

Long before the Ballaghaderreen controversy, Syrians fleeing So why, rather than letting them engage with a public eager

THE little boy with the black backpack reached his hand up high, carefully keying in each number of the code until the gate opened. As he passed beyond it, the rest of the group — three girls wearing local school uniforms and neatly arranged hijabs — scurried along behind him.

The school day had ended and, as they sipped on brightly coloured smoothies, laughing and cajoling in between, they were home.

Home, for the immediate future at least, is not what it used to be. For these seemingly care-free children and their families, a perilous journey from war-torn Syria has brought them to the unassuming village of Monasterevin and the gloomy yet peaceful confines of the former Hazel Hotel.

Once a venue that played host to well-known country musicians like Charley Pride, Big Tom and Mike Denver, the abandoned building



by **Catherine Fegan**

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was reopened in 2015 and currently accommodates 60 refugees.

Along with the Clonea Strand Hotel in Waterford, it was one of the first locations to be turned into an Emergency Reception Orientation Centre (EROC) by the Department of Justice for the purpose of accommodating refugees.

Earlier this month, as news emerged that the Abbeyfield Hotel in Ballaghaderreen, Co. Mayo has been selected as a third hotel to be used as an EROC, the response from locals was mixed. The refugees, who are mostly of Syrian extraction, are expected to be housed in the hotel within the

next 10 to 15 days. A further 80 people are expected to arrive in February, and another 80 in March.

As independent TD Michael Fitzmaurice hit out at the Department of Justice for the lack of consultation with locals on the issue, it emerged that anti-Islamic leaflets have been handed out in the town. The literature referred to terrorist groups such as Islamic State and Al Qaeda. It also urged the people of Ballaghaderreen to 'preserve freedom in the West' by refusing Muslims entry into Ireland and to 'crush them once and for all.' Mr Fitzmaurice claims neither he nor any other TD from the constituency knew of the plans before they were announced and that local schools, GPs and county childcare committees were also 'left in the dark.'

As the community in Ballaghaderreen continues to debate the issue, a look at how locals in the two other locations hosting refugees have responded to the same development reveals varying degrees of success. Both communities have welcomed their new neighbours, but one has lingering concerns.

On a cold Tuesday morning in the Co. Kildare village of Monasterevin, a group of Syrian men carrying shopping bags make their way along the main street in town towards the Hazel Hotel. They talk enthusiastically among themselves in Arabic, pulling their coats up around their faces as a shield against the bitter wind. The walk back to the hotel is less than ten minutes.

Inside, they are accommodated in interconnecting family rooms or single rooms. There is an internet connection available and shared computer facilities in the common areas, a tea and coffee station, laundry facilities, a pool room, a limited number of self-catering cooking facilities, indoor and outdoor play areas, two primary school classrooms, a doctors' surgery and large communal area on site. Three meals a day are cooked in the main kitchen by the kitchen staff. Outdoors, there is a peace garden developed by volunteers and a football pitch.

The refugees who are staying there have 'settled in very well,' according to a Department of Justice spokesman. Yet despite this, not one was put forward for interview, despite numerous requests.

The paper was advised not to approach the hotel. We were told: 'They won't be able to communicate.' We offered to provide an interpreter: this too was declined. A further request for anonymous case study information, including details of some of the personal stories of struggle, the kind of lives left behind and jobs once held by refugees was denied. A spokesman said the department was precluded from doing so under the terms of the Refugee Act.

Appeals to help 'humanise' the issue by telling the real stories of how these people fled the war that has ravaged their homeland — a cradle of civilisation, whose people have an extraordinary cultural and artistic heritage — were met with reference to reporting guidelines: this despite the fact that the NUJ guidelines, in conjunction with the UNHCR, note that 'refugees have a right to be heard and many have amazing stories to tell.'

Many locals also seem to have had little interaction with the refugees: but as you would expect, the general reception has been nothing but positive. Across the road from the Hazel Hotel, in the Barrow Close housing estate, residents said their experience with their new neighbours had been 'nothing but positive.' 'They keep to themselves,' said one homeowner.

'They are doing no harm here and there have been no issues. No one around here has any problem with them and it's all working out fine.'

Further afield, local businessman Dave Maher, who owns the Bellyard Pub, said he 'knew very little' about the new additions to the community. 'They just landed here,' he said. 'You would see them walking up and down the street and that's about it. It's just a way of life for us, you never hear people even talking about it, whether it's positive or negative. They just do their own thing up in the hotel as far as I can see.'

According to the Department of Justice, adult refugees spend their day attending English classes in Kildare town as well as venturing off on trips to Newbridge and Portlaoise. Outings are also arranged by the Kildare Volunteer Centre. More locally, a group of volunteers are part of a befriending program who visit the centre each night and at weekends to 'converse with the refugees' and to play music, cards and other games.

'We have about 20 volunteers who vis-

it the hotel,' said Mick Power from the Kildare Volunteer Centre. 'They go in and mix with the people and talk to them and things like that. They deal with kids and adults. They go, sit down, and people come and join them if they want. It's not that our volunteers go in and impose themselves on them. They go into a corner and people come and join them; it can be structured or semi-structured or not structured at all. We try to make them feel at ease, to get used to meeting Irish people.'

Mr Power said that the volunteer centre was inundated with toys and clothes when the refugees arrived and the 'majority of people' have been hugely welcoming. 'There is a good deal of integration in the community,' he said.

'You have to understand that the people who go to Hazel are generally only there for about three months so it's not a permanent thing. This can work and can be beneficial to a community. This is an orientation centre. It's a place where these people can have a chance to settle in, to learn about Ireland, about our culture, how we live before they actually go in to the community itself. From that aspect, it has been very successful; obviously it's big change and a big shock, but people are very adaptable. If you are coming from a war-torn country like Syria, to get away from that situation is a very welcoming thing.'

For many, the circumstances surrounding their arrival to Ireland have been deeply traumatic. They have left behind their homes, friends and jobs. Some have physical injuries from the conflict and others bear emotional scars. They have also had to adjust to life on a much smaller scale: Aleppo had a population of over three million before the war; Monasterevin numbers just under 4,000. There are no mosques and many are shuttled by bus to the nearest mosque in Portlaoise. For the small number who are Christian, a warm welcome from Parish Priest Father Liam Merrigan has resulted in some serving at Mass.

'There is one young man in particular from Aleppo,' Fr Merrigan told the Mail.

Requests for case studies and details were denied

'His name is Salem. He is Christian and he comes every week with his mother, who is in a wheelchair. He pushes her down from the hotel to the church for Mass. We had a parish mission in November and one of the nights was a community night for different organizations and groups. Salem and his mother carried up a symbol to illustrate the fact that they are part of our community. When I was down at the hotel I just threw out the invitation to see if the others wanted to come. And they did. They had tea in the parish centre here and they got to meet a lot of people.'

According to figures provided to the Mail by the Department of Justice, the first group arrived at the Hazel Hotel in August 2015: 57 men, 62 women and 148 children. Since then, 207 of these Syrian refugees have been resettled in other counties. Families spend between three and six months in the centre prior to being housed, undergoing an initial orientation and English language training while having a chance to 'rest and acclimatise.' All children between four and 18 years attend a school orientation programme. For primary age children, the programme is run onsite in classrooms in the hotel while older children attend a local secondary school.

In St Paul's Secondary school in the village, the walls of the classroom where 17 young refugees are taught are decorated with the names of all the battle-scarred places they once called home — Homs, Aleppo, Baghdad and Mosul.

'They are lovely girls, very friendly,' said Father Merrigan. 'They have their own separate class, with a dedicated teacher and they don't do a full school day. At the Christmas Carol service here some of them played the tin whistle, that was a way to make them feel part of the school. One of the teachers taught them a tune on the tin whistle.'

Overall, the message from this small village is one of open-armed acceptance, albeit with the caveat of keeping

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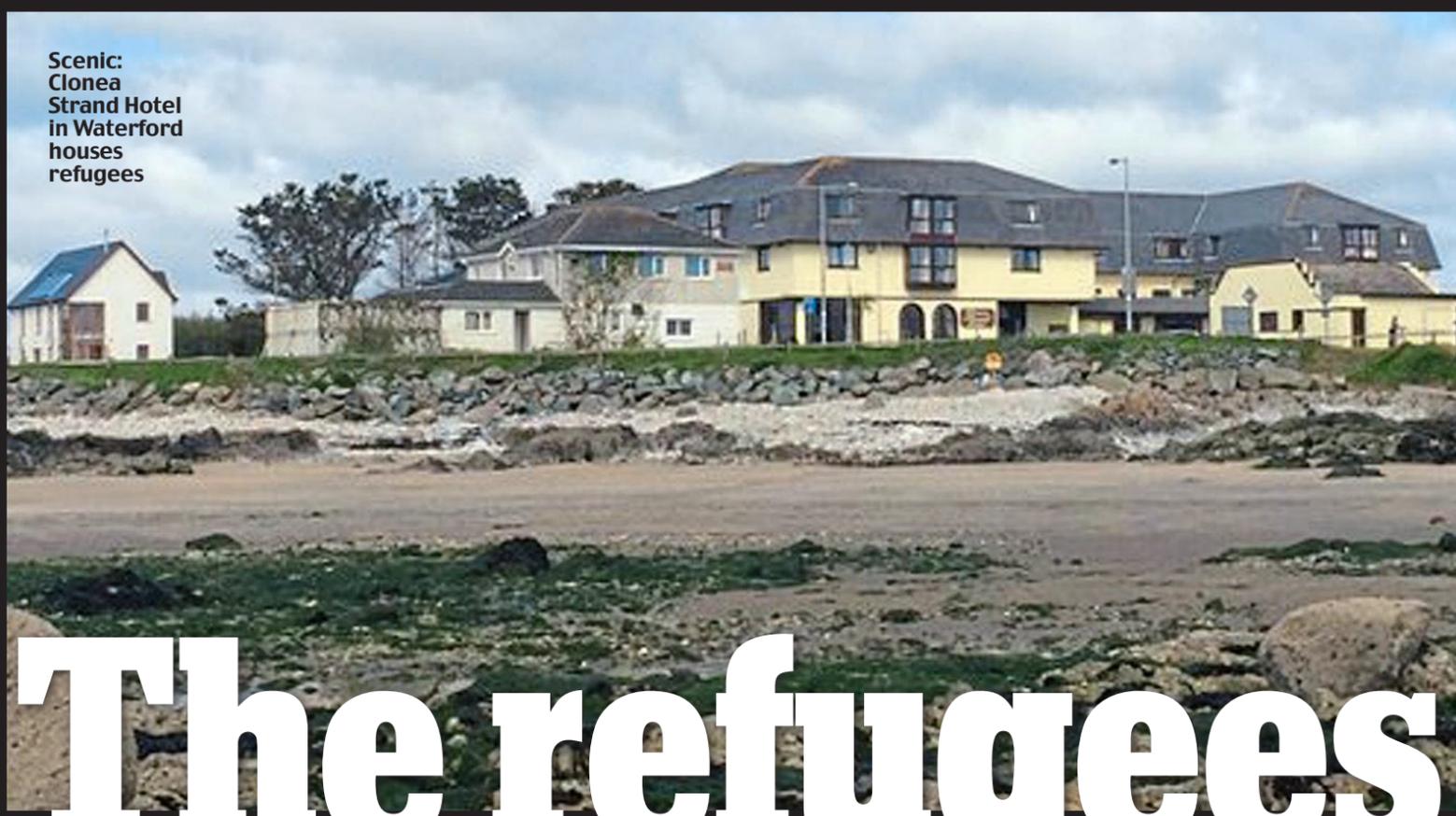
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INSIDE NEXT SATURDAY'S
Irish Daily Mail



the war have been welcomed in other parts of the country. to help, are they kept hidden away behind gates and walls?

Scenic:
Clonea
Strand Hotel
in Waterford
houses
refugees



The refugees our officials do not want you to meet



New home: The first refugees arrived at the Hazel Hotel in August 2015

a respectful distance.

'Everyone realises what they have been through. These people have fled war. We are trying to do what we can to help make them as welcome and happy as we can,' Fr Merrigan said, adding: 'Language will continue to be a bit of an issue but the youngsters have a few words and they know when you are nice to them. A smile doesn't need translation.'

Over 100 miles away in the seaside

village of Clonea, another community has a story to tell. For decades, holidaymakers made their way to the two-mile stretch of Blue Flag beach at the foot of the Clonea Strand Hotel, where the Comeragh Mountains stand in the distance and Dungarvan Bay ripples out in front. Yet the resort's newest inhabitants know nothing of these attractions; up until a couple of months ago many had not even heard of Ireland. They

are Syrian refugees who have been offered a new life in the country, and who must now adjust to living 3,000 miles from home. On Thursday, as an icy storm battered the coast, the scene at the Clonea Strand hotel was one of weather-ravaged desolation.

The leisure centre connected to the hotel is still open to the public, and as locals filtered in and out, the sound of children's laughter spilled out through an open window in one of the rooms at the side of the hotel. Inside, dozens of refugee children, each settled on a small yellow chair, played with blocks and other toys. In another room, young women wearing hijabs were quietly reading books.

Back outside, a female jogger circled the roundabout at the front of the hotel, 5kilometres outside Dungarvan. 'Everyone here is very happy to be able to help these people,' she says. 'They have been to hell and back and it's the least we can do. This hotel was empty, sitting unused, now it is being used to benefit those less fortunate.'

According to the Department of

Justice, since it opened in December 2015, 203 Syrian refugees have been accommodated at the EROC at the Clonea Strand Hotel. Since then, 141 of these Syrian refugees have moved into housing in other counties. There are 62 Syrian refugees currently resident. At the time of opening, local concern over the effect of the EROC on local tourism was well-documented and concerns still linger.

'Clonea is a seaside location,' local councillor Seamus O'Donnell told the Mail. 'It's a very popular location for tourists. There is a huge caravan site next to the hotel and since the refugees went in quite a number of people who had caravans there have pulled out of it. They would visit from Clonmel and Offaly and Tipperary. The carpark at the front of the hotel, the one next to the beach has also been closed off so that's had an effect.' He said he had an idea for a different location but the 'Department of Justice didn't want to know. There was little or no consultation. That's the problem. They were literally taken in overnight. At the beginning

quite a number of people came to me saying they were opposed to it. Since they have come I haven't heard much about it.'

In relation to claims that his business had suffered as a result of the refugee centre, Dan Casey, the owner of Casey's caravan Park, said he had 'no comment' to make on the issue.

'The very same thing happened here that is happening in Ballaghaderreen, that's all I can say. No consultation,' he added.

However a local businessman, who did not wish to be named, argued that there was some truth to Mr O'Donnell's claims: 'At one point the hotel catered for up to 70 weddings a year. The business went downhill, in all honesty before the refugee centre went in. Going forward, it won't help things though. This was a deal that was just signed up overnight. The Department didn't want to hear about the concerns for tourism. It was the same here as Ballaghaderreen, we heard it through the grapevine after everything was signed.'

For Waterford County Council, going forward, the focus is very much on tourism. Earlier this year, the part of the new Waterford Greenway, which will eventually link Waterford city and Dungarvan on a traffic-free route for walkers and cyclists, was opened for use. The 45 km stretch, which starts at the road that leads to the Clonea Strand Hotel, is being built at an overall cost of about €10 million. 'We have a tourist attraction being built and there will be no tourist to use it,' said one business owner. 'There is no opposition here to helping refugees, they have nothing to do with it. It's the location that was chosen.'

Claims that the location is unsuitable have been disputed by the Department of Justice, who argue that the refugees that have passed through the Clonea Strand Hotel have benefitted hugely from the ex-

'They've been to hell and back; we are happy to help'

perience. 'The local community have given the families a very warm welcome,' said a spokesman. 'There is a local voluntary group who engage with the refugee families. They have also befriended some families and continue to visit them when they move to their new homes. Families have also been invited out for meals and trips. Some of the local sports clubs have offered facilities for the children to play in. Some of the children are playing hurling, football and have been befriended by children in local schools.'

In the coming months, both the Hazel Hotel and the Clonea Strand will receive refugees from Lebanon following a selection mission in October 2016. Some of those who are currently in these centres will move on to new homes in other communities.

'It's important to extend the hand of friendship to these people,' said Fr Merrigan. 'When I walked in to the classroom in St. Paul's and saw Homs written on the wall I remembered all the horror stories I read on the news about it. There, in a classroom in Monasterevin was a beautiful young girl who had made her way from there to here. You shouldn't need to say anymore than that.'

That sentiment is overwhelming. Yet with little or no voice from the refugee community itself and a policy in the Department of Justice of keeping their personal stories secret, it may be difficult to foster a culture of respect and understanding in the communities receiving them.

Many may wish to remain silent, which must be respected. But in a country known as the land of a hundred thousand welcomes, you have to wonder why an official policy of keeping these men, women and children sequestered under a veil of mystery is considered the right way to ensure the céad míle fáilte.