



WELCOME TO CARLOW CARLOWÓT SÓLAMOT GORÁZAR

Ten Years of Rohingya Refugee Resettlement in Carlow

**July 2019
Carlow County Development Partnership**

REPORT AUTHORS



Margaret Ward is a freelance journalist and researcher, writing for The Irish Times and other publications. She was formerly Foreign Editor with RTÉ, Ireland's public service broadcaster, and has covered issues involving refugees and migration for more than twenty years, including many complex emergencies. Margaret went to school in Carlow as a child. She has an MA in Journalism from Dublin City University.



Aideen Ward, who helped design the research and edit the report, has an MBS from the Irish Management Institute and UCC. She specialises in stakeholder research for public bodies and NGOs. She was born in Carlow.



"Difference is a resource.
Difference is richness.
That is the Ireland that is
unfolding before us
and I welcome it."

President Michael D. Higgins,
7 June 2016

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Notes

The Rohingya refugees refer to their original home country as Burma, and this is what has been used throughout the text. The country is also known as Myanmar.

The quotes at the beginning of each chapter are from contributions by Rohingya community members to 'Our Story So Far', a creative writing project by those who have chosen to make Carlow their home. The project took place at the Visual Arts Centre, in partnership with Carlow College St Patrick's, Carlow Integration Forum and Carlow County Development Partnership.

Foreword from the Authors

Welcome to Carlow. Or as the Rohingya community would say, Carlowót Sólamot Gorázar!



This report tells the story of the remarkable journey of the Rohingya community who came to Carlow in 2009, and of the people of Carlow, who took on the task of resettling a vulnerable group, and making them feel welcome.

It has been commissioned by Carlow County Development Partnership to reflect and celebrate ten years of the Rohingya community in the town, and identify outstanding issues and how they might be addressed

If your city or town is thinking about receiving resettled refugees in future, or if there is a programme in your county or country you might become involved in, then this publication may also be for you. While the report focuses on a government and UNHCR sponsored resettlement programme, it may also be useful to those working with other migrant and refugee communities in Ireland and elsewhere.

It is also a report for the community of Carlow to learn more about the Rohingya refugees who are making a home there, to better understand the challenges they face and the contribution they have and continue to make to the life of the town.

The report is accompanied by a video, which provides a visual record of the Rohingya community's ten years in Carlow.

We hope it will inspire others in their work with refugees, and in providing a place of safety where they can flourish as new citizens.

We would like to thank the Rohingya community for welcoming us to Carlow and for sharing their stories and reflections.

*Margaret Ward
Aideen Ward*

Foreword - Frank Corcoran – Chairperson CCDP

Over the past two decades, Carlow's population has become increasingly diverse in respect of nationality and ethnicity reflecting national demographic change. Such change brings both opportunities and challenges. Traditionally Ireland is more used to emigration than immigration as it has seen generations of its sons and daughters leave to seek a new life and find employment in other countries. Now we are in a position to reciprocate and offer a home to members of other ethnicities who may be facing hardship and persecution in their own land.



Carlow County Development Partnership aim to support the many different communities that have chosen to make Carlow their home, as they seek to contribute to the social, cultural and economic life of the county. We are particularly proud of the part we have played, with other agencies, in welcoming the Rohingya community some ten years ago and in our continued support. I note the significant supports provided by the company, including the Tús Programme, which is currently supporting members of the community in work placements and the ongoing creative interventions provided under the SICAP including capacity building and empowerment workshops with a focus on the women in the community. What cannot be underestimated is the strength and resilience that the Rohingya have demonstrated and also their huge contribution to the wider Carlow Community which has accepted them as their own.

Commissioned by Carlow County Development Partnership, this report is a comprehensive review of the Rohingya Refugee Resettlement Programme in County Carlow 2009 - 2019. It includes an analysis of the services and supports which were provided in the initial period and in subsequent years and makes recommendations for supports into the future, motivated by a commitment to record and review this process from the standpoint of the community themselves and providing creative solutions to identified needs.

We also hope that its findings will inform reflection on the success of such programmes throughout the country. It is part of our mission to promote the development of a society in which the needs of the most vulnerable are listened to and responded to in a proactive way. There is no doubt that an integrated and concerted effort from different agencies will be needed to implement the recommendations and I wish to pay tribute to the work of all in the statutory, community and voluntary sector who have supported the Rohingya community over the past ten years and who will continue to do so in the future

Frank Corcoran

Foreword – Anastasia Crickley – previous chairperson of the UN Committee for the Elimination of Racial Discrimination and the first woman chairperson of the European Monitoring Centre on Racism and Xenophobia

This study is a reflective, informative and most interesting narrative account of the lived experience of the Rohingya community in Carlow from their arrival in 2009. The story of a decade, of new journeys, new challenges and new comforts in a new land of which many of the original arrivals are now citizens is unique and, to my knowledge the first to chronicle a decade of refugee integration in Ireland as experienced by a particular group of refugees. Tributes are due first and foremost to the Carlow Rohingya community, Rohingya Action Ireland and in particular to the members of the community who so courageously shared their experiences. Particular tributes are also due to the researchers and those who supported them for their sensitive and creative approach which facilitated the story's emergence.



The story and associated recommendations for future developments with the Carlow Rohingya community is best read as it is told in the pages that follow so I won't seek to paraphrase it here. However, it's ongoing relevance for other refugee experiences and integration processes deserves underlining. To mention but a few it's quite clear that the interagency approach and the central role undertaken from the outset by St Catherine's Social Service Centre was crucial for creating the conditions for a sensitive approach to support for the new arrivals to Carlow. The provision of support by Carlow College St. Patrick's in a variety of ongoing ways - including the ground essential for the cricket club which still functions there - also staff involvement and premises for community initiatives continues to be important.

This research and many other creative initiatives were made possible by the enthusiastic and committed staff engagement and financial support of Carlow Community Development Partnership. Their work and initiatives provide excellent models of best practice for other Local Development Companies nationally as they seek to engage appropriately with people who are part of Ireland now.

As programme refugees invited to Ireland by the government the Rohingya avoided some of the issues still faced by asylum seekers, particularly those in direct provision accommodation for prolonged periods seeking to have status as refugees recognised. However, their experiences of loneliness, isolation and racism resonate across those divides. Their challenges in a new context caught between keeping the cherished traditions of the past while living in a situation which brings its own inter generational changes is one well known to migrants, including Irish emigrants everywhere. It speaks to the ongoing realities of cultural change and its particular resonances in the twenty first century for women's rights and empowerment globally.

Like other exiles, the Rohingya face ongoing concerns about their loved ones back home. The powerful in Myanmar or as they choose to call it Burma, have created a political situation which continues to deny their identity, prohibits use of their very name and continues to act with little or no concern for the lives of their community having already killed many and seen almost one million depart since 1992. This was also the the year the first of the Carlow group left.

I am honoured to have had some opportunities to meet with Rohingya people here and elsewhere and hope to be able to continue to act in global solidarity with their struggle for rights and justice. I am honoured also to have spent some time with the Carlow group and wish them well in their continued journey towards the further enrichment of Carlow and Ireland, which their presence brings.

Finally, I encourage you to read and reflect on the story that follows

Anastasia Crickley

1. INTRODUCTION

On the 29th of June 2009, a group of Rohingya refugees stepped out of a bus in Carlow to begin their new lives, after a long journey from refugee camps in Bangladesh, and a period of orientation at a reception centre in Ballyhaunis, County Mayo. The older ones had fled persecution in Burma years before, the younger ones had known nothing but life in the camps, where few went to school. That night the families slept in their own homes for the first time.

Ten years on, the community has grown, children have done their Leaving Certificate and gone to college, babies have been born and new households formed. The community is now about a hundred strong. Most of the Rohingya refugees are now proud Irish citizens, who voted in the last presidential election. Carlow town has a revived cricket club, and an active campaign group drawing attention to the underlying causes of the refugees' original flight from Burma.

The Rohingya came to Ireland at the invitation of the Irish government in close cooperation with the UNHCR- the United Nations High Commission for Refugees. Carlow was chosen as the host town and embarked on an ambitious resettlement programme, which involved both statutory and non-statutory agencies.

A decade on, Carlow County Development Partnership (CCDP) decided to commission this report to tell this remarkable story. This is the first time that the story of a refugee resettlement programme in Ireland has been told over a ten-year period. It is also the story of one town's interaction with a unique group of people, and how that has shaped the lives of a new generation, for whom Carlow is now home.

When Carlow began this process in 2009, it had limited expertise to draw on, but it now has valuable experience to share, and is currently involved in another resettlement programme, this time with Syrian refugees.

While the report captures learning from the local agencies and groups involved in the programme from the start, its real value is in the stories of the last ten years in the words of the Rohingya refugees themselves. Their voices shine through this report and the accompanying video, telling their stories of struggle, challenge, opportunity and growth.

The report explains how the programme came about, the details of resettlement; the local partnerships and groups, which helped, drive it and the benefits it has brought to Carlow. It does not shy away from identifying what could have been done better, and what remains to be done.

Carlow County Development Partnership has been involved in community-led development since the early 2000s. Its remit includes social inclusion and it was involved with the Rohingya Resettlement Programme from the outset. Since the three-year formal resettlement programme ended, CCDP has had an on-going relationship with the Rohingya community through the SICAP, Social Inclusion

and Community Activation Plan and other programmes, as well as through its' work with Carlow Integration Forum.

The report was commissioned by Carlow County Development Partnership with the following objectives;

- To review the last 10 years of the Rohingya resettlement programme in Carlow with stakeholders
- To record the stories of the Rohingya community on their resettlement journey, in a multimedia format
- To explore the challenges and opportunities in terms of this UNHCR programme and others
- To explore the self-identified needs and supports of the Rohingya community on the next stage of their journey in Carlow

Report structure

The **Context and Background** chapter gives a brief overview on the Rohingya ethnic group and the reasons they became refugees. It outlines the resettlement process, gives some background on the town of Carlow and provides a short overview of Irish policy on migrant integration.

The **Methodology** chapter outlines how the report was prepared, which was primarily through qualitative group discussions with Rohingya refugees and interviews with relevant local stakeholders.

The Chapter titled **The Rohingya in Carlow** is the narrative story of the last ten years divided into four subchapters.

- **The Journey Begins** tells the story of the refugees' departure from Bangladesh and arrival in Ireland
- **The First Three Years (2009-2012)** tells the story of the formal resettlement period
- **Moving On** covers the period 2012-2018
- **The Rohingya Community in Carlow Today** reflects on the position of the community ten years on

The final chapter, **Analysis and Recommendations** includes recommendations for future resettlement programmes, and addresses outstanding issues for the community in Carlow.

The report also includes stories about specific aspects of the refugees' lives in Carlow.

- Anyone for Cricket?
- Sharing Food and Sharing Stories
- From Stateless People to Political Activists

The Appendix includes details of stakeholder interviews, the original members of the Interagency Resettlement Steering Committee, and References.

2. Context and Background

"Sometimes a lamp burns, sometimes a heart turns, somewhere a child mourns"

Our Story So Far

a) The Rohingya

The Rohingya people are an ethnic group who live primarily in Northern Arakan state in Western Burma (Myanmar). They are Muslim, and have been discriminated against inside Burma for decades, including exclusion from education, religious observance, civil rights, statelessness and extreme poverty. In 1992 abuses against the Rohingya, including forced labour, sexual violence and persecution, resulted in a mass exodus of more than 250,000 people into neighbouring Bangladesh, where many still live in atrocious conditions. A 2010 report by the Irish Centre for Human Rights at NUI Galway concluded that abuses against the Rohingya amounted to crimes against humanity.

Persecution in 2012 resulted in over 650,000 Rohingya fleeing the country to Bangladesh, Malaysia, Indonesia and Thailand. A further outbreak of violence in 2015/16 and the genocide of 2017 resulted in a fresh wave of refugees, many of whom are located in makeshift camps around the Bangladeshi city of Cox's Bazaar. In October 2018, Marzuki Darusman, chair of the UN fact-finding mission on Myanmar told a news conference that "genocide was still going on" in Burma.

Refugees have essentially been warehoused in camps, without access to a long-term solution. As a result many refugees have severe physical and psychological health concerns, little or no education or labour market skills, and for children, greater developmental challenges.

The refugees who arrived in Carlow had fled Burma in 1992 and many had lived most, if not all of their lives in the camps in Bangladesh. It is important to note that many family members of those now in Carlow are still stuck in these camps, with little prospect of either returning to Burma or of being resettled elsewhere.

b) Resettlement – a measure of international protection

Resettlement involves the transfer of refugees from the country in which they first sought asylum, generally a developing country, to a "third country" that has agreed to admit them with long term or permanent residency status. Resettlement provides protection for refugees whose safety is immediately at risk. Resettlement is described by UNCHR as "a mutual dynamic multifaceted and ongoing process", adding that the process "requires a willingness for communities to be welcoming and responsive to refugees and for public institutions to meet the needs of a diverse population". (UNHCR, 2013:2)

Resettlement is a tool of international protection and is an important expression of international solidarity with developing countries, which host the majority of the world's refugees. The United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) is the international agency mandated to protect refugees and look for long-term solutions. It asks countries to accept refugees, and the decision to do so is a voluntary one. Only 1% of refugees in the world get the opportunity to be resettled. The refugee resettlement programme is entirely separate from the asylum system.

c) The Rohingya Resettlement Programme in Carlow

The Rohingya community in Carlow was invited to Ireland after a consultation between the UNHCR and the Irish government – coordinated by the Department of Justice. Officials from the Department, along with Gardaí, visited the camps in Bangladesh to interview refugees and decide who would be selected to come to Ireland.

The Rohingya arrived in Ireland as programme refugees, “a person to whom leave to enter and remain for temporary protection or resettlement as part of a group of persons, has been given by the government”. (Refugee Act 1996) This gives refugees the right to work, to access health, education and social welfare, and provides a pathway to citizenship.

In November 2008, the Office of the Minister for Integration (OMI) asked Carlow County Development Board to resettle 13 Rohingya families, seven of which were headed by lone female parents. There were 64 people in total, 23 adults, 14 teenagers and 27 children and babies.

An Interagency Resettlement committee was established, chaired by an officer of Carlow County Council, involving statutory bodies involved in health, housing, education and other areas as well as other local agencies (full list in appendix). St Catherine's Community Services Centre was chosen as the lead implementing agency for the project. It was initially funded for one year, but the particular vulnerabilities of the Rohingya community led to an extension of the programme for a further two years, after which the community transitioned to mainstream public services.

Initial funding of €116,000 was granted by the OMI to employ a resettlement worker, cover interpretation, childcare, and volunteer training costs. Further funding of €15,000 was secured for a summer programme for children. Costs of housing, health and social welfare payments were funded through mainstream services.

d) Carlow Town

Carlow town is situated 90 kilometres from Ireland's capital city Dublin, which is one hour away by train or car. The county had a population of 54,185 in 2016, of whom 10.5% per cent were foreign born. Carlow has become a diverse town in a relatively short space of time and is now home to dozens of nationalities. It has two third level institutions, Carlow College St. Patrick's and Carlow Institute of Technology, both of which draw students from around Ireland and overseas and a renowned arts centre, Visual, which is the largest gallery space outside of Dublin.

Ireland has favoured an approach of dispersing refugees throughout the country to avoid ghettoisation in big cities. At the time Carlow was chosen as the host town for the Rohingya refugees, the impact of the 2008 financial crisis was only just beginning to emerge. Housing was easier to obtain than it is now, and the local authority sourced accommodation from the private rented sector, something that would be much more difficult to do now. However, by the time the refugees arrived unemployment was beginning to rise and cutbacks in public services were taking effect, creating a difficult financial environment for agencies involved with the resettlement programme.

Carlow has since undertaken another resettlement programme, this time with Syrian refugees, as part of a national commitment to host 4,000 refugees under the Irish Refugee Protection Programme. Carlow is also currently preparing a Migrant Integration Strategy to promote integration for all migrants including refugees and the development of an intercultural society. This is the second strategy undertaken in Carlow.

e) Migration, Refugees and Asylum - The Wider Policy Environment in Ireland

While this was the first time Carlow had hosted a resettlement programme, Ireland has had previous experience of such programmes. According to the UNHCR, Ireland was among the first six European countries to establish a resettlement programme in 2000. Ireland's experience stretches back to 1956 when the country ratified the 1951 UN Refugee Convention and in the same year welcomed 541 refugees from Hungary. Previously hosted groups of refugees under other programmes, include those from Vietnam (1979) and Bosnia in the 1990s.

The UNHCR report 'Towards a New Beginning –Refugee Integration in Ireland' (2014:12) states, "resettled refugees have a very different experience to convention refugees, those who go through the asylum and direct provision system." This system has been the subject of much controversy and debate in recent years, with asylum seekers only recently acquiring the right to work. In contrast, resettled refugees can work and live independently with financial support from the day they arrive. However, resettled refugees share many of the characteristics mentioned in that report, including the experience of trauma and of family separation.

The Rohingya refugees arrived to a country that has seen significant demographic change over a short period of time. The “Celtic Tiger” years of the early 2000s had seen the migrant population grow to more than 12% of the total. This includes EU citizens, and non-EU citizens including refugees, asylum seekers and those granted work permits or other leave to remain.

While Ireland has not experienced the significant rise in anti-immigration rhetoric or extreme right wing politics evident in some other European countries, the government’s most recent iteration of its approach to integration, ‘The Migrant Integration Strategy 2017-2020’, highlights the risks to Irish society if integration is not a success. This includes the loss of the contribution of migrants and refugees, the possible fragmentation of societal norms and/or the growth of anti-integration agendas. (2017:7).

The strategy states explicitly that diversity is now integral to Irish identity and sets out various sectoral strategies to foster integration. Ireland also subscribes to the European basic principles on integration and has comprehensive equality and human rights legislation that prohibits discrimination on the grounds of ethnicity or race.

Like many other EU countries, Ireland has adopted a policy of mainstreaming service provision in the area of integration, with specific initiatives to meet specific needs. Integration is defined in Irish policy as a two-way process and as the “ability to participate to the extent that the person needs and wishes in all of the major components of society without having to relinquish his or her cultural identity”. (Department of Justice: 1999)

The Migrant Integration Strategy 2017-2020 sets out a long list of actions, and emphasises that effective integration requires engagement by migrants and public services but also by businesses and communities. The Minister for Justice Charlie Flanagan reinforced this message at a citizenship ceremony in Killarney on 29th April this year saying that the government’s migration integration strategy “is aimed not just at all newcomers to our shores *but also at our own citizens*, with the primary objective of ensuring that barriers to full participation in Irish society are identified and addressed, and that the basic values of Irish society are respected by all”.

Local authorities are now obliged to develop their own Migrant Integration Strategy. As stated above, Carlow is currently preparing its second strategy for the county.

3. Methodology

From the outset, the intention was that the Rohingya community would be actively engaged in the process of producing this report. An initial community meeting and workshop was held to explain the process and to get the community talking about the stories it wanted to see included, and to identify issues for more focused research. This was then followed by a series of group discussions with different age and gender groups.

Community Meeting and Group discussion attended by 15 adult members of the Rohingya Community (self-divided into male and female groups, two moderators)

Group discussion (with interpretation) with five of the original female heads of household (age 30+)

Two separate group discussions with six young women (age 19-28)

Group discussion with four school-going girls (age 10-13) at community event

Group discussion with four school-going males (age 18-19) at The Vault, Carlow Youth Services

Group discussion with three young men (age 19-26) at cricket training

Attendance at women and children group get-together (10 women and 10 plus children)

Joint interview with Rohingya Action Ireland board members Haikal Mansor and Mohamed Rafique

The research was complemented by semi-structured interviews with stakeholders involved in the initial formal resettlement programme (Carlow Council, health providers, youth service, implementing partner St Catherine's Services Centre, resettlement workers etc.) as well as others involved in the town (full List in the Appendix)

The report also drew on the detailed evaluations of the initial resettlement programme carried out by researcher Aoife Titley, and on desk research relating to Ireland's policies on refugee resettlement and migrant integration. It is important to note that this is not a formal evaluation of the Rohingya resettlement programme, but a narrative of its lived experience, which also captures learning, celebrates successes and highlights areas for improvement.

The report was conducted in an ethical manner, with confidentiality and anonymity guaranteed to those who took part. Where comments are on the record (e.g. video interviews) informed consent was sought in all cases. Informed parental consent was obtained for discussions with children under 18. Particular efforts were made to secure interpretation for a session with some of the older

female members of the community who's English is still limited. It should be noted that the Rohingya are a relatively conservative Muslim group and participants self-selected into single gender groups on a number of occasions.

While contacting individual members of the community was not as straightforward as during the earlier evaluations (there is no longer any central gathering place such as St Catherine's Services Centre or any centralised record keeping), the researcher built relationships within the community and asked them to invite other participants to attend discussions (within the restrictions of GDPR). We would like to acknowledge in particular the help of Annette Fox of CCDP, Mohammed Rafique, Rafika Begum, Sanzida Begum, Parvina Akter Uddin, Haikal Mansor, Jimmy Dooley of Carlow Youth Services, David Francis Moore of Visual and Dilip Kumar Barua who translated at one group discussion.

The researcher also adopted an observational approach, spending time with the community at a cooking session and community get together in a family home, Sunday morning cricket training and young people's attendance at a youth centre. This was important to build trust, gather a deeper understanding of the lives of the community, and give readers a flavour of the lived experiences of the group.

4. The Rohingya in Carlow

a) The Journey Begins

"I was barely 18 when I started my first journey from my ancestral home in Burma to Bangladesh as a refugee. The last journey of mine ends in this beautiful country."

Our Story so far

Leaving the camps behind

The Rohingya refugees' long journey from the camps began when the International Organisation for Migration (IOM) brought them to the Bangladeshi capital Dhaka. From there they flew to Dublin via Dubai. They had never been on a plane.

"They gave us all a piece of paper with IOM on it. If we got lost in an airport we were to go to an information desk and give it to them"

Before their selection, the refugees knew nothing at all about Ireland.

"When the Olympics opening ceremony in Beijing was on we watched it on TV and we waited for the Irish team to come out," recalls one man. "That's the first time we saw the flag of the country we were going to. We were so excited."

For women in particular the prospect of a new life away from the overcrowded refugee camps was an opportunity for safety and security for them and their families.

"When I first heard, I was very happy I was going to a foreign country. In Burma we had a really hard time, lost family members", says one woman. "I fled Burma but had no good life in the camps. I was on my own with my children. I had a really difficult time. I was living with a lot of fear, afraid to go out, a lot of bad things were happening. Allah makes us happy, we are here."

Carlow Prepares

Meanwhile in Carlow preparation had been underway since November 2008 when Carlow was first approached to receive the refugees. Those involved report a sense of energy and excitement about the project they were about to undertake.

"We sat down and said we have to do this. It was so vivid. We met two representatives of the Department of Justice who said there was no money, and that everything would have to be mainstreamed", recalls one stakeholder. "We said that is not going to happen here! We wanted all the services together and we proposed St Catherine's Community Services Centre. It's about local knowledge and there needs to be a local response".

An interagency steering group was established which met every two weeks at the start and included representatives of local authorities, St Catherine's, HSE, Dept. of Education, youth services, Gardaí, childcare services and other groups (Full list in appendix).

The group drew upon the experience of the Sudanese Resettlement project in nearby Kilkenny in drawing up a template for how to manage the process. The priority issues included allocating housing, organising school and childcare places, organising language support and a befriending and orientation programme.

Carlow County Council organised housing in private rented accommodation funded through the Rental Assistance Scheme (RAS). Carlow youth services planned a summer programme for children. Intercultural training was provided for those involved in frontline services. Over a busy few months the committee worked to ensure all the elements were in place for the arrival of the Rohingya group including furnishing houses down to cups, plates and glasses.

The HSE, which was represented on the steering group, coordinated with the Ballyhaunis centre and the UNHCR regarding medical records, allocated GPs, and organised screening and vaccinations where necessary. GPs were given a briefing on the refugees' background.

Arrival in Ireland

The refugees arrived in Ireland in a number of groups, beginning in April 2009. As a result, some got up to six weeks orientation at the national refugee reception centre in Ballyhaunis, while others were only there for two weeks. At the centre, refugees received wide-ranging briefings on life in Ireland on topics from child protection to social welfare, the rules of the road to what to do at the post office.

For the children it was an exciting if disorienting time, but also one in which they bonded as a group.

"We liked it better in Ballyhaunis, we were all together, we could play all the time and there was a mosque next door," recalls one 18 year old. "Now we have to call each other".

"We had fish fingers and chips and rice, but it was a different kind of rice!" remembers another. "It was all really strange. We used to sleep on the floor in Bangladesh. It was the first time we slept in a bed."

While those working with the refugees had been advised they were particularly vulnerable, the level of need and the supports required exceeded their expectations.

"The whole transition was massive for them, it was nothing like we expected. Even the move from Ballyhaunis to Carlow was massive".

Members of the steering group welcomed the group to Carlow, with a meal at the centre. The Department of Social Protection also set up a desk to register the families so that they would not have to go individually to organise access to social welfare payments. Community welfare officers had already visited the reception centre in Ballyhaunis to organise medical cards.

First night in Carlow – a new home in a strange land

After the initial reception session at St Catherine's the refugees, were split into family groups and put in a minibus to go to their own homes. Because Ireland had agreed to take particularly vulnerable populations, there were a number of households headed by women who had been widowed or separated. Without language or family support, being alone in a house with children in a strange country was an enormous challenge.

"When I stepped into the house I was very afraid. How could I stay there alone with my daughter?" one young mother recalls. "Sometimes I stayed in my house, sometimes in my auntie's house, sometimes with other families. I slowly settled".

"For reasons of integration, right or wrong, they were scattered," says one of those who worked closely with the refugees from the start. "It was a huge shock for them. Traumatic. They felt like they had just been landed here".

Young women remember how intimidated they and their mothers felt for the first few months.

"It was like, what the hell are we doing here, where are the others? We were all calling each other to find out who is where," remembers one young woman. "I was nine at the time. I remember I got lost. I spent two hours trying to find my house".

Initial public reaction in Carlow

A network of befrienders was established through the Carlow Volunteer Centre, local people who volunteered to help welcome the Rohingya families and give them assistance with day to day life in the town, and in their homes.

The involvement of the befrienders helped to spread the story of the Rohingya in Carlow, but the steering group had also laid the groundwork, with a subgroup focusing on public relations.

The arrival of the Rohingya group was a new departure for Carlow, which had not had any previous involvement in resettling programme refugees. While Carlow now has a very diverse population, ten years ago the situation was somewhat different.

While one article in local media referring to the potential impact of the refugees' arrival on the housing list rang some alarm bells, the steering group took the initiative to explain the situation. They also made sure public representatives,

“People realised quite quickly that there was a story behind the Rohingya, how poor they were and how much they needed support and the people of Carlow reacted well,” one stakeholder recalls. “Housing wasn’t such an acute problem back then so there wasn’t that hostility. People knew what they were fleeing was very extreme”.



b) The First Three Years 2009-2012

"For the first time in my life I am able to experience the wind of freedom"

Our Story So Far

For the Rohingya themselves, their entire lives had been turned upside down, with everything essentially restarting from scratch.

"We had nothing except our clothes and some photographs. We brought some cooking pots. It's the only thing we have from our past life."

While grateful to have a home, living in a house was a huge change for the refugees. They had lived in camps with no running water, private toilet facilities or appliances. The befrienders visited the Rohingya families once or twice a week, and took people shopping, taught them how to use appliances, change lightbulbs and many other things that people in Ireland take for granted. They also helped with homework and a listening ear.

The group stuck closely together at the start for both practical and emotional reasons. For example, there was no Halal shop in Carlow at the time and the group used to organise a regular bulk shop in Clondalkin in Dublin. The families also visited each other frequently to reduce their sense of isolation.

"When we came to Carlow we visited each other a lot because we didn't know anyone," remembers one young girl. *"We visited each other to give comfort. I remember lots of people holding me and giving me treats".*

Language

Language was the single biggest issue from the outset, as only three of the 64 refugees spoke any English before they arrived. Initially funding was only given for two weeks of interpretation, after which St Catherine's was supposed to use mainstream interpreting services. It quickly became obvious that this was totally impractical and the centre applied for funding from the European Refugee Fund for a full time intercultural worker who was involved for two years.

"The whole theory was about mainstreaming, you can't treat them differently to others, but it would have been criminal to mainstream them given their needs," says one member of the steering group.

The Rohingya language (Chittagonian dialect) shares some features with languages spoken in neighbouring Bangladesh. At the start St Catherine's couldn't find an interpreter, which delayed the process, but eventually one was found who became close to the families and was involved in many facets of their lives. The interpreter, described as an intercultural worker, was based at St Catherine's, as was the resettlement worker who dealt with all aspects of the community's interaction with public services as well as many other issues.

Role of St Catherine's Community Services Centre

For the first three years life for many of the Rohingya population revolved around St Catherine's Community Services Centre where the resettlement and intercultural worker were based. This was a place where women in particular felt safe and welcome, and where their questions on life in Ireland could be asked and resolved.

"This was where they came, this was the base. St Catherine's was the hub. Because their needs were so acute they needed an awful lot of support."

Even now, many are still involved in courses there, or make use of the crèche and the Citizens Information Centre. The Rohingya community remains deeply affectionate towards St Catherine's and it is clear that having a physical space where they felt safe and welcomed was critical to their early days in Carlow. They also praise the resettlement worker Clare Cody. It is difficult to overstate the importance for those who have suffered trauma of having an anchor point, and it vindicates the decision of Carlow Local Authorities to centralise the project within an organisation that would still be there when the formal programme was over. As one woman told the 2012 evaluation:

"St Catherine's are friends of the Rohingya family. Any sort of problem or trouble, St Catherine's is the place we get help".

First Day at School

The Rohingya group arrived in Carlow at the end of May. The children had undergone an orientation programme at the reception centre in Ballyhaunis to prepare them for school in Ireland. However, it is important to note that many had no schooling of any kind before arriving in Ireland. Some had only a couple of years of education and in some cases this was focused solely on learning Arabic and the Koran, as for most of their time there this was all that was available. Most, like the adults, were not literate in any language.

It is also important to recognise that many of these children had lost their fathers before they came to Ireland. In the course of this research, it emerged that some of the children had actually been working from a very young age. They were in reality child labourers trying to earn a little extra to support their families.

"We used to get a ration card for rice, lentils and flour, but that was all. I didn't go to school. I used to work doing carpentry, carving wooden things and selling them."

"When I was in Bangladesh I worked for five years making chairs (from age 9 to 14) I have back pain and I think it is from that time."

As the children would not be starting school for two months Carlow Youth services put together a summer camp programme with an English language component which was well attended and received. Many of the children were very excited at the prospect of going to school, with one young boy reported to be wearing his

school uniform from the middle of August. However, the reality of school life was tough for many.

Those young enough to go to primary school for at least a couple of years report a broadly positive experience. Here pupils had the same teacher all day, and there was support available in terms of extra English classes.

"I started in sixth class. It was my first time ever going to school," says one teenager who is now in 3rd level education. "I couldn't speak, I couldn't write. I didn't even have my ABCs and now I am in college."

"The first day I was in primary school I was so happy writing my name!" says one nineteen-year old woman. "When others were doing Irish you would go to another teacher and get help with grammar and vocabulary."

Those who started in secondary school found things were a lot more challenging.

"I found myself dumb, thinking, why am I here?" says one young woman. "I was upset. When others are writing you feel you should be doing something"

Some teenage boys in particular found it difficult to settle.

"I didn't know anything. When the teacher says answer me this, I can't understand to answer and that was shameful for me."

Mothers recall a difficult time.

"They felt lost. They were crying, saying other kids are talking about me."

Several boys began skipping classes or dropped out, and none of the first cohort of boys completed their Leaving Cert.

"At home at their age they're young men, in control. They'd been in an unstructured setting in the camps," says one person who worked closely with the families. "To land in a classroom doing English, maths, geography, history – it was doomed to failure"

Younger students who benefited from primary education have an acute understanding of the problems their elder siblings faced.

"I think Carlow did a decent job overall but the worst thing was they left students on their own, put them in secondary when they didn't have any English and they ended up not getting a proper education"

Educational psychologists were brought in, and the steering group reported the issues back to the Department of Justice but no action seems to have been taken at national level to make any exceptions to the legal requirements regarding school attendance and the curriculum. The Steering Committee later discovered that the City of Dublin VEC had managed to get an exemption from normal

secondary school for unaccompanied minors so they could focus on English for a year first.

"We had looked for a special programme but were told this wasn't possible under the law. If I'd known about the Dublin programme I could have argued the case," says one worker closely involved. *"If they'd been kept out for a year it would have benefited them. It didn't happen and I don't know if it has been looked at for other cases."*

Some schools would appear to have made greater efforts than others to integrate pupils and individual teachers went beyond the call of duty.

"I didn't do Irish, I did construction instead. A teacher was kind enough to do it just with me when Irish was on. It helped me to get the CAO points I needed."

"What we tried to do was look at their age and do the best we could, putting most of them into first and second year, with a small number of subjects, extra English and no Irish," says one principal. *"We were blessed with the lads we got, the majority were engaged fully"*.

Adult language learning

While children went to school, the adults attended a course run by the VEC, KCETB, which focused on English language learning at a level appropriate to their needs.

The course ran for 20 hours a week and was held in St Catherine's. In an innovative move, it was organised there to suit breastfeeding mothers whose children were attending the crèche.

"At the start St Catherine's helped us a lot but it wasn't enough to make us confident. English was too hard for us".

"I went to the VEC to English class. When I had small kids I stopped studying for a few years, now I am back again at level 3."

In traditional Rohingya culture, a woman's role is primarily in the home. Back in Burma, women would not have even done the shopping. When they came to Ireland men handled most of the engagement with public services, schools and other organisations. As a result, their English improved a lot more quickly, reinforcing the language gap between the genders, and making it even less likely, that women would take a frontline role. This had a knock on effect when it came to accessing services such as healthcare.

"There were cultural issues where women were subservient. There was a power imbalance where male elders and teenage boys spoke more English, but it wasn't appropriate to use them for translation."

Access to other courses were also organised for adults, and several attended VTOS and Back to Education programmes as their English improved. St Catherine's also

organised men's and women's support groups, which were particularly popular with women. An intercultural community gardening project at An Gairdín Beo, funded by CCDP, was considered very successful, as it did not depend on language skills and also provided the opportunity to engage with the wider community.

Racism and discrimination

While the Rohingya community will go to great lengths to point out that their experience has been generally positive, and that they are grateful for the welcome they have received, even young children have endured racist comments and abuse. Almost everyone interviewed for this research reported multiple incidents of racism during their time in Carlow.

"When we came first we had so many problems. People pulled at our hijab, or threw stones", says one young woman. "Now it is OK. Carlow is like family. Carlow is home."

However, there was at least one more serious incident.

"I was beaten up, I ended up in hospital. I called the Gardaí. I know who the people were".

Most Rohingya say that this abuse has now abated, and that some of those who once engaged in it are now friendly towards them. Despite early racist incidents, it would appear that the Rohingya community were very much the "vanguard" for the acceptance of diversity in Carlow.

"Kids call us Paki. We had our door kicked. We were the first people like us in Carlow town".

The Rohingya women and teenage girls are particularly distinctive and recognisable, as almost all of them wear long abayas and hijabs (headscarves) while the men wear Western dress.

"They didn't know where we came from, what our culture is. Now it's completely different, people respect each other".

Youth Services

Carlow Regional Youth Services (CRYS) also played a role in peace making after a couple of incidents involving teenage boys who were attacked by another group. The Youth Service was a crucial partner in the resettlement project from the start and its building, The Vault, a drop in centre for teenagers age 12-18 became an important gathering point for younger Rohingya. What began with summer camps expanded into an afterschool programme for post primary students. St Catherine's also hosted a primary afterschool programme and later children attended mainstream afterschool.

The Youth Services also organised extra English classes, a mentoring programme and at a later stage, a one to one programme for some teenage boys called Youth at Risk. However, perhaps the most important element of the Vault was that it gave young people a place to call their own and to begin mixing with other Carlow teenagers. It was also part of the genesis of the cricket club.

“They liked the Vault but they were struggling because of the language. Between 13 and 16 they struggled with structure and mixing with other teenagers, but the best thing was they were made to feel welcome, could have a chat.”

Religion

The Rohingya are Muslims and had been persecuted in Burma where their identity had been suppressed. Their religion became a strong marker of identity when their ethnic background was under threat, and for a long time Islamic schools were the only ones available in the camp.

When the group came to Carlow, they were disappointed to discover there was no proper mosque and that prayers took place in a private home. They were also distressed that there was no Muslim graveyard. In the initial evaluations of the resettlement programme the issue of the mosque was a priority for the community, and while it was mentioned during this research, there seems to be an acceptance that this is something the Muslim community need to resolve themselves. Over time, the Rohingya community became more involved at the mosque with one community giving religious instruction there for a time.

As in many other migrant communities, religious observance has also promoted social contact. As there was no pre-existing Rohingya population, they became closer to Carlow’s Bangladeshi community whose language is similar to their own. This has resulted in some Rohingya working in businesses owned by Bangladeshis and has resulted in several Rohingya women marrying Bangladeshis already living in Carlow. Some of the women have commented that their husbands helped them to settle in Carlow and that life was much better as a result. However, this is not the case universally.

Counselling

Some Rohingya women had either been exposed to violence or witnessed it in the camp and were fearful of living alone.

“Single women felt very unprotected here, and they felt their only option was to have a husband”, says one of those who worked closely with the group. *“They found managing life in Ireland very hard especially if there were issues with sons.”*

As they became more aware of the trauma issues from the camp era the resettlement team organised some sessions with Women’s Aid and with the Dublin based organisation Spirasi, which provides trauma counselling. *“It was an*

emerging situation, we were only finding out as we went along. It emerged that there was a lot of social violence.”

Language was however a major difficulty. Unprocessed grief was also an issue. Many had lost family members in difficult circumstances and had also left parents or other siblings behind. Those who took up the offer of counselling found it useful.

“I lost my parents very young. I was living as a single mother in the camp. Sometimes in our lives, we can’t trust other people to share the feelings. Here there was space to share feeling and experiences.”

Operation of the Steering Group and the Partnership approach

While the resettlement steering group had initially allocated a budget for counselling, it was not used at the start, as the basics needs of the group were so great and their lack of English made it too challenging. This was an example of how much flexibility was required to deal with an unfolding situation. Every month the resettlement worker reported to the steering group and decisions were made to enlist support from other agencies in the town, and to seek resources where possible.

“We’re such a small county. The County Development Board had created a good working relationship and we all knew each other. It was a project, something to get our teeth into.”

There has also been praise for the chair, who kept the project moving and kept the focus on the families’ needs. This flexible interagency approach led to some very useful and responsive cooperation e.g. between the Youth Service and Gardaí, and the Adult Learning Centre and St Catherine’s. St Catherine’s felt they could draw on support from others as needed including non-members of the steering group such as the arts centre Visual. The interagency approach and the partnership between public bodies and other organisations also generated some creative ideas such as the revival of the cricket club.

In early 2010, €200,000 funding for a further two years was received from the European Refugee Fund. This needed to be matched by 25% local funding. Despite the difficult economic circumstances, this was raised successfully through member agencies and brought the total to €270,000. This covered the extension of the resettlement worker, an interpreter, language provision, childcare and other costs. Cost of housing, health, education and social welfare continued to be funded from mainstream services.

c) Moving On 2013-2018

"Freedom is an essential need to develop and reach potential"

Our Story so far

End of the Formal resettlement programme

The resettlement programme was initially only due to last 16 months but the implementing partners and the steering group decided that this would be insufficient, given the group's needs, and it was extended into 2012. The resettlement worker continued until then, but in the latter stages, the interpreter was only used on an occasional basis.

Everyone was aware that the transition to mainstream services needed to be done sensitively and plans were made for over a year. A mainstreaming plan was developed which outlined a list of actions with a traffic light system, and also involved the preparation of other agencies in the town. It covered areas such as school enrolment, support work in schools, linkages to mainstream youth groups, parental support, language support, guidance services, communication between schools and families, support with form filling, mental health services, sexual health workshops, child protection and a host of other issues, as well as access to education and training.

"I never got a sense there was a huge upheaval. Although the staff were gone a lot of others at St Catherine's were involved, even though they were not officially designated", says one stakeholder who was closely involved in the process.

While at the time the families were concerned about the loss of support, in retrospect they feel they managed the transition well. *"When they left we thought it would be hard but now we are okay."*

The resettlement worker worked with the families on individual plans, coming up with solutions to their self-identified needs.

"My feeling was they'd be fine. They had massive challenges in Carlow, but they'd had massive challenges before they came. They're strong, they're resilient".

The Carlow programme was innovative in many ways, particularly in the involvement of volunteer befrienders, and in forward thinking initiatives such as situating language classes next to a crèche so breastfeeding mothers would be able to attend. Carlow County Development Board was recognised with an award from Chambers Ireland at the Excellence in Local Government Awards in 2012.

Transitioning to employment

By the end of the formal programme three of the men had found work and one had passed his driving test.

However, Ireland was in the grip of a serious recession resulting from the financial crash and the subsequent international bailout. National unemployment rose to 15% and Carlow was particularly badly affected.

“They had arrived in 2009 just as recession was taking hold”, one stakeholder recalls. “With their limited English there were plenty of people who were going to get a job before them.”

The evaluation at the end of the formal programme had identified that older members of the community who wanted to work were lacking experience. The young men who had not completed their Leaving Cert also needed education and work placements.

St Catherine’s designed the CREWE programme – Carlow Rohingya Education and Work Experience, which began in February 2014. However, English language skills proved to be a significant barrier and the programme was redesigned to focus on adult literacy.

Members of the group did a series of work placements in everything from an egg factory to charity shops, an alterations service and car valeting. While feedback from employers was generally positive, Carlow struggled throughout the recession and moving into paid employment proved challenging. With the younger men, the goal was to get them onto a qualifications ladder, and a number did progress to the youth training centre. However, with some there were issues around attendance and timekeeping, and a lack of understanding of the need for qualifications to get a job in Ireland.

Some men found jobs in restaurants, often through Bangladeshi or other Asian contacts. However, some have found that restaurants prefer to employ part-time students at lower wages, of whom there are thousands in Carlow. At least seven men are now working in security. Some travel as far as Dublin daily for work.

“The job doesn’t need education. You do the training, you get the job. It’s ten days training in Bagenalstown.”

“We need jobs where English is not critical”, says one man in his 40s. “It’s hard to get work experience in Carlow, there’s very little industry, no factory jobs.”

They recommend that in future efforts be made to build on adapting refugees existing skills (in their case tailoring and carpentry) rather than trying to train them or give them work experience in something else, or expect them to set up their own businesses.

“It’s difficult for us to learn all the skills to run a business.”

The older men are highly conscious of the need to be productive, and to be seen to be productive. They also reference the impact of employment on their own dignity and the social benefit that it brings in terms of making friends and acquaintances. They also suggest that refugees involve themselves in volunteering as a way to give back to their community.

"Give new refugees information on how they can give back. Sport, for example, that unites everybody."

Some men have sensed bias by employers, which they are reluctant to label as discrimination.

"I went for a job, there were two of us. We had to do a test. I had to show the other candidate how to use the computer but she got the job. She was European."

"I applied for a few jobs, kitchen porter, cleaning. The thing I can do is carpentry. I applied for an apprenticeship but didn't pass."

Younger men who haven't yet found a job are aware that they might have a better chance in Dublin but are reluctant to move there because of the challenge of finding accommodation. Some also have responsibilities to older parents or are struggling with other issues.

"Young adults still need support. Their experience from the camps still underpins it all," says one stakeholder who has worked closely with them. *"They need access to services who work with people who come from these kinds of situations, and they need support into adulthood."*

Women were less engaged in the CREWE programme but later became involved in sewing and gardening programmes. Many of the older women struggled with English as well as family responsibilities. Some took part in social inclusion initiatives such as the 20-week 'New Futures' personal development programme organised by Carlow County Development Partnership in Bagenalstown. This innovative and creative programme included women from many backgrounds, facilitated intercultural learning and personal development and provided opportunities for learning, training and employment.

However, those who have worked closely with the community think it is unlikely that older women will progress into the formal labour market at this point in their lives given their cultural background and English level. Some have on-going health issues and some in the community feel these women should be given a break by the Department of Social Protection, where they are often asked what progress they are making in their job search. One woman is working part-time in a community kitchen via a Tús programme supported by Carlow County Development Partnership and feels that she is benefiting from it. Others have engaged in some volunteer work.

Noor



Noor Khatum's husband died of malaria in a refugee camp in Bangladesh. She came to Ireland alone with her young children.

She loves cooking and now works part-time at St Clare's hospitality kitchen in Carlow.

Some of the young women who arrived at second level completed their Junior or Leaving Certificate and one has gone on to do a degree at Carlow IT. Several have got married and had children at a young age, and some of these are engaging in community education at St Catherine's.

"From 10 until 1, I could work", says one young woman. "After that I have to have time for my children as my husband is working. Many places don't accept that. Also many places will not take us with hijab."

"I don't see them going into the labour market" says one worker. "It's a cultural issue, they are married and have children. The girls in school now will be different".

Several of the cohort who married young are quite vocal on the subject of early marriage and say that they will discourage their own children from this path.

"I don't want my daughter to be like me", says one. "I want her to have freedom to be independent, to do something for herself".

"We want them to be confident, to be a lawyer or a doctor. After that they can get married."

Another expressed concern about potential discrimination in future even with good qualifications.

"I still feel that the hijab will be a barrier. You can sense and feel you are differentiated from others. When it comes to selection you could be pushed down and other pushed up. You don't see Muslims working wearing a hijab, except doctors, and they are very much in demand and in a stronger position".



Young Rohingya Women's Empowerment Workshop with Dr Ambia Perveen and Dr Anita Schug

Education - the main driver of integration

As previously described, there have also been some issues with racism and isolation in schools. However, in general, education has been the primary driver of progress and integration within the Rohingya community and as time went on, life became easier for Rohingya pupils.

"The first big thing in our school was that one of the Rohingya kids got the Edmund Rice award for 3rd years" says one former principal. "It's for being helpful, for your humanity as well as your advancement. 160 parents were there plus dignitaries, our parents were delighted."

The schools also liaised with the Carlow Regional Youth Service particularly in relation to the younger male teenagers.

"When Jimmy Dooley from The Vault started the cricket it was a godsend. If someone was being a bit lax, he'd let it be known he only wanted lads on the team who were also going to school. He was reinforcing what we were doing and then we were applauding their cricket exploits".

As the primary school Rohingya children became teenagers they also came to the Vault, and later became involved in cricket. However according to youth workers this younger generation drifted off as they did better academically and made more friends at school. This group feels they have suffered less bullying and isolation than their older siblings.

"People pick on you if you are new, but by secondary school they've got to know you and if you have good friends they will back you up".

All of this group have done their Junior Cert and are continuing to Leaving Cert.

"We just had our mocks. It's a lot of hassle and of course you are going to be nervous, but I'm planning on going to Carlow IT to study engineering."

Others also hope to become engineers, architects, or work in construction. They understand the CAO system, the pathways to qualifications, the Access programme to Carlow IT and the option of PLC courses.

Rohingya children who are now in primary school are of course completely fluent in English. Many had begun learning English in crèche as soon as they arrived and they also learned to socialise with Irish and other nationalities.

"I have one Irish friend I met here in the crèche when I was one year old; she was in playschool and is now in school with me".

Almost all children learn Irish, though occasional exceptions seem to be made even still, on an ad hoc basis.

They attend a range of primary schools in the town and take part in the full curriculum. However, Rohingya children do not take part in religion classes at primary level.

"In secondary school the teacher teaches all the different religions. You don't have to practice them. She says we are here to learn the different ones so we can respect them" (13 year old girl)

St Leo's in Carlow has a prayer room and some Muslim children including Rohingya use it to say their 1pm prayers. While the wearing of the hijab in schools was something of an issue initially, it now appears to be accepted.

"When we are on our way to school we wear it", says one twelve year old girl. "We don't need to wear it in class as it is an all-girl school, but sometimes we do. The teachers make us tuck it in. It has to match the uniform".

Even these young children sometimes find people making fun of them in school or in the street. One reported that a group of schoolgirls always *"look at her weirdly"* and others have been called names.

All have some Irish friends, and are included in outings like blackberry picking with neighbours and birthday parties.

"I've been to a party, there were chips and wedges and cake and fireworks. It was really fun."

These young girls are ambitious for the future mentioning careers like doctor, journalist, and politician.

"I want to make my community proud", says one teenage girl. "We wouldn't have had any future if we were in Burma. We have this chance and we have to make the best of it."

Schoolgirls



Jamalida Rafique and Josna Akter were babies when they arrived in Ireland as refugees in 2009. They are now students at Scoil Mhuire gan Smál in Carlow.

Citizenship and Civic involvement

For a group of people whose identity was ruthlessly suppressed in Burma and who were treated as stateless in Bangladesh, acquiring citizenship was more than just a practical matter. Those who have attended citizenship ceremonies have found them very moving, considering that they were denied citizenship in both Burma and Bangladesh. One man was particularly impressed by the presence of the army band.

"To see an army band playing music, when you think of what the army does back there in Burma!"

As programme refugees, they became entitled to apply for citizenship after three years rather than the usual five years residency requirement. They also voted for the first time and have remained engaged ever since, voting in elections and referenda. President Higgins is particularly popular as he has attended the Sport against Racism soccer tournament in the Phoenix Park and members of the community have met him on several occasions.

"He is our president and we love him".

Members of the community have also campaigned throughout Ireland and Europe for the rights of their fellow Rohingya in Burma and Bangladesh. Rohingya Action Ireland was established in 2018. (See story panel).

Connection with Bangladesh

Once the community began to acquire Irish passports, travel to Bangladesh became easier and more frequent. Connection with Bangladesh is constant as many of the refugees still have close family there including parents and siblings, and in some more recent cases, husbands or wives. Some Rohingya also send money when they can, to help with medical expenses or buy new plastic sheeting before the monsoon season.

As Programme Refugees, the Rohingya community are entitled to apply for family reunification. This can be complicated however, as depending on the situation the Rohingya here need to show proof of income above 30,000 euro a year (to bring in non-EU nationals who are not also refugees). They also have to have approval from their landlord and/or the council to show that they have space to accommodate extra family members. There may also be issues with documentation and recognition of marriages. While a number of the community have married fellow Rohingya from the camps, or Bangladeshis living in Bangladesh or elsewhere, getting permission for them to enter Ireland can be a long drawn out process.

"I got married in 2016. My wife is in Bangladesh. She is 22. I applied for family reunification. If I am accepted the Minister will send me a letter."

Permission for parents is also difficult to obtain. As a result, several families still have elderly parents in the camps, a situation that is stressful for all concerned, though at least now they are able to visit them.

An Irish Refugee Protection Humanitarian Admission Programme (IHAP) for 10 priority countries, including Rohingya from Burma, is currently being processed by the Department of Justice. It has slightly less onerous conditions and several applications have been made from Carlow.

Family life and generational change

As the Rohingya community is so small the pool of potential marriage partners within their own ethnic group is tiny. Several of the Rohingya women who were lone parents on arrival have married Bangladeshis already living in Ireland. With cultural mores favouring arranged marriages, parents have expanded their search for partners for their children to their extended networks in the camps and among the Bangladeshi community in Ireland and overseas. However, they recognise the limitations of bringing in partners from the camps.

"It's not going to work in the long term. If our son or daughter is educated, they are not going to marry an uneducated person. We need to look for people who can adjust in the future".

Mothers view getting their children married as one of their main roles in life. Some are willing to leave the choice to their children as long as they marry other Muslims. While some want their children to marry at 18, others want them to finish their education and find a job first.

Younger men are already making their position clear.

"They're from the culture that arranged marriages. I told my mother I want my own freedom."

"We don't want stuff like our sisters, arranged marriages. You don't spend much time with the partner beforehand."

The Rohingya have faced challenges in getting access to housing as families grow and new ones are formed. Most are housed in private rented accommodation under the Rental Assistance Scheme (RAS) or the Housing Assistance Payment (HAP), which allows them to remain in the homes when they take up employment. Ireland is facing a housing crisis, and at the time of the report, at least one Rohingya community member was living in Bed and Breakfast accommodation.

d) The Rohingya Community in Carlow today

"The beauty of Ireland always makes me feel at home, with the added flavour of the welcoming nature of Irish people, who too have travelled their difficult journey"

Our Story So Far

Growth and opportunity - but challenges remain

Ten years on the Rohingya are vibrant members of Carlow's increasingly diverse local community, playing an active role in sport, culture and political activism. The community has grown from the initial 13 households to 25, as new families have been formed and babies born. Children are in school and college and are forging ahead with their new lives.

"Apart from the first couple of years the kids just came in, no different to anyone else. Once they had the language they had access to the curriculum and they were off".

Two of the community are studying at Carlow Institute of Technology and others are involved in a range of training courses. Many of the men are employed in jobs ranging from security to restaurants to personal training. Others have been involved in volunteer and community employment projects throughout the town and county. However, unemployment and poverty remain serious challenges as does housing for new or growing families. Some of the young people who went straight into secondary school with no English are still carrying that disadvantage today.

Community cohesion

While not homogenous in terms of needs or progress, the community displays a high degree of cohesion. Although not everyone takes part to the same degree, this is a tightly woven community, which has its advantages and disadvantages. Living so closely together can result in occasional personal or group strains, but there is also a high degree of support and solidarity in time of need. The community is also connected via various WhatsApp, Facebook and other messaging groups although not all members are included.

It has its own saving scheme called "chomoti" which translates as community share. Members put in money every two weeks. Someone's name is pulled out in a draw, but they don't get another turn until everyone else has got theirs and they must keep contributing. If someone badly needs money, say to visit an ill parent in Bangladesh, they may get the money instead as a kind of advance.

Women and their children get together every second Saturday in someone's home and share a meal. There are also events like camping in the mountains in summer, and a party if their teams win a trophy in cricket or soccer. The Rohingya soccer team is an important source of pride, as is the group's involvement in reviving Carlow Cricket Club (see story panel).

The community is also involved in the mosque with a representative on the committee fundraising for a new building in Carlow. A site has been found and some money raised but planning permission is required. In the early years of the programme, the lack of a proper mosque was a source of deep concern to the Rohingya community but they are now actively engaged in finding a solution.

Toward Integration - Carlow is our hometown

The community feels safe and settled in Ireland, and most community members appear to be confident in navigating Irish life and knowing where to conduct daily business. The resettlement programme and its staff set the community on a path to independence.

"I can understand English. I have more idea what to do and what not to do," says a woman in her 30s. "I have more talent and can make more decisions".

A noticeable feature is the community's attachment to Carlow, with only a handful of the original refugees leaving the town for other locations within Ireland.

"Carlow is our hometown, small peaceful and quiet. People are helpful, warm and kind".

The Rohingya say they are grateful to the government, the resettlement programme and the town of Carlow. Some say they sometimes feel guilty for what they have, compared to others at home, and to the homeless and asylum seekers who live in much tougher conditions.

"We never thought we would have this. We struggled in the camps. When we eat our food, we think of the other people there. We compare what we have with our families back there. Some have been in a camp for 45 years".

The Rohingya community are now highly integrated in terms of education but less so in terms of employment, particularly among women. They have experienced both racism and discrimination, and while there are some signs that overt racism has declined, some of the community still sense a bias when it comes to employment.

When asked about their identity today most people identify as Rohingya and Irish rather than Burmese, not surprisingly as their native country never granted them citizenship.

The group are integrated into the sporting community in Carlow (again predominantly men). Children and young people have friends from Irish and other backgrounds, but women tend to stick together. However several reported good relationships with their neighbours, and they notice an improvement on earlier years.

As previously stated a Migrant Integration Strategy for Carlow is now in preparation and several members of the community have been active members of Carlow Integration Forum and are involved in the new Intercultural Forum.

Those involved in the resettlement programme have seen a great deal of change over ten years, with one remarking that the group appear healthier and happier.

"There are a lot of positives, young Rohingya kids running around with Irish kids. There's the cricket, and people hanging out together eating Rohingya food. The older women are more isolated though, and we could be much further along".

Some feel that this is the way the older women have chosen to live.

"They've come here for refuge and peace, not to change their culture at this stage of their lives".

A new generation – opportunities and challenges

Generational change is likely to prove a challenge for the Rohingya community as young people grow up in a very different society to that of their parents. However, it appears that the transition is gradual and has some welcome positives in terms of female empowerment and access to opportunities.

"Back there the men go free but women are kept in a cage. I think that will keep happening for a long time, but the generation that are growing up here, that will change." (young woman)

Older members of the community also have concerns about the loss of the Rohingya language. Whereas English language acquisition was a challenge in the early years (and remains so for many older group members) a new development is that some younger people are starting to lose touch with the Rohingya language and can no longer communicate with family members in Bangladesh or even here in Carlow.

"We need to keep our culture alive – in Burma they tried to make us lose our identity. We are worried our language is being lost".

"We are the interpreters!" says one woman in her 20s. *"My mother struggles to speak with my children, her own grandchildren".*

While there is interest in support for a language or culture programme for children, younger members feel that any other initiatives should involve the wider community.

"If you stay within the Rohingya you only use your own language. But when the older women did a cooking course in St Catherine's there were Irish, Syrians Rohingya all together. They really liked that."

Dildar



Dildar Begum arrived in Ireland in 2009 with no English. She is now studying business administration at Carlow Institute of Technology, and is the first woman from the Rohingya community to pursue a degree.

Ismail



Mohammed Ismail first fell in love with helicopters as a refugee, when he saw them hovering over the camp in Bangladesh. He is now studying aerospace engineering at Carlow Institute of Technology.

The lingering effects of trauma and family separation

Events in Burma and Bangladesh also have a very visceral effect on the Rohingya community in Carlow. The continued dire situation in the camps and persecution inside Burma are of real concern to those who still have parents, siblings and other relatives living there. Family reunification is also a concern, with families feeling it is difficult to meet the conditions required.

The National Intercultural Health Strategy acknowledged that people from minority ethnic groups are at increased risk of poverty and social exclusion, and it put a particular emphasis on mental health. It is important to note the ongoing effects of the experience of the group while in the camps. While the researcher did not feel qualified to delve deeply into issues of unresolved trauma, the research session with older women did discuss the issue of counselling. A number said that at the time it was originally offered language was too much of a barrier, but that they would be open to it if it was made available again.

"Sometimes if you scratch the surface it can end in tears," says one person who has worked with the group. "The 2016 crackdown in Burma brought stuff up, and there weren't the resources for counselling."



International Rohingya Remembrance Day 2018 in front of the Remembrance wall

5. Analysis and Recommendations

OUTSTANDING NEEDS

The Rohingya community made few requests for specific interventions during this research, and have become used to their needs being dealt with through mainstream services.

While there is a recognition that it is up to the Muslim population to organise and fund the building of a mosque they ask that people support them to ensure that it is built.

There is a general desire to improve the employment potential of younger men, but a lack of clarity as to how to make this happen. Engagement with various agencies from the Department of Social Protection to Turas Nua, to various training schemes has not always been successful for a variety of reasons.

There is interest among some older women in attending further English classes but it is difficult to gauge the true level of commitment. Most people recognise that a few hours a week will not make a substantial difference if they then go home and speak the Rohingya language. One woman is now working via a Tús scheme, operated by CCDP, and her positive experience has led other women to express interest in something similar.

Some younger women want to progress through the QQI qualifications system towards the labour market, but others feel they are too busy with small children to engage in paid employment. Those who do want to work would like to see some employers taking the lead in employing women wearing hijabs and proactively hiring Muslim women. While there have been suggestions in the past that Rohingya women might consider some kind of social enterprise, it is clear that most people have their own individual interests and there is no particular evidence of a desire to work together on a business.

While the community appear loath to make a big deal out of it, it is clear that racism and discrimination have been a significant issue among all age groups, and a barrier to the community achieving its full potential.

The difficulties associated with family reunification are still a major issue and families have asked that the process for parents in particular is made easier. While grateful for the assistance of St Catherine's, Carlow County Development and Carlow Older Persons' Forum during the most recent round of IHAP applications, they requested that someone with good knowledge of the system would brief them on how to deal with future applications. Many fear that their parents will die in the camps, having spent most of their lives there. Others wanted to know if it might be possible to arrange adoptions from the camps in Bangladesh.

Many are concerned that the Rohingya language may be lost among the community over time, and a number have expressed interest in finding ways to

keep it alive through classes for children in language, culture and music, with perhaps a small degree of financial support.

Recommendations

What is clear from this resettlement programme and its aftermath is that the interagency partnership approach worked extremely well in Carlow, both in terms of preparing for the refugees arrival (housing, school places etc.) and over the following three years. Relationships built up between the Rohingya community and many of those involved on the steering group have endured and evolved and led to several other initiatives over the years.

The choice of St Catherine's as the implementing partner worked out well and gave a particularly vulnerable group a safe anchorage. It is evident that this is paying off over the longer term, and **suggests that local solutions may be more viable than tendering processes, which may involve parties with no immediate connection to the area involved.** Under current policy NGO's who work directly with refugees cannot play any role in the resettlement planning process if they may end up tendering at a later stage. This deprives the process of valuable local expertise.

There are a number of other issues that bear consideration for future programmes either in Carlow or elsewhere, and for the future successful integration of the Rohingya and other refugees.

The single most critical issue for progress for refugees in education, work and social settings is their level of English language. It needs significant investment at the start, to allow people reach their potential. Without it, levels of dependency are likely to remain high. While primary school worked out very well, secondary school proved to be extremely difficult for the first cohort. While English wasn't the only issue, it was the root of many others. Issues such as those that arose in Carlow, (where children began the secondary school curriculum with virtually no knowledge of English) need to be acted upon at national level and an efficient feedback mechanism needs to be in place to find creative solutions quickly. Lost time at that age is almost impossible to recover.

This research has found that racism and discrimination have been far more widespread than perhaps previously thought. Carlow, with its diverse population, has an opportunity to be a leader in terms of anti-racism and anti-discrimination policies particularly in the work place. Even refugees who do well in college or other training will start out with more disadvantages than those born in Ireland, particularly in terms of informal networks. **Local authorities and local businesses could make a decision to help break down mindsets and barriers by eliminating discrimination and unconscious bias, and by making an effort to ensure that refugees and migrants from different cultures are employed in public-facing, visible roles.** The recent decision by the Gardaí to allow turbans and hijabs as part of the Garda uniform is a pointer to new times emerging.

Politicians and other community leaders might also consider making a public commitment to support the new mosque being undertaken by the Muslim community and to send a message that its presence is welcome in Carlow.

The interagency steering group had a broad range of members reflecting many aspects of life, but it was dominated by public sector organisations and NGOs. **The involvement of the private sector could help to speed up connections to the workplace, and to create a sense of buy in and ownership among businesses as to how they might play a part, even in the latter stages of any resettlement programme.** In Portugal, the *rede alargada* is a network of public and NGO organisations with a focus on the business community. Businesses identified as potential refugee employers are offered sensitisation workshops for their management and staff focusing on resettlement and promoting voluntary work and internships for refugees as part of their corporate social responsibility programmes.

Carlow's small size had several advantages in terms of geography, and in terms of all the key players already knowing each other and working well together. **While Carlow ended up being a positive experience for this particular group of refugees in many respects, the policy of dispersal to smaller towns means that employment is a more difficult prospect than it might be in larger cities. In this case, it was exacerbated by the recession, but it is worth bearing in mind that small towns may not be suitable for all groups and that employment potential needs to be taken into account alongside housing availability.**

The Rohingya group undoubtedly needed a high level of support, and at the time of their arrival were the only programme refugee population in Carlow. As a result, several programmes were put in place specifically for them. However, this resulted in them spending even more time together, and limited their opportunities to speak English and to learn from other attitudes to work, qualifications and training. **At this point, after 10 years in Carlow, it is highly recommended that whatever new initiatives are put in place in the future, should not take place in a Rohingya-only context, as this reinforces their differentiation from the rest of the population. (With the possible exception of Rohingya language classes for children, women's empowerment programmes in the Rohingya context, young women's workshops or events focused on culture such as the dance project underway at Visual in the summer of 2019).** It is also important to recognise that members of the Rohingya are all individuals, with varying and individual needs and aspirations.

While St Catherine's used to have a new communities officer there is currently no specific key worker to support migrant communities and individuals in Carlow as they navigate mainstream services. While not wishing to pre-empt the work being done on integration in general, it may be worth reconsidering this, given that when the Syrian resettlement programme ends there will be another community which may also need longer term support. **A dedicated intercultural worker**

would provide invaluable support. A physical hub at St Catherine's was significant in creating a safe space for the Rohingya. **It may be worth considering a hub for use by all new communities, as well as others working on integration and social inclusion.**

The cultural change for Rohingya women has been even more significant than for Rohingya men. **It may be useful for Rohingya women to meet other migrant and Muslim women engaged in employment in Ireland and to share experiences on how to navigate job seeking and the workplace.** Any such skill sharing in terms of employment should not be limited to the Rohingya community but should extend to other nationalities and should involve bridge building to other non-Muslim communities.

Mental health issues arising from experiences in camps can be at the root of many other problems for refugees. In the case of the Carlow refugees, language proved to be a barrier to counselling for many. Now that people have more proficiency it may be worth offering the opportunity again with specialists who understand the context that refugees are coming from. It may also be valuable to make this available to younger people.

A bill to ease the conditions attached to family reunification is currently progressing through the Oireachtas. It may be useful for the Rohingya to lobby their politicians to explain the impact the current legislation is having on them and to seek amendments that address their situation.



Traditional Henna art at which the women are exceptionally skilled

A FINAL WORD

Those who have worked closely with the Rohingya have paid tribute to their strength and resilience and their willingness to embrace a new life in Carlow.

"There is so much warmth, when you consider what they've been through and the humanity that's still in them."

Others make the point that, like many migrants, the first generation makes sacrifices for those coming after them.

"Young peoples' education, that's what parents wanted. They came here for their children, not necessarily for themselves. We don't know the half of it, what these people went through."

The bottom line for most Rohingya is that life is better in Carlow and they can see a future for themselves, and more importantly their children.

"Now I can protect my family and my children are in school. I am happy they'll do something better with their lives."

"I call myself Irish. It's the only thing I've got; otherwise I'd be stateless. Then if they ask where I was born, I will tell them the whole story. Sometimes they call me Paddy the Ismail..."

6. Stories of Change

a. Anyone for Cricket?

On a Sunday morning, a dozen small kids are practising balls skills in the CBS gym in Carlow town. Two Rohingya-Irish kids join others from India, Pakistan, Australia, Ireland and South Africa. Later a group of Rohingya and Pakistani young men take turns to try and bowl out Australian GP and Coach Dr Ben Parmeter.

While Carlow had a vibrant cricket club in times gone by, it had folded by the 1980s. When the Rohingya came, some of them played a few games in nearby Bagenalstown. The youth service started involving teenagers in cricket and the germ of an idea began. While some of the Rohingya had played street cricket in the camps, most couldn't afford a bat there.

The youth service, St Catherine's and Carlow Sports Partnership got together with a group of Rohingya to restart the club. They played at the rugby club initially and later at Carlow College, St. Patrick's. Fr Conn Ó Maoldhomhnaigh, President of the college made the grounds available, ensured maintenance and has been key in supporting the community. Local bus service Ring a Link has secured funding to provide transport to matches. It is one of the best examples of the partnership approach that has been a hallmark of the resettlement project, but the enthusiasm of the Rohingya was critical to getting it off the ground.

"Carlow Cricket Club wouldn't have been revived without the Rohingya and their passion for the game", says youth worker Jimmy Dooley, a cricket player himself. "They were also looking for something to get their teeth into."

For the Rohingya community, cricket is about more than sport. It's a way to integrate with Irish and other nationalities, to contribute to the town's sporting and social life and to build the self-esteem of the group and its members, particularly young men who may be struggling in the job market. The club now plays in the Leinster League.

"Cricket is a way for us to give back," says club chairperson Mohamed Rafique. "It's not only for Rohingya. There are now 125 members from 13 different countries involved."

One of their Rohingya Irish players, Robi Alam, was chosen to go for training with Leinster under 17s. He and other Rohingya-Irish boys have also played for their school, CBS.

"We went to Dublin and we played Kings Hospital," says Robi in a strong Carlow accent. "And we beat them too!"

"Robi could get a chance to play for Ireland", says Rafique. "I believe at some point we will have someone from the Rohingya community playing for Ireland."

Cricket



Carlow 2 cricket team after a match at their home ground of Carlow College.

The club was revived by Rohingya refugees in 2011, and plays in the Leinster League.



“Crickling” – a mix of cricket and hurling

b. Sharing Food and Sharing Stories

It's a Saturday afternoon in a kitchen in the middle of Carlow and eight small children and one fluffy rabbit are sitting on the floor tucking into a feast of Rohingya food. They're the first shift; the bigger kids and then the adults will eat later. Rafika, the hostess this Saturday, is dishing out food from a dozen different dishes. The aromas are enticing and the choice amazing, including lamb curry and chicken biryani. Rafika and her daughter have been cooking since 7am. One of the young women explains how much these fortnightly get togethers mean to her mother.

"She comes every time. She likes to meet everyone, to see the kids enjoy our culture and to catch up with the other women".

Women in the community take turns to host, and swapping stories is as important as sharing food. Several women show me pictures on their phones of parents and grandparents in Bangladesh. Thoughts of them are a constant in their lives.

"When you come here (to meet the group) it's comforting, you feel fresh. You don't think about all the stuff in your brain, it goes out of your mind".

Cooking has also been a way to share experiences with others, even when language proves to be something of a barrier. Everyone, after all, has to eat. A local election candidate calls to the door, and goes away with a takeaway container with a selection of Rafika's specials.

Some of the women joined forces with students from Carlow College, St. Patrick's to produce a recipe book called Rohingya Stories through Recipes. The students cooked traditional Rohingya food with the women over five weeks at the local Church of Ireland Community House kitchen. The support from Reverend David White both in this project and over the years has been invaluable. The project enabled a shared experience of the women's lives in the camps and since they came to Carlow. The project was supported by Carlow County Development Partnership and Carlow Integration Forum.

Food has also been central to events such as the Intercultural Festivals of Diversity held at An Gairdin Beo, International Women's Day held at Carlow College St Patrick's, projects at Visual, community celebrations, and cultural events. Many of these have been supported by the SICAP and Carlow County Development.

"They had drawn and painted pictures of their home (in Burma), which were very moving and caught us by surprise" says Emma Lucy O'Brien, interim CEO at Visual. "They were sincere and beautiful drawings of rural and agrarian scenes, something of where they had come from".

Emma Lucy has been involved in several projects over the years and has observed how the community has developed over time. "When the Rohingya came there was immense support around them. They needed it and it was sustained over

time. They are a particularly warm and open group of people. The food they prepare, the sharing, it's incredible to be involved in it".



**Launching the very successful
Rohingya Cookbook**

Preparing and sharing wonderful food



c. From Stateless People to Political Activists

When Sanzida Begum was a small girl, she could never have imagined that one day she would be carrying a placard protesting outside the offices of Galway city council. But that's where she found herself earlier this year, trying to persuade the council to revoke the freedom of the city that it had granted to Burmese leader and Nobel peace prize winner Aung San Suu Kyi.

"Before 2010 we really liked her, we used to celebrate her birthday. She said she would take responsibility for all Burmese including Rohingya but she didn't give the Rohingya human rights. Now it is worse not better."

The council voted 30-2 to revoke the freedom of the city, a small but symbolic victory for the group.

When the Rohingya community originally came to Ireland their focus was on settling into Carlow and getting to grips with education and work. But the fact that their families were still suffering back in Burma and Bangladesh was never far from their minds. As it became possible to go back and visit the camps, some of the group began to gather photographs and testimonies to highlight the situation faced by their fellow Rohingya.

Mohamed Rafique documented the lives of some of those in the camp with his camera and the exhibition was shown at Visual, Carlow's Arts centre, supported by Carlow County Development Partnership. Since then it has travelled to dozens of events in Ireland and overseas, including universities, conferences, and trade union gatherings. It has featured in Canada, Istanbul, Scotland and the UN.

Haikal Mansor was not part of the original refugee group, but came to Ireland from Burma to study medicine and is now an integral part of the Rohingya Irish community. His contribution has been very important.

"When I came to Ireland I started to share news and information as a blog, particularly in 2012 when massacres were taking place. I have relatives in Burma so I've since had to change the name of the website".

In 2018, this informal campaigning was put on a formal footing with the establishment of Rohingya Action Ireland. Mohamed Rafique already a member of the European Rohingya Council became Chair of the RAI.

Stephanie McDermott, lecturer on the Social, Political and Community Studies Degree Programme in Carlow College St Patrick's and secretary to Rohingya Action Ireland points out "that the establishment of Rohingya Action Ireland was instrumental in formalizing the approach of working collaboratively to raise awareness of the plight of the Rohingya. RAI takes a Community Development approach of social justice, empowerment and participation. With the support of Carlow College St Patrick's, CCDP, Community Work Ireland, Teacher's Union of Ireland, European Rohingya Council and other civil society organisations RAI will continue to be active in Social and Political conscientization.



Activism in Galway



Meeting former president Mary Robinson and showing her the photographic exhibition

7. Appendix

a) Stakeholder Interviews

Margaret Moore, Administrative Officer, Carlow County Council, Chair of the Interagency Steering Group 2009-2013

Niall Morris, Director St Catherine's Community Services

Thomas Farrell, original Resettlement manager, St Catherine's Community Services (now manager of Moving On programme)

Orlaith McHugh, course coordinator CREWE, St Catherine's Community Services

Clare Cody, Resettlement Worker 2009-2012

Jimmy Dooley, Carlow Youth Services

Emma Lucy O'Brien and David Francis Moore, Visual Carlow (Arts Centre)

Stephanie McDermott, lecturer Carlow College and board member Rohingya Action Ireland

Dr Mary Francis, Health Service Executive

Helen Rothwell, Carlow Volunteer Services

Leo Hogan, Principal St Marys Academy (CBS) until 2017

Teresa Bucowska, Integration officer, Immigrant Council of Ireland

b) Original Resettlement Interagency Steering Committee

Carlow Local Authority
Carlow County Development Partnership
St Catherine's Community Services Centre
Department of Social and Family Affairs
Carlow Regional Youth Services
Health Services Executive
Carlow County Childcare Committee
Department of Education and Science
Gardaí
Carlow Women's Aid
Barnardos
County Carlow Vocational Education Committee
Carlow and South Leinster Rape Crisis Centre
National Education Welfare Board
Money Advice and Budgeting Service (MABS)
Integration Ireland (Southeast region)

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