of the centres as the mile-stones in the passing of meaningless and unfulfilling days. "Every day is the same. You are like a zombie – get up for breakfast, wait for lunch, if you want", says a resident in one centre. In another centre a resident says 'everyday eat; go to sleep, nothing to do'.

Information and Support Services

One of the most frequent enquiries to the ORWs for assistance is in relation to information. The information sought usually takes one of three forms related to:

- o the asylum process
- o social welfare
- o connections to the local community and services provided in the local community

The asylum process

The information sought in relation to the asylum process covers a range of associated issues, such as, information about the different stages of the process, the length of the process, the Refugee Legal Service, appeals, delays, leave to remain, deportation, and refugee status. Those who seek information on the asylum process often present to the ORWs in an anxious state.

Social welfare

After the asylum process the second largest area of information sought is in relation to social welfare. The information sought is related to entitlements and decisions made by community welfare officers. Again there are often high levels of anxiety associated with these information requests.

Connections to the local community and services provided in the local community

The third general area of information sought is related to the local community and services provided in that community. Examples of these requests are for information on English language training, other educational and training opportunities, integration activities, opportunities to do voluntary work.

There are a number of sources of information for people living in direct provision, provided by the relevant agencies, such as the Reception and Integration Agency, the Office of the Refugee Applications Commissioner and the Refugee Legal Service. The extent, quality and form of the information provided are not in all circumstances satisfactory. The ASPIRE! Project reports that feedback from its partners point to three key problems with information:

1. Appropriateness of information content – where the information given is not necessarily the information that is needed
2. Appropriateness of the information-giving process – where information is given in a way that leads to confusion or lack of clarity on the part of the receiver
3. Appropriateness of the information-giving context – where the surroundings within which information services are located can add to a sense of distance, lack of security and lack of trust¹⁶

¹⁶ Supra 1 p.8 [see working group document – to be published]

Isolation and Promotion of Integration

Activities

Residents of accommodation centres complain of being bored, that they and their children have little to do. The lack of activities also adds to unhappiness in other areas of life in the centres. Some people point out that the physical impact of inactivity has added to their size and weight. In the majority of the centres visited it was apparent that efforts have been made and continues be made to develop activities for residents and their children. In some centres, even in those with a lack of space, the management of the centres have tried to improve facilities for their residents. In larger centres where facilities are greater there are noticeably more activities available. There are some residents in all accommodation centres who engage in activities that are provided in the centres and a number of people seek activities outside of the centres and become involved in groups and organisations locally. There are also some local community groups that engage with their local accommodation centres providing support and the activities for the residents in and outside of the centres. Nonetheless, in all centres people complain about having nothing to do.

Children have particular needs for activities to assist with and enhance their development. In the centres visited for the preparation of this document where children reside, efforts have been made to provide play activities. However, these activities appear to be arranged in an ad hoc and unplanned way. In one centre a national youth organisation has set up a club for children. In another there is a staffed crèche, but it is inadequate for the number of young children in the centre. According to the UNHCR (1994: p.40) 'play is vital to the healthy development of a child'.¹⁷ The UNHCR guidelines on the protection and care of children continue by stating that reception centres should have play areas from the time they are established. Apart from the recognition of the importance of play by the UNHCR, the Irish State has launched a national play policy as part of its commitment made to the *UN Convention on the Rights of the Child* (1989) and the *National Children's Strategy* (2000). The play policy *Ready, Steady Play – A National Play Policy* (2004) sets out to do a number of things including, to raise awareness of the importance of play and to ensure that children's play needs are met.¹⁸

Isolation

A persistent issue for residents is that of isolation with the location of the centre a key contributing factor. In discussions with residents it was found that people living in urban areas were as likely to be isolated as those living outside or on the fringes of the urban areas. Living in an accommodation centre in the middle of a town appears to be isolating due to the fact that the centre is readily recognised as 'the centre for asylum seekers'. To be identified with the centre can lead to name-calling and racist remarks. Where isolation appeared to be less of an issue was in a village location in which local community members visit the centre and structured activities for children are organised through the centre.

The lack of transport to larger urban centres adds to their isolation. Even where transport is provided for residents at no cost to them, the reported limited nature of this provision is seen as a problem. For those with no access to free transport the lack of income allows them to use public transport only once or twice a week. This was reported by residents in centres which are on outskirts of urban centres and where public transport is provided. Their main problem of access to these urban centres is the lack of income to pay for fares.

¹⁷ UNHCR (1994) *Refugee Children: Guidelines on Protection and Care*. Geneva: UNHCR

¹⁸ Asylum seeking children are referred to in the National Children's strategy but in a very general rather than specific way. For example, it is stated that there is a 'need for education so that we can develop an inclusive society' p.70)

Central to the issue of isolation is the reaction of the local community. When members of the local community are willing to become involved and support the residents of the accommodation centre, isolation appears to be less of an issue. The converse of this also appears to be the case. Access to bigger population centres also seems to cause less isolation as people are not as easily identified as being the 'asylum seekers'.

Dependency

Dependency in accommodation centres emerges from a combination of factors, which include lack of information, lack of control over what one eats and when one eats, the lack of worthwhile activities in which to engage, the length of time in an accommodation centre, and the experience of isolation. Individual factors are also important elements, such as the person's own psychological capacity to cope with the situation in which they find themselves.

The fact that individuals and families are made dependent on the state for all of their basic needs affects their capacity for independent care of themselves. Low self-esteem, as well as skills degeneration and health problems may develop as a result of dependency. This is evident through reports from staff at accommodation centres and SONAS's ORWs. It was reported by staff from two centres that dependency and institutionalisation is a major problem for asylum seekers who eventually leave the accommodation centres as they find it hard to manage their lives outside in private rented accommodation.

In research carried out by Faughnan et al (2002) on the community welfare service and asylum seekers, the authors quote the views of two Community Welfare Officers on the issue of dependency

'When people come off direct provision, CWOs are finding that they are unable to manage, they have no money management skills; they have lost their ability to cope.'

*'They are totally dependant on the system and don't realise how expensive it is to live outside direct provision'*¹⁹

A further potentially damaging aspect of dependency is where children see their parents in a dependent role. The image of a parent not having control over the fundamental aspects of daily living and lacking in the ability to make basic decisions may lead to a child perceiving their parents as being ineffectual. Such perceptions, especially over a period of time, may impact negatively on the parent child relationship.²⁰

¹⁹ P. Faughnan et al (2002) *Patching Up the System: The Community Welfare Service and Asylum Seekers*. Dublin: Social Science Research Centre, UCD, p.25

²⁰ See UNHCR (1994) *Refugee Children: Guidelines on Protection and Care*. Geneva: UNHCR, p 31
See also J. Stapleton (2001) *Direct Provision and Dispersal – 18 Months On*. Dublin Irish Refugee Council,
p 12

RECOMMENDATIONS AND STRUCTURE FOR ACTION

A range of issues have been considered in the previous pages, which impact on the daily lives of asylum seekers in direct provision. In this section some key recommendations will be made and a structure for dealing with these issues will be set out.

Management of Centres

A number of points emerge about the management of centres in the body of this report. It is recommended that key issues be addressed under the heading of management:

- o There is a need for training of accommodation centre management and staff. It is recommended that training developed by SONAS for working with asylum seekers be used.
- o There is a need for discussion about rules and regulations in accommodation centres between the RIA and groups representing and working with asylum seekers as there are questions about the appropriateness of some of these rules and regulations.
- o A mechanism for consulting between residents accommodation centre management should be developed and training provided where necessary, as many of the problems appear to arise as a result of a lack of proper communication.
- o It is acknowledged that there is a complaints procedure in place in accommodation centres but this procedure is inadequate and is disadvantageous to asylum seekers. It is recommended that an independent complaints procedure be put in place.
- o As food is a central issue of dissatisfaction in accommodation centres it is recommended that a mechanism for addressing this dissatisfaction is developed.
- o It is recommended that efforts be made to give families and individuals more space in accommodation centres.

Information and support services

The outreach service provided by SONAS has been its key innovative feature. Throughout its period of operation the outreach service and the one-to-one contact with asylum seekers has been of great benefit to the individuals assisted by that service and should be continued into the future. The following are recommendations on information and support services:

- o It is recommended that an outreach information and support service to asylum seekers continue to be provided in the form developed by SONAS.
- o It is recommended that the availability of up-to-date information to asylum seekers be provided in a prompt and appropriate manner.
- o It is recommended that residents leaving accommodation centres be provided with guidance on money management and budgeting by MABS.
- o It is recommended that the transport needs of asylum seekers on the fringe of population areas be improved.
- o It is recommended that local services, such as education, community welfare, and health, are provided with appropriate interpretation services.

Isolation and Promotion of Integration

It has been noted in the body of this report that the local community plays a very important part in assisting to combat isolation and in promoting the integration of asylum seekers into their local communities. Furthermore, participation in activities within and outside the centres plays an important part in reducing isolation. The following recommendations concern the development of the role of local communities and activities in accommodation centres:

- o It is recommended that support groups be given increased assistance to engage with local direct provision centres.
- o It is recommended that awareness raising of issues relating to asylum seekers be carried out in local communities where accommodation centres are located.
- o It is recommended that educational opportunities be provided for asylum seekers.
- o It is recommended that activities committees be established in every accommodation centre and that full consultation take place with residents about proposed activities.
- o It is recommended that leisure activities for adults and children be organised so that all sections of the accommodation centre community are encouraged to engage in them.

Structure for Action

Not all of the above recommendations can be easily achieved and not all of the related issues impact on asylum seekers in direct provision equally. As a result, the following structure is aimed at addressing a number of core issues which SONAS believes can be addressed. The priority issues are:

- o training for centre management
- o information on an outreach basis
- o food
- o complaints
- o living space within centres
- o local community involvement
- o activities and fight against boredom

The above issues can be addressed through two existing sources and the development of another:

- o The Reception and Integration Agency
- o The Accommodation Centres
- o The provision of information and support workers

It is suggested that the following is how this structure would work:

- o training for centre management – to be a requirement of contracts with providers of the accommodation centres. A training course for managers should be piloted based on the course developed by SONAS.
- o information on an outreach basis – that this successful model be promoted through existing information agencies such as Comhairle.
- o food – that a consultative process with residents in a small number of centres be piloted to determine how problems relating to food are resolved.
- o complaints – that a more user friendly and locally based complaints procedure be piloted. It is suggested that the RIA would involve other organisations in this pilot with them.
- o living space within centres – with the decreasing numbers of applicants for asylum space will be freed up in accommodation centres. It is suggested that some of this space be used to improve the allocation of living space to residents.
- o local community involvement – that the information outreach service would also include the role of support worker, one of whose functions would be to actively engage the local community in their local accommodation centre. It is suggested that funding for this aspect of the outreach service would be sought through existing local agencies.
- o activities and fight against boredom – the support worker will also have as part of his/her role the function of developing educational and other activities through the local community and asylum seekers in the accommodation centre.

APPENDIX: INFORMATION ON PERSONS WHO AVAILED OF SONAS OUTREACH SERVICES

Table 1: Numbers using service

Dec 2002 – Sept 2004

| Gender | Number |
|---------------|---------------|
| Male | 938 |
| Female | 807 |
| Total | 1745 |

Table 2: Status of those availing of service

| Status at time of initial contact | | Sub-total | Total |
|--|---|------------------|--------------|
| In asylum process | <i>Reception/Arrival</i> | 234 | |
| | <i>Pre-interview</i> | 578 | |
| | <i>Post interview</i> | 118 | |
| | <i>Awaiting appeal</i> | 136 | |
| | <i>Post appeal</i> | 110 | 1176 |
| Deportation | | | 22 |
| Leave to remain | Awaiting leave to remain | 125 | |
| | Awaiting Leave to remain (Irish Born Child) | 110 | 235 |
| Residency | General residency | 66 | |
| | Residency (Irish Born Child) | 21 | 87 |
| Refugee Status | | | 56 |
| Other | | | 169 |
| Total | | | 1745 |

Table 3: Referral Issues

Dec 2002 – Sept 2004

| Issue | Total |
|---------------------------|--------------|
| Asylum Process | 1279 |
| Education | 324 |
| Health Services | 224 |
| Community Welfare Service | 99 |
| Social Welfare | 265 |
| Accommodation | 290 |
| Direct Provision | 89 |
| Childcare | 13 |
| Voluntary and Community | 314 |
| Host Community | 303 |
| Language | 393 |
| Specialist Services | 330 |
| Social and Cultural | 114 |
| Sport and Leisure | 70 |
| Religion | 30 |
| Food | 80 |
| Volunteering | 234 |
| Voluntary Return | 34 |
| Other | 374 |
| Total | *4859 |

* People who used the Outreach Service often had more than one issue to be dealt with

APPENDIX 6: PROPOSAL FOR IMPROVEMENT IN PLANNING, COORDINATION AND DELIVERY OF SERVICES FOR ASYLUM SEEKERS

PROPOSAL FOR IMPROVEMENT IN PLANNING, COORDINATION AND DELIVERY OF SERVICES FOR ASYLUM SEEKERS

Rationale

The proposal has been developed to enable the lessons from the experience of SONAS DP in relation to the information and other support needs of asylum seekers in Ireland. It has identified support mechanisms that could be put in place at national level to assist in translating policy into best practice in the delivery of services. SONAS DP has also taken into account the policy recommendations being made at European level by the ASPIRE! Trans-national Partnership, which has called for (a) greater collaboration between governments and the NGO sector and (b) that each asylum seeker and refugee should have access to easily available and easily understood information about the asylum procedure and their host country, including state and community based services. This proposal comes at a time of declining numbers of new asylum seekers as well as a reduction in the time asylum seekers spend in the process. SONAS DP believes that these factors offer an opportunity to look at more effective use of resources using the experience and expertise of different partners working in collaboration. Finally, SONAS believes that the proposal will lead to benefits to asylum seekers in the quality of life experienced while in the process, as well as in their understanding and ability to fulfil the requirements of the asylum process.

Objective

The main objective is to promote policy and practice change in services to asylum seekers through an Expert Working Group (EWG) based on collaboration between statutory and non-governmental bodies with experience of working with the target group.

Membership

It should be noted that SONAS DP has yet to consult with agencies interested in participation. However, SONAS would regard the participation of the following agencies as important to the success of the project:

- Reception and Integration Agency
- Equality Authority
- SONAS DP
- Comhairle and/or Refugee Information Service
- Irish Refugee Council
- Department of Education and Science Curriculum Development Unit
- Health Service Executive
- Office of Social Inclusion
- Other Non-Governmental Organisations working with Asylum Seekers

Terms of Reference

- Develop and agree an agenda for action detailing the key priority and practice issues for services to asylum seekers
- Use the learning and policy lessons developed by SONAS DP to inform the development of this agenda
- Support and develop the work initiated by SONAS in developing training and capacity building

- The Group will carry out a review of unmet needs and lessons learned from current policy and practice within different agencies
- Where appropriate the group will commission research and/or policy work on areas where insufficient information exists
- The Group will bring specific policy recommendations to decision makers within agencies and will support agencies in executing appropriate policy and practice changes

Resource Requirements

- The Group will be supported by a policy worker to carry out the following tasks
 - Organise and facilitate meetings of the group
 - Write up policy papers on behalf of the group
 - Engage with statutory and voluntary groups on behalf of the group
 - Conduct and/or manage research as requested by the group
 - Facilitate dialogue between the Group and Policy Makers
 - Investigate relevant policy areas with a view to greater co-ordination and integration of practice
- The Policy Worker be located within SONAS DP.

Expected Outputs

The following are the expected outputs of the project:

- Active participation and exchange between group membership
- Training programme(s) developed and endorsed for those working with asylum seekers
- Adoption of best practice within organisations working with asylum seekers
- Policy report(s) produced outlining desired policy and practice changes
- Recommendations from policy reports adopted and implementation process agreed
- Implementation of recommended initiatives in piloted areas
- Further policy development and research needs identified
- Greater co-ordination and integration of policy and practice

Time Frame

The expected time frame is 18 months

Costing

A budget of €95,000.00 is anticipated for an 18 month costs to include:

- Salary and related costs
- Admin Support Costs
- Meeting costs
- Travel and Subsistence
- Report writing, dissemination
- Additional research costs

APPENDIX 7: POVERTY, SOCIAL EXCLUSION AND REFUGEES: A DISCUSSION DOCUMENT

POVERTY, SOCIAL EXCLUSION AND REFUGEES: A DISCUSSION DOCUMENT

Ireland's response to poverty and social exclusion

Over the past ten years Ireland has developed a multi-faceted response to the issue of poverty and social exclusion. In March 1995 the Irish Government agreed to develop and implement a National Anti-Poverty Strategy at the UN World Summit for Social Development in Copenhagen. This commitment became a central feature of Partnership 2000, the fourth partnership programme agreed between the Government and the social partners. The National Anti-Poverty Strategy (NAPS) has remained a core element of subsequent partnership agreements.

The development of the NAPS recognised the challenge of poverty and social exclusion in Ireland at a point when the Irish economy was, for the first time, beginning to provide rapidly increasing benefits for Irish society. It was acknowledged that these benefits should be fairly distributed and used 'to tackle the underlying causes of poverty and social exclusion'²¹. The investment in tackling poverty and social exclusion was in the interests of all in society as the costs of not taking on poverty would curtail economic growth and bring about a less cohesive society. Furthermore, the *Sharing in Progress*, the national anti-poverty document published in 1997, identifies three particular factors on analysing the data on poverty:

1. Addressing poverty needs to be based on an understanding of the multidimensional nature of poverty.
2. Addressing poverty involves tackling the deep-seated underlying structural inequalities that create and perpetuate it.
3. There is a need to give particular attention to a number of key areas if any significant advance on the tackling of poverty is to be achieved. These include:
 - Educational disadvantages
 - Unemployment, particularly long-term unemployment
 - Income adequacy
 - Disadvantaged urban areas
 - Rural poverty²²

The definitions of poverty and social exclusion in Ireland have been institutionalised through the NAPS and through Partnership 2000 and subsequent partnership agreements. Poverty is defined by the NAPS as:

*People are living in poverty, if their income and resources (material, cultural and social) are so inadequate as to preclude them from having a standard of living which is regarded as acceptable by Irish society generally. As a result of inadequate income and resources people may be excluded and marginalised from participating in activities which are considered the norm for other people in society.*²³

²¹ Government of Ireland (1997) *Sharing in Progress: National Anti-Poverty Strategy*. Dublin: The Stationery Office, p. 2

²² Government of Ireland (*supra* 1), p.8

²³ Government of Ireland (*supra* 1), p.30

Partnership 2000 describes social exclusion as

*Cumulative marginalisation: from production (unemployment), from consumption (income poverty), from social networks (community, family and neighbours), from decision making and from an adequate quality of life.*²⁴

These definitions are wide-ranging and incorporate the multi-dimensional nature of poverty and social exclusion. Poverty is no longer defined purely in terms of a lack of adequate income, although income adequacy is a central factor. Poverty is also assessed on a range of other factors which include the lack of employment and being marginalised from key social networks, and more generally from participating in and enjoying an adequate quality of life.

Poverty in the context of these definitions is called relative poverty, where 'people are considered to be living in poverty if their standard of living is substantially less than the general standard of living in society'²⁵. According to the Combat Poverty Agency (CPA) poverty is not inevitable, '...it is an outcome of the way society allocates resources such as money, wealth, jobs, education, housing, healthcare and so on'²⁶. The CPA identifies a number of factors that influence the likelihood of being in poverty:

- having a job or not and the type of job
- size of family and type of family
- age
- people's social circumstances or social class
- gender
- disability
- educational experience
- ill health
- whether people own/rent a home
- experience of discrimination
- sexual orientation

It is noteworthy that being an asylum seeker, or indeed a refugee or immigrant, is not a factor that influences the likelihood of being in poverty in Ireland, according to this list. For those who work with or who are familiar with any of these groups, would surely question their absence.

Asylum seekers, poverty, social exclusion and direct provision a review of the literature

No studies on poverty and social exclusion of asylum seekers have been carried out in Ireland. However, there have been a number of studies which report on the experience of asylum seekers in direct provision as well as some published analyses of government policy which, in part at least, refer to the poverty and social exclusion of asylum seekers in Irish society. Prior to the government's introduction of its direct provision and dispersal policy for asylum seekers in April 2000, asylum seekers were granted basic welfare payments through supplementary welfare allowance, rent allowance, health provision and education for children, on the same basis as Irish citizens. Asylum seekers were excluded from working, from vocational training, from benefiting from public housing provision, from adult and third level education. In one of the earliest studies carried out on the needs of asylum seekers, from a public health perspective, Begley et al (1999)²⁷ found that 86% of those surveyed stated that the weekly social welfare allowance they received was inadequate to meet their basic living needs.

²⁴ Government of Ireland (1996) *Partnership 2000*. Dublin: The Stationery Office

²⁵ Combat Poverty Agency (2004) *Factsheet: What is Poverty?* Dublin: Combat Poverty Agency, p.1

²⁶ Combat Poverty Agency (*supra* 5), p.2

²⁷ Begley, M., C. Garavan, M. Condon, I. Kelly, K.Holland, A.Staines (1999) *Asylum in Ireland: A public Health Perspective*. Dublin: Department of Public Health Medicine and Epidemiology, UCD

With the introduction of direct provision and dispersal in 2000, a parallel welfare system was put in place for asylum seekers. Calling for its abolition, Stapleton (2001) describes direct provision as both 'inhumane and discriminatory'.²⁸ In this study by Stapleton, and in other studies and commentaries, the policy of direct provision is consistently pointed to and criticised.²⁹ This policy is widespread throughout the European Union, and were developed in other EU countries first and have been followed and adapted by Ireland. The UNHCR points to a number of restrictive policies which have been introduced by EU countries, amongst which are 'deterrent' measures which includes systems such as direct provision.³⁰ It is believed that some migrants are not asylum seekers but 'disguised economic migrants seeking to circumvent stringent immigration legislation.'³¹ Furthermore, separating asylum seekers from society through direct provision policies and reduced welfare support actively limits the possibilities for their integration into the host community. According to Bank (2000), the state's attempt to exclude asylum seekers from participating in normal life of the host society is 'to ensure that law enforcement against rejected asylum seekers is not impaired by the development of strong social ties.'³²

There are other consequences of the deterrence policies which contribute to the general hostility of the host communities to asylum seekers within EU states. Sales (2002) speaking in the context of British asylum policy claims that changes to the system of social support for asylum seekers have 'underlined the dependency of asylum seekers on welfare benefits, fuelling public perceptions of them as a "burden".'³³ Sales continues her argument by stating that the British policy towards asylum seekers has created a new social category and separates asylum seekers 'both in policy and public discourse' from refugees. She believes that this policy operates on the presumption that asylum seekers are 'bogus' and thus 'undeserving', while those granted refugee status are 'deserving' of state support.³⁴ This distinction between the 'deserving' and the 'undeserving' has been described by Cohen (2002) as 'nothing less than the creation of a modern poor law', based on coercion.³⁵ These welfare policies have been labelled discriminatory by Roberts and Bolderson (1999), which are 'justified' because asylum seekers are 'outsiders' and not accepted as members of the society to which they seek admission.³⁶ Williams (1999) and (Fanning 2002) go even further by describing such policies as racialised or racist.³⁷

Anti-poverty and social inclusion: policy developments and asylum seekers

Since the mid-1990s successive Irish governments have developed an array of policies and introduced legislation across a range of social policy areas which are intended to be consistent with promoting social inclusion and combating poverty. The most important and substantial of these policies have been developed as a result of or through national partnership arrangements. The incorporation of the social partners into the policy making process has ensured that the most important and pressing social, as well

²⁸ Stapleton, J. (2001) *Direct Provision and Dispersal – 18 Months On*. Dublin: Irish Refugee Council, p.21

²⁹ Examples include, Collins, A. (2001) *Meeting the Needs of Asylum Seekers in Tralee*. Tralee: Partnership Trá Lí. Fanning, B., A. Veale, D. O'Connor (2001) *Beyond the Pale: Asylum Seeking Children and Social Exclusion in Ireland*. Dublin: Irish Refugee Council. Fanning, B. (2002) *Racism and Social Change in the Republic of Ireland*. Manchester: Manchester University Press. Faughnan, P., N. Humphries, S. Whelan (2002) *Patching Up the System: The Community Welfare Service and Asylum Seekers*. Dublin: Applied Social Research Centre UCD. FLAC (2003) *Direct Discrimination? An analysis of the scheme of Direct Provision in Ireland*. Dublin: FLAC

³⁰ UNHCR (2000) *The State of the World's Refugees*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

³¹ Geddes, A. (2000) 'Denying access: Asylum seekers and welfare benefits in the UK'. In Bommes, M. & A. Geddes (Eds) *Immigration and Welfare: Challenging the Borders of the Welfare State*. London: Routledge, p.139

³² Bank, R. (2000) 'Europeanising the reception of asylum seekers: The opposite of welfare state politics'. In Bommes, M. & A. Geddes (Eds) *Immigration and Welfare: Challenging the Borders of the Welfare State*. London: Routledge, p.149

³³ Sales, R. (2002) 'The deserving and the undeserving? Refugees, asylum seekers and welfare in Britain'. In *Critical Social Policy* vol. 22(3): 456-478, p.457

³⁴ *ibid*, p.463. See also Bloch, A. 'Asylum and welfare: contemporary debates. In *Critical Social Policy* vol. 22(3): 393-414, p.399

³⁵ Cohen, S. (2002) 'The local state of immigration controls'. In *Critical Social Policy* vol. 22(3):518-543, p.534

³⁶ Roberts, S. & H. Bolderson (1999) 'Inside Out: Migrants' Disentitlements to Social Security Benefits in the EU. In *Comparative Social Policy: Concepts, Theories and Methods*. Oxford: Blackwell

³⁷ Fanning (*supra* 9). Williams, F. (1999) 'Good-enough principles of welfare. In *Journal of Social Policy* vol. 28(4):667-687

as economic, needs and challenges are included for action by government. There are four primary influential sources for the development of policies related to poverty and social exclusion:

- the *National Anti-Poverty Strategy*,
- the current national partnership agreement *Sustaining Progress* alongside its predecessor the *Programme for Prosperity and Fairness*,
- the supporting National Economic and Social Council's review *An Investment in Quality: Services, Inclusion and Enterprise*, and
- the *National Development Plan*

These are the primary documents which inform government policy on issues relating to poverty and social exclusion. In turn we will examine what each has to say about asylum seekers in relation to poverty and social exclusion.

National Anti-Poverty Strategy

In the original National Anti-Poverty Strategy, published in 1997 the key areas of disadvantage were identified as follows – educational disadvantages; unemployment, particularly long-term unemployment; income adequacy; disadvantaged urban areas; and, rural poverty. Under the Review of the National Anti-Poverty Strategy under the Programme for Prosperity and Fairness the key areas of disadvantage were extended. The document, *Building and Inclusive Society* (2002), states that much progress has been made in combating poverty in Ireland but much remains to be achieved.³⁸ The overall policy approach included the following points which are relevant to asylum seekers:

- provide levels of income support to those relying on social welfare sufficient to sustain dignity and avoid poverty, while facilitating participation in employment and escape from welfare dependency
- address the needs of groups at high risk of poverty with specific needs
- support disadvantaged communities³⁹

The review of the NAPS continues by stating that within the overall approach, priority would be given to the weakest and most vulnerable in society. As a minimum people in those groups needed to be assured that their real incomes will continue to rise as they have in the case of social welfare recipients. This, it is pointed out, is a core commitment of the strategy. This overall strategy will be guided by the key objectives of:

- reduce, and ideally eliminate, consistent poverty;
- build and inclusive society, and
- develop social capital – particularly for disadvantaged communities⁴⁰

The NAPS review shows that consistent poverty in Ireland has fallen from 15% in 1994 to 6% in 2000. The Strategy reiterates its commitment to eliminating consistent poverty and places a target of 2%, and in so doing declares that specific attention be paid to particular vulnerable groups in the pursuit of this objective.⁴¹ Consistent poverty is defined by the NAPS 'as being below 50%-60% of average disposable income and experienced enforced basic deprivation – basic deprivation are a set of eight indicators, regarded as necessities and possessed by the majority of the population.'⁴²

³⁸ Department of Social, Community and Family Affairs (2002) *Building an Inclusive Society: Review of the National Anti Poverty Strategy under the Programme for Prosperity and Fairness*. Dublin: Department of Social, Community and Family Affairs

³⁹ *ibid.* p.7

⁴⁰ *ibid.* p.8

⁴¹ *ibid.* p.9

⁴² *ibid.* p.8

The reviewed NAPS includes new key areas of disadvantage which are added to the original five. These are health, housing and accommodation, vulnerable groups (including children and young people, women, older people, travellers, and people with disabilities), and migrants and members of ethnic minority groups. Poverty and social exclusion in relation to asylum seekers cuts across a number of these areas of disadvantage, both in the original and reviewed strategies. This paper will return to one of these issues, that of children, but it will now outline what is the most directly relevant area of disadvantage referred to in the reviewed Strategy – Migrants and Members of Ethnic Minority Groups.

The reviewed NAPS highlights the special vulnerability and disadvantage of people who are migrants and members of ethnic minority by including them as a key target area of the strategy. The overall objective of the strategy in relation to these populations is

*To ensure that members of ethnic minority groups resident in Ireland are not more likely to experience poverty than majority group members.*⁴³

The NAPS normally sets out key targets for action, but in the case of migrants and members of ethnic minority groups it does not. What it does say is that there is

*very little quantitative information about the socio-economic situation of foreign-born residents in Ireland. It is not possible, therefore, to define specific targets for this group as a whole or for particular ethnic groups at this stage.*⁴⁴

However, the NAPS outlines the overall policy approach which is to tackle the barriers to integration of ethnic minorities. Specifically, this approach includes tackling racism, racial discrimination and related intolerance; developing a new immigration legislative framework within which to develop fair and sensible immigration policies to meet the needs of Irish society; providing resources for 'an efficient, fair independent and transparent procedure for processing asylum applications', with a six month target date for decisions; and finally, a commitment by the state and all relevant statutory agencies as well as social partners to ensuring the rights to equal treatment under equality legislation and to accommodate diversity.⁴⁵

Sustaining Progress and Programme for Prosperity and Fairness

Sustaining Progress has as its core objective under the heading 'poverty and social inclusion'

*to build a fair and inclusive society and to ensure that people have the resources and opportunities to live life with dignity and have access to the quality public services that underpin life chances and experiences.*⁴⁶

The focus of the policy thrust on poverty and social inclusion in Sustaining Progress is to use the extensive mechanisms that are already in place to ensure that they operate effectively. It is pointed out that the appropriate policy frameworks are in place to tackle poverty and social exclusion, and that implementation and meeting set targets are now needed to achieve these goals. Asylum seekers are not mentioned in the document, although under the key principles one of the actions required is to 'identify emerging causes of exclusion or inequality'.⁴⁷ Migrant workers are referred to in Sustaining Progress under the headings 'Immigration and Labour Market Co-ordination' and 'Racism in the Workplace'.⁴⁸ The first reference is related to immigration policy and the needs of the Irish labour market. The reference to

⁴³ *ibid.* p.17

⁴⁴ *ibid.* p18

⁴⁵ *ibid.* p18

⁴⁶ Government of Ireland (2003) *Sustaining Progress*. Dublin: The Stationery Office, p.52

⁴⁷ *ibid.* p.52

⁴⁸ *ibid.* p.80-81

racism is also located it in the context of the labour market and the need to develop and extend specific actions against racism in the workplace.

In the Programme for Prosperity and Fairness (PPF), 'refugees' are specifically mentioned in 'Framework III for Social Inclusion and Equality' under the section on 'Equality'.⁴⁹ A number of commitments are made in the PPF, and they are worth quoting in full:

- ❑ the Refugee Act, 1996, as amended will be implemented, including the appointments of the Refugee Applications Commissioner and the Chairperson of the Refugee Appeals Tribunal, as well as the establishment of a Refugee Advisory Board. The Government continues to be committed to the target of reducing the processing time for applications to a period of six months.
- ❑ a comprehensive strategy for the integration of refugees, including employment and training issues, will be developed as quickly as possible.
- ❑ policy on providing for asylum seekers' needs will be developed in consultation with Government Departments, State agencies, NGOs and social partners.
- ❑ adequate training will be provided for public sector workers, particularly those involved in the delivery of services to those from culturally diverse backgrounds.
- ❑ refugee interest groups, along with relevant Government Departments, will be represented on the statutory Refugee Advisory Board, whose remit is to advise the Minister for Justice, Equality and Law Reform on all aspects of asylum policy.
- ❑ the role and funding of NGOs and community organisations will be reviewed and any funding available will be allocated in a cohesive and co-ordinated manner with due regard to their role in supporting asylum seekers and refugees and promoting a tolerant and inclusive society.⁵⁰

The PPF also refers to racism, where it commits the government to increase funding for the National Consultative Committee on Racism and Interculturalism in order to expand its workload in the area of racism. And just as Sustaining Progress does, the PPF also commits to address the issue of racism in the workplace.⁵¹

An Investment in Quality: Services, Inclusion and Enterprise

Since the launch of the first national partnership agreement the *Programme for National Recovery* in 1987, the National Economic and Social Council has published a policy document in advance of the commencement of negotiations. These policy documents form the basis for discussion and policy direction of the negotiations and are thus extremely influential in setting the agenda and impacting on the outcomes of the partnership agreements. It is therefore important to outline the views of the NESC in relation to asylum seekers in their most recent document, *An Investment in Quality: Services, Inclusion and Enterprise*, which informed the Sustaining Progress partnership agreement.

Asylum seekers, refugees, and migrant workers are discussed in *An Investment in Quality: Services, Inclusion and Enterprise*, in Chapter 8, 'Policies on Poverty, Exclusion and Inequality' under a heading

⁴⁹ Government of Ireland (2000) *Programme for Prosperity and Fairness*. Dublin: The Stationery Office

⁵⁰ *ibid.* p.102-103

⁵¹ *ibid.* p.103

'New Population Flows and Cultural Diversity'.⁵² Asylum seekers are recognised by the NESC as the most vulnerable of the migrants who come to Ireland. The NESC gives a number of reasons for this, including the circumstances which caused them to leave their country of origin. The NESC also lists factors about their stay in Ireland which make this group vulnerable:

*once in Ireland they find themselves under suspicion of being economic migrants seeking to evade immigration controls; their differential treatment by the Irish state (direct provision, finger printing, denial of the right to work, liability to deportation, etc.) marks them out as a special group and can lower their status in the eyes of some people.*⁵³

In response to the vulnerable situation of asylum seekers the NESC makes a number of statements:

- it has an impartial concern for civil liberties within the state and as a result believes that 'arrangements governing asylum seekers should be exceptional only in so far as they are strictly necessary, and should be kept under review';
- it notices that the recognition rate for asylum seekers in Ireland was low by EU standards;
- it commends the 'steep learning curve which the authorities and civil groups in Ireland have climbed in this regard, and the rapid development of an institutional and policy framework to deal with requests for asylum';
- it suggests that 'the single best way to bring asylum seekers to enjoy the same treatment and rights as others in the state is through ensuring the speedy, courteous and impartial processing of their claims' and it recommends that the availability of sufficient resources to address this issue should be a priority;
- it recommends the encouragement and facilitation of community and voluntary groups 'to form contacts with asylum-seekers in the state and foster public understanding of their situation'.⁵⁴

The NESC continues by saying that it considers the arrangements in place for asylum seekers are generally fair and reasonable. It concludes by saying that it supports an exploration of alternatives to the ban on employment of asylum seekers, which it says 'would enable them to use their time in a manner more constructive for themselves and their host society'⁵⁵.

The thrust of the NESC's considerations on refugees and those given leave to remain is to enable their speedy participation in mainstream society. It believes that the low skilled, those with poor language skills, or lacking in social networks may be particularly vulnerable in Irish society and that the relevant authorities would monitor the protection of their basic rights in employment and across a range of services. It recommends family reunification, and assistance by local authorities and voluntary and community groups with the integration of refugees and ethnic minority groups.⁵⁶

National Development Plan

The final piece in the tapestry of national policies which include a commitment to combat poverty and social exclusion is that of the *National Development Plan 2000-2006*. The National Development Plan has the promotion of social inclusion as one of its objectives. One of the key elements of the Plan is to address social inclusion through a multi-faceted approach, targeting interventions aimed at areas and

⁵² National Economic and Social Council (2003) *An Investment in Quality: Services, Inclusion and Enterprise*. Dublin: NESC. See pp.407-421

⁵³ *ibid.* p.410

⁵⁴ *ibid.* p.412-413

⁵⁵ *ibid.* p.413

⁵⁶ *ibid.* p.414

groups affected by poverty and social exclusion throughout the community.⁵⁷ Under a section on 'equality' the National Development Plan commits to supporting refugee language training. Asylum seekers are not a specifically named group for interventions under the Plan.

Asylum seekers – poverty and social exclusion the reality

It is evident from the previous section that there is an absence of anti-poverty and social inclusion policies for asylum seekers in Ireland. In the documents reviewed above it is apparent that there is limited understanding of the poverty and social exclusion experienced by asylum seekers. Equally, there has been no attempt at rigorous analysis of state policies in this area and the few commitments that were made in these policy documents have yet to be honoured. This section outlines how asylum seekers are denied inclusive and anti-poverty supports by the state.

Direct Provision

Since 2000, with the introduction of direct provision and dispersal, government policy has increasingly impoverished and excluded asylum seekers from society. This has been done in a number of ways:

- Direct provision and the introduction of subsequent legislation (Section 13 of the Social Welfare (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act 2003) has removed asylum seekers from living in ordinary houses and apartments by insisting that they live in accommodation centres provided by the state and denying them rent allowance, effectively excluding them from the standard of accommodation enjoyed by the general population;⁵⁸
- With the introduction of direct provision asylum seekers have lesser welfare benefits than others in the population in similar circumstances. These benefits, inadequate though they may have been (and below poverty income levels based on the NAPS definition), provided asylum seekers with the opportunity to make decisions about their own food and when they ate it, where they lived, and how they used their money. In contrast in direct provision, although basic needs are met, there is no choice about what one eats or when one eats, where one lives, and severely restricts what one can spend one's money on, the amount being a lesser payment than that provided for similar populations - €19.10 per week for adults and €9.50 per week for children. It is argued by FLAC that this discrepancy in the amount received by asylum seekers in direct provision as against the higher amounts received by people in other forms of hostel accommodation is discriminatory.⁵⁹ Furthermore, the weekly amount received by asylum seekers has not increased since it was first introduced in 2000. All other sectors of the population have benefited from increased welfare allowances and/or wages in the same period under the various partnership agreements.

Employment

Despite the NESC's support for an alternative to the employment ban on asylum seekers there has been no movement on this issue by the Minister for Justice, Equality and Law Reform. Not being able to work or participate in training or educational activities has a hugely negative impact on asylum seekers in direct provision. It has been shown in a previous SONAS report as well as in other research documents that one of the recurring problems for asylum seekers is boredom due to lack of work and other meaningful activities.⁶⁰ Unemployment, and more particularly long-term unemployment (that is for twelve months or

⁵⁷ Government of Ireland (2000) *National Development Plan 2000-2006*. Dublin: Stationery Office

⁵⁸ Government of Ireland, *Social Welfare (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act 2003*. Dublin: The Stationery Office

⁵⁹ FLAC (2003) *Direct Discrimination? An analysis of the scheme of Direct Provision in Ireland*. Dublin: FLAC

⁶⁰ SONAS (2004) *The Basic Rights of Asylum Seekers in Direct Provision*. Dublin: SONAS. See also Stapleton *supra* 8, Collins *supra* 9

more), is directly linked to a risk of poverty⁶¹. The lack of employment for a period of time has been shown to sap motivation and undermines a person's self-belief as well as their capacity to engage in the workplace without an intensive re-entry programme.⁶²

There is little research done on the levels of unemployment of refugees. In one of the earlier studies carried out on programme refugees O'Regan (1998) found high levels of unemployment and under-employment among Bosnian and Vietnamese refugees.⁶³ In a more recent report by QE5 (2004) for the MORE Project there is further evidence that refugees find it difficult to access work⁶⁴. Of the resettled programme refugees interviewed for the QE5 research, only one in four respondents were in current employment and only one of the 44 respondents was in employment appropriate to his previous experience and qualifications.⁶⁵

Given the evidence of the personal and poverty impact of long-term unemployment, and the particular difficulties that refugees face in securing employment, the right to work is a fundamental poverty and social inclusion issue for asylum seekers. Even if asylum seekers were allowed to work from arrival in the state it seems that many of them would find it difficult to access employment. By excluding asylum seekers for months and even years from the labour market, the state adds to the barriers they would encounter, and in the process contributes to their marginalisation as there is no compensatory programmes to assist those granted refugee status or leave to remain to enter the workforce.

Child Poverty

One of the priorities for government policy is to eliminate child poverty in Ireland⁶⁶. As well as being a key issue in the various strategies referred to above this goal is reiterated in *The National Children's Strategy* (2000) where it is stated that 'children will be provided with the financial supports necessary to eliminate child poverty'.⁶⁷ The National Children's Strategy also recognises the special needs of refugees and other minority communities, which have to be considered and addressed collectively and individually as required.⁶⁸ However, it is difficult to reconcile government policy towards asylum seeking children with the policies of the National Children's Strategy.

In May 2004 the government withdrew child benefit to all new asylum seeking families with children. According to the Children's Rights Alliance this move will 'force vulnerable children into deeper poverty'.⁶⁹ In the study *Beyond the Pale: Asylum-Seeking Children and Social Exclusion in Ireland* (2001) it is claimed that children living with their families in direct provision has led to serious to serious deprivation for some children as a result of their poverty.⁷⁰

⁶¹ Combat Poverty Agency (2004) *Poverty Briefing: Poverty in Ireland – The Facts 2001*. Dublin: Combat Poverty Agency

⁶² Fitzgerald, E., B. Ingoldsby & F. Daly (2000) *Solving long-term unemployment in Dublin: The lessons from policy innovation*. Dublin: Dublin Employment Pact; and, Clasen, J., A. Gould & J. Vincent (1997) *Long-term unemployment and the threat of social exclusion*. Bristol: Policy Press

⁶³ O'Regan, C. (1998) *Report of the Survey of the Vietnamese and Bosnian Refugee Communities in Ireland*. Dublin: Refugee Resettlement Project

⁶⁴ The MORE Project is a European funded project whose partners are the Ministry of Labour, Finland and the Reception and Integration Agency, Ireland – the aim of the project is to develop comprehensive resettlement models, which can be used in European resettlement programmes.

⁶⁵ QE5 (2004) *Training Needs Assessment of Adult Resettled Refugees in Ireland*. Omagh: QE5

⁶⁶ Government of Ireland, *supra* 1

⁶⁷ Government of Ireland (2000) *The National Children's Strategy: Our Children – Our Lives*. Dublin: The Stationery Office, p.47

⁶⁸ *ibid.* p.23

⁶⁹ Children's Rights Alliance (2004) Press Release 14 May – *Denial of Child Benefit to Asylum Seeker Children will Force Vulnerable Children into Deeper Poverty*

⁷⁰ Fanning, Veale & O'Connor, *supra* 9

Exclusionary policies – poverty, social inclusion and asylum seekers?

Irish government policy of direct provision and exclusion from the labour market reinforces the poverty and exclusion felt by asylum seekers. Let us examine the two fundamental definitions used by the state in describing poverty and social exclusion. In the first section of this document poverty the NAPS definition of poverty was given as:

People are living in poverty, if their income and resources (material, cultural and social) are so inadequate as to preclude them from having a standard of living which is regarded as acceptable by Irish society generally. As a result of inadequate income and resources people may be excluded and marginalised from participating in activities which are considered the norm for other people in society.⁷¹

Asylum seekers living in direct provision have fewer and more inadequate resources than the rest of society. Direct provision precludes them from having a standard of living which is regarded as acceptable by Irish society. Asylum seekers in direct provision are excluded and marginalised from participating in activities that are considered the norm for other people in society.

Partnership 2000 describes social exclusion as

Cumulative marginalisation: from production (unemployment), from consumption (income poverty), from social networks (community, family and neighbours), from decision making and from an adequate quality of life.⁷²

Asylum seekers in direct provision are socially excluded in that they are not allowed work, they have inadequate income to meet their needs, they are restricted in developing social networks – they cannot stay overnight with friends or family, they live in centres which are not conducive to developing normal friendships and relationships, they have no choice about where they live – and basic decision-making is removed from them – even basic normal decisions about food are removed from them, they do not have the freedom to decide when they eat or what they eat.

In this context the inclusion of policies directed at combating the poverty and social exclusion of asylum seekers in direct provision in national strategies appear at the very least contradictory. This may be the reason why references to asylum seekers are so scarce in these documents, that there is no intention of dealing with poverty and social exclusion of asylum seekers. Perhaps their best opportunity to be included in these strategies is for a speedier decision on their application for refugee status. In the context of being afforded state support to evade poverty and social exclusion the six month commitment to having one's asylum application processed becomes very important. Unfortunately, this commitment appears to be meaningless for many asylum seekers.⁷³

The problem with the government's policy approach is that not alone does it exclude asylum seekers but it also impacts on two other policies. Any government anti-racism policy is fundamentally flawed when it excludes a sizeable section of society, such as asylum seekers. The language of 'illegal' immigrants and 'bogus' asylum seekers or 'genuine' refugees are in direct conflict with a genuine anti-racist perspective.

The second policy impacted for asylum seekers is that of refugee integration. Refugees, like other minority groups, face enormous barriers to integration without the state pursuing a policy which will further impact negatively on them. For those who are granted refugee status or some form of subsidiary status

⁷¹ Government of Ireland, *supra* 1

⁷² Government of Ireland, *supra* 4

⁷³ SONAS, *supra* 41

they are allowed to avail of the full support of the state on the same basis as Irish nationals. Given the long period of poverty, dependence and social exclusion in direct provision it is not surprising that those who are allowed to leave and live in normal conditions often find it difficult to cope.⁷⁴ Despite these difficulties, the policy commitment made in the *Programme for Prosperity and Fairness* on refugee integration – a comprehensive strategy will be developed as quickly as possible – has not even begun.⁷⁵

State policy of direct provision is no accident; it is a calculated government response to the increased numbers of asylum seekers entering the state. Ireland is no different from other European countries in this respect and its response to asylum seekers is 'fuelled by both ideological and economic considerations. Deterrent entry requirements, coupled with a punitive, exclusionary regime for those who do gain access, have formed the mainstream political response to this issue.'⁷⁶ As a result of this response, asylum seekers become non-members of our society with minimum civil, social and economic rights and without a political constituency to defend them. Until asylum seekers are treated as members of our national and local communities and given the opportunity to enjoy the rights the rest of us take for granted they will continue to live in poverty and remain excluded and on the margins of our society.

⁷⁴ SONAS, *supra* 41. See also Faughnan, P., N. Humphries & S. Whelan (2002) *Patching Up the System: The Community Welfare Service and Asylum Seekers*. Dublin: Social Science Research Centre, UCD

⁷⁵ Government of Ireland, *supra*, 30

⁷⁶ Pearl, M. & R. Zetter (2002) 'From Refuge to Exclusion: Housing as an Instrument of Social Exclusion for Refugees and Asylum Seekers in the UK'. In Sommerville, P. & A. Steele 'Race', *Housing and Social Exclusion*. London: Jessica Kingsley, p.227-228