

SANCTUARY RUNNERS

2025



Programme For Government Recommendation



Replace the 'Migrant Integration Strategy' with
a new more effective and dynamic 'Community
Integration Strategy'

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Who are the Sanctuary Runners?

A multi-award winning, solidarity-through-sport movement established in Ireland in 2018 to bring people together through running, jogging, walking and open sea swimming – with a special focus on those who are new to Ireland and especially international protection applicants and refugees.

Our core function is to enable and enhance community integration and we now have 43 groups across Ireland and are expanding internationally. We are a not-for-profit organisation with charitable status (CHY23117)

What is our proposal?

To replace the 'Migrant Integration Strategy' with a new 'Community Integration Strategy'.

What would a new community integration strategy look like?

We believe the aim of this strategy should be to encourage, enable and enhance community integration rather than just focusing on the integration of the person coming to Ireland.

Integration needs to work both-ways and by focusing so much on the migrant, or descendants of migrants, it places a pressure on that person to integrate, when the transition is far more complex and multi-layered.

Impactful and effective Integration only works when the entire community is engaged, not just the migrant. This will contribute to community resilience and a true sense of valued inclusion.

It would include aids to integration enabling people to access areas such as education, employment and healthcare.

Understanding of need for 'Community Integration':

In previous strategies there has been an over emphasis on the provision of services for the migrant rather than on integration itself.



While accessible services are clearly vital for the newcomer to survive and get ahead, they do not, in and of themselves, ensure integration is achieved.

Through the work of Sanctuary Runners, which uses sport to bring all in the community together, we know that true integration is only achieved when bridges are built in the community in a sustainable way with social solidarity at their heart.

We are frustrated with a common lack of understanding of the intrinsic importance of community integration, how relatively easy it can be to make it happen and how vital it is that nationwide community integration is adequately supported, developed, appreciated and rewarded.

There is often too much focus placed on ‘integration into the labour market’ for example. Sustainable community integration must go further than the workplace and often migrants in Ireland will work in industries which rather than encourage integration, prevent it from happening – this is especially true of sectors such as food processing, fishing and construction.

Enabling cross-societal Community Integration to happen:

We believe at the heart of the new strategy should be a commitment to encourage, enable and create community integration initiatives in every community across the country – be they in the areas of sport, music, the creative arts, business, town improvement, social technology, religion, education or other spheres.

Not to simply fund existing projects but to dedicate personnel and resources to observing best practice and help to replicate that, to foster and support innovation.

For example: Sanctuary Runners will work with Sport Ireland to develop a programme which can help all sporting bodies in the country to connect in a much more meaningful way with people from minority ethnic groups. We would like to see this approach taken in a cross societal way with an energetic, dynamic and concerted effort made to create a wave of sustainable community integration across the state.



Integration v Assimilation

We must understand the difference between integration and assimilation. Integration: ‘ability to participate to the extent that a person needs and wishes in all major components of society without having to relinquish his or her own cultural identity’

Assimilation: ‘The absorption of a minority group into a majority population, during which the group takes on the values and norms of the dominant culture’

To date we see many in society, including in public office, confuse these two things. We applaud the Nigerian youngster who becomes an Irish dancing champion but are less excited by the Irish teenager playing cricket with his Pakistani friend. We see this trend repeated over and over. It’s vital any Integration strategy clearly explains the difference between these two things.

Listening to Migrant voices at local and national level:

We feel passionately that migrants and those in-migrant communities should be consulted, listened to and can have their voices heard.

Too often in Ireland government departments and public bodies, seek to offer the solutions to problems they presume exist without appropriate input from relevant parties. A lack of understanding of Migrant communities in Ireland can lead to poor messaging – this was particularly evident during the Covid19 pandemic.

Multilingual messaging:

According to the last census almost 100,000 people living in Ireland said they spoke English either very poorly or not at all.

Across so many spheres, from education to health, housing and social supports, transport to immigration, it’s vital we understand the need for respectful and culturally appropriate multilingual resources and seek to provide them where possible.



Not only is this respectful to the individual – but also vital to running efficient services for everyone. Local Authorities should be resourced from the central government to create bespoke multilingual resources for their local area.

The use of sport to achieve community integration:

Sport has a unique ability to break down barriers and bring people together regardless of nationality, legal status, culture, religion, gender or sexual orientation. However, in many sporting organisations in Ireland the demographic make up of our societies is not represented in clubs and teams across the country. Many clubs and orgs need support in how they go about representing the diverse communities in which they are based.

This new 'Community Integration Strategy' needs to focus on how sporting clubs and groups can connect with ALL in their community. And not just playing participants but their families.

The work of organisations such as Sanctuary Runners needs to be leveraged, studied and supported so that integration can happen on the sports fields and in sporting arenas across the state.

We believe that the payment of annual membership fees and insurance for participants are a major barrier to entry for many migrants and their families – especially for those living in Direct Provision.

Sport Ireland's most recent annual Sport Monitor report – for the year 2023, showed that while sports participation increased among 'White Irish' to 62% since 2022, participation among 'Black, Asian or Other backgrounds' stood at 52%.

The participation rate for the latter cohort dropped by a full six percentage points since the 2019 measurement. Club membership, which among 'White Irish' is 49% is just 24% for those in the 'Black, Asian and Other backgrounds' grouping.

Sport is a vital tool for integration and fees are clearly a barrier – for both the person wishing to play a sport and the club wishing to facilitate and welcome them.

We believe a fund should be established, administered through Sport Ireland, which enables clubs across all sporting codes to apply for funding to supplement membership



costs for those who cannot afford these fees – especially people from migrant communities.

Currently the solutions, when they are found, are ad hoc, unsustainable, can be divisive within clubs and off putting for people of a migrant background.

Harnessing expertise when it comes to strategies:

There is so much wonderful community integration work happening in pockets across the country, but it is often unseen, under-valued and invisible to all but those who are benefitting.

Also, it is not sustainable because of a lack of supports or because the work is too reliant on individuals.

A cohesive integration strategy would seek to bring together a special taskforce of experts, including migrants working to break down barriers, which would advise policy on a national and local basis. It is absolutely vital that this expertise is seen and championed.

Communication:

It is not enough to generally say ‘immigration is good’ – this needs to be backed up with statistics, case studies, examples and a broad strong narrative about how community integration can result in a far more inclusive and state:

We need to clarify our national narrative.

No more ‘non-national’ or ‘foreigner’ – while it shouldn’t have to be pointed out, we still hear prominent people and public bodies use these terms.

Our strategy should lead by example and outline clearly that these terms are outdated, unhelpful and loaded.



Representation:

We need to continue to push for more diversity both in public office but also in public bodies where senior management roles are disproportionately made up of white Irish employees.

Until we start looking at this issue then integration strategies cannot really work as the decision makers will almost always be of one single ethnicity.

Funding

Each year via the Communities Integration Fund from the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth makes €500,000 available to community-based projects nationwide to support 'the integration of migrants'.

The largest grant award in this funding category comes to €5,000 – and while all support is welcomed this funding is likely to cover costs for an existing group but not, necessarily, lead to new innovation in terms of community integration.

We believe this collective funding pot could be put to much better use in a 'Community Integration Strategy' where fewer small amounts are shared for funding but there is a greater emphasis on new innovations in towns across Ireland and a national awards scheme for community integration is devised for cities, towns and villages.