

30 November 2023

RE: Public Consultation to inform a national strategy for migrant integration

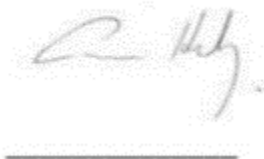
To whom it concerns,

Cork Chamber represents 1,200 members together employing 100,000 people throughout the city, metropolitan area and county. Our vision is to be a world-leading Chamber of Commerce, delivering on a progressive economic, social and sustainability agenda at the heart of a vibrant business community. Our direction is guided by our formal pledge to uphold the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) five of which have been identified by the Chambers Ireland network.

Our steadfast commitment to fostering positive change is evident through stronger integration with our local community and a dedication to the principles of sustainability, resilience, inclusion, equality, and diversity. We champion SDG 5 Gender Equality and embrace a broader interpretation including all dimensions of equality, diversity, and inclusion. This consultation is a pivotal step towards fostering more cohesive and resilient communities. In developing this strategy, the government must ensure that it not only facilitates the economic empowerment of migrants but also contributes to the broader agenda of achieving a fair and just society.

Cork Chamber welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the development of this national strategy and we ask that the below comments, advice, and proposals are duly considered. We remain at your disposal to share any additional insights from our member businesses.

Yours Sincerely,



Conor Healy
CEO

Growing County and city region in Cork

Ireland, including Cork, is changing drastically. Within Cork city centre, approximately 50% of residents are non-Irish born. The post-COVID world has undoubtedly ushered in significant changes in migration patterns to Ireland, driven by a confluence of factors, particularly shifts in the work environment and geopolitical events including the war in Ukraine.

One notable transformation stems from the widespread adoption of remote working which was accelerated by the pandemic. With many companies embracing flexible work arrangements, professionals now have greater freedom to choose their place of residence. As the only native English-speaking country in the European Union, a scenic landscape, robust infrastructure and strong industry clusters across a number of sectors, Ireland has become an attractive destination for many workers seeking a balance of work and quality of life.

Simultaneously, the war in Ukraine has prompted a wave of migration, with individuals and families seeking safety and stability and Ireland, known for its history of providing refuge to those in need, has seen an influx of Ukrainian migrants. The impact of these geopolitical events has not only increased the diversity of Ireland's population but has also enriched its cultural fabric.

However, these changes also pose challenges, such as the need for effective integration strategies and the strain on local resources. As Ireland adapts to the evolving dynamics of migration, there is an opportunity to harness the skills and experiences brought by newcomers to contribute to the nation's growth and resilience.

Economic Growth, Reputation, Talent Attraction and Skills Needs

Skills shortages pose the number one threat for business growth in Cork and the top barrier to recruitment, according to Cork Chamber's latest economic trends survey¹. The lack of specialist skills was also cited to be among the top barriers to enhancing sustainability.

In the Southern Region, the National Planning Framework (NPF) plans for up to 380,000 additional people and Cork will be home for 60% of these people. Cork will also host 135,000 new jobs. As the country is at full employment and the hunt for talent and specialist skills continues to dominate the business landscape, it is clear to meet this ambition, the diversity and the attractiveness of our region will be key.

If a successful migrant integration policy is in place, it can contribute to economic growth in various ways. In addition to enhancing the labour force and filling gaps in the labour market, which are ever present across various sectors as indicated by our members, there are a number of other areas where migrant integration is of significant importance to the economy. We have seen first-hand the benefits of migrant integration in the field of entrepreneurship and business development and the affects this has on job growth and economic activity. In addition to this the diverse perspectives, skills and experiences that are

¹ https://www.corkchamber.ie/wp-content/uploads/2023/10/Q3-2023-Eco-Trends_web.pdf

gained through migrant integration have contributed to the overall success of our city region which is expected to be the fastest growing city in Ireland over the next 20 years under the National Development Plan.

Cork has experienced huge success in recent decades attracting significant levels of FDI. Our track record is hugely important to ensure this pattern of inward investment continues. It is of paramount importance that we are successful in integrating migrants as this increases our attractiveness to a global talent pool, which will deepen and diversify our talent pool, thus enhancing our profile for FDI.

Economic success cannot be achieved however without social cohesion. This consultation is timely given the social tensions being experienced across the country in recent months and weeks. The scenes witnessed on social media and our television scenes of rioting and looting driven by an anti-immigrant agenda have damaged our reputation as a welcoming nation, the effects of this are already being experienced and the long-term implications may even be of an economic nature. Some businesses in our nation's capital are now choosing to close early as immigrant staff fear for their safety². This new policy is needed and must address in meaningful terms the need for successful migrant integration with a concrete plan that includes not only migrants themselves but also Irish born citizens who must also embrace inclusion, equality and diversity.

Ensuring a high quality of life for those who choose to make Cork and Ireland their home is key to maintaining Ireland's competitiveness as a destination of choice. A focus on work-life balance and the time spent outside of work, the 5-9, is just as important as the 9-5. Factors such as quality and affordable housing, a well-connected public transport network, childcare and social networks all influence migrant integration and decision-making. As such, the accelerated delivery of the Cork Metropolitan Area Transport Strategy (CMATS) and the associated Bus Connects programme are key to ensuring that newcomers can move around the Cork city region.

Investing in the education and training of migrants can not only enhance their skills but it will allow their contribution to the overall human capital of this country which in turn will benefit the economy by creating a more skilled and adaptable workforce. Cork Chamber recently attended a graduation ceremony in Cork for over 50 women from the Ukraine. The graduates had been participating in English classes over the last year. The classes were sponsored by the *Ireland For Ukraine* fund from the Community Foundation Ireland. As these classes were funded through philanthropy and it was a time-limited funding, this opportunity is no longer there for other Ukrainian women who will need these language skills to be able to integrate successfully into our community. It is imperative that the necessary funding and supports are made available to ensure that those who are trying to integrate into society and who can make a significant contribution to both our community and our society are supported in doing so.

Multi-year funding from the State should be made available to community and grassroots organisations to enhance integration, and address language and employment needs. Many

² <https://www.thejournal.ie/dublin-riots-3-6235147-Nov2023/>

organisations say that most funding is for short periods which does not allow groups dedicated to integration to take a long-term strategic approach.

The Critical Skills Employment Permit is designed to attract highly skilled people into the labour market with the aim of encouraging them to take up permanent residence in the State. In addition to this visa regime, the associated issues of the high cost of living in Ireland should not be an additional deterrent to applicants.

With placemaking being a priority among workers there are opportunities for Cork to improve the quality of life for its citizens and ensure a 'soft landing' and community integration for new arrivals. For example, increasing the efficiency and understanding of day-to-day bureaucratic services, such as obtaining a driver's license.

Proposed Integration Initiatives

Cork Chamber has been leading out on a talent attraction and retention programme to develop a talent attraction strategy for the Cork region. The following proposed initiatives have been derived from our work in this area:

- Develop an ambassador programme.
- Carry out an International Talent survey to explore the experiences of international talent.
- Establish an International House, as a one-stop-shop, to provide migrants with the tools needed to integrate and start their new life in Ireland. International House Tampere in Finland³ is best practice example of a way to support integration. It is a single service point for supporting internationals with living, working, studying, and connecting with local employers.
- Identify international talent and initiate peer to peer storytelling.
- Make multi-year funding from the State available to community and grassroots organisations to enhance integration, and address language and employment needs. Short-term funding options for organisations dedicated to integration can be problematic as it does not allow these groups to take a long-term strategic approach.

³ <https://internationalhouse.tampere.fi/en/>