

Introduction

Upon arrival to Ireland, asylum seekers and refugees are not educated on the Irish political system; this is left to local authorities and communities. The objective of this project was to collate experiences of support workers and locals in integrating asylum seekers and refugees into local Irish communities, and in providing information on Irish politics.

Background & methodology

Participation of migrants in Irish local elections has generally been low, with the Immigrant Council of Ireland reporting 0-20% voter registration among immigrants in select local authorities[1]. Local authorities are typically tasked with outreach and political education (see Figure 1). Higher levels of voter registration have been observed among some migrant groups in Ireland, correlating with participation in ethnic- and identity-based community groups[2]. These findings suggest a community aspect to political integration[3].

This research project consisted of four in-depth interviews with individuals working with refugees and asylum seekers in various capacities: an English teacher in several direct provision centres, a coordinator for a community support programme, and two providers of political education through local authorities. These interviews were transcribed, coded, and studied using a thematic analysis approach.

Several themes emerged through analysis of the interviews:

1. Diversity in refugee/asylum seeker population in Ireland

The diversity of the refugee and asylum seeker community was highlighted by participants in this research, who had worked with people from a wide range of nationalities, family circumstances and educational backgrounds. The range of accommodation models and financial allowances provided by the Irish state also contributed to the broad spectrum of experiences observed. This variety in lived experiences greatly affects the capacity of individuals to participate in community or educational activities, and in turn the possibilities for obtaining information about Irish political life.

2. Benefits of local connections in community building & information sharing

Interviews with local service providers highlighted the advantage of using local connections to widen inclusion and political education opportunities for refugees and asylum seekers by sharing local information and events and relying on locals to run community activities. Participants spoke of using local connections as “how [volunteering is] done in a small town”. Support workers also found it helpful to be strategic in recruiting volunteers, looking for people who had knowledge in areas such as housing and education. These trends establish locals as a trusted source of information and advice. In addition, participants working in formalised programmes mentioned the benefits of sharing information about political education workshops by reaching out to local organisation, not necessarily political ones. This allows for wider outreach through word of mouth and through social and traditional media.

Number of local authorities who use selected methods to encourage migrant voter registration

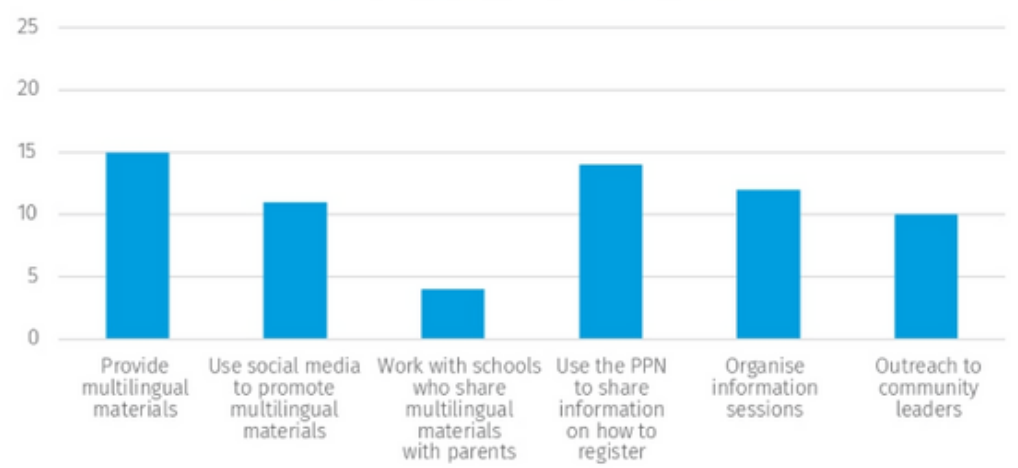


Figure 1: number of local authorities who use selected methods to encourage migrant voter registration (Immigrant Council of Ireland, 2022).

3. Variable engagement and enthusiasm for local politics

Participants reported interest in local politics, both from refugees and locals as being extremely variable. While all reported some instances of discussing local politics, the level of willingness to discuss these topics varied across the diverse refugee/asylum seeker population. Education, preference for global politics and lack of time and energy were commonly suggested reasons for a lack of interest. One participant noted that political refugees might be more likely to engage with Irish local politics, while another suggested that the institutional nature of an isolated DP centre was a barrier to accessing political education workshops. Some participants admitted reluctance to discuss these topics with refugees and asylum seekers in the community, due to the local political climate, having experienced indifference from local politicians towards their volunteer work and hostility from far-right actors.

Discussion

Although these results are limited in scope due to the small sample size, they suggest that to effectively deliver political education to asylum seekers and refugees in Ireland, service providers need to think locally and take into account the diverse nature of the refugee/asylum seeker population in Ireland. Local initiatives will probably be most effective when they use local connections to establish trust and spread the word about their services. Efforts to increase refugees and asylum seekers’ political engagements could also benefit from greater support and attention from local authorities and in particular elected officials, helping to establish trust in the political system both among refugees and asylum seekers and locals.

References

- [1] “Voting | Immigrant Council of Ireland.” Immigrantcouncil.ie, 2025, immigrantcouncil.ie/local-migrant-integration-index/key-findings/voting#&gid=1&pid=1. Accessed 12 Sept. 2025.
- [2] O’Boyle, Neil. 2009. “Integration and Political Participation: Immigrants and the 2009 Local Elections in Ireland.” *Studies: An Irish Quarterly Review* 98 (389): 59–69.
- [2] Ugba, Abel. 2007. “African Pentecostals in Ireland.” In *Immigration and Social Change in the Republic of Ireland*, edited by Bryan Fanning.
- [3] Bloemraad, I. 2006. “Becoming a Citizen in the United States and Canada: Structured Mobilization and Immigrant Political Incorporation.” *Social Forces* 85 (2): 667–95. <https://doi.org/10.1353/sof.2007.0002>.

Acknowledgments

I would like to thank my supervisor, Dr. Rachel Hoare, for her invaluable guidance and insight, and the participants who took the time to be interviewed. I am also extremely grateful to Trinity College Dublin, and to the Laidlaw Foundation for funding this project. On a personal note, a huge thanks to my family for being so supportive and accommodating during this project.