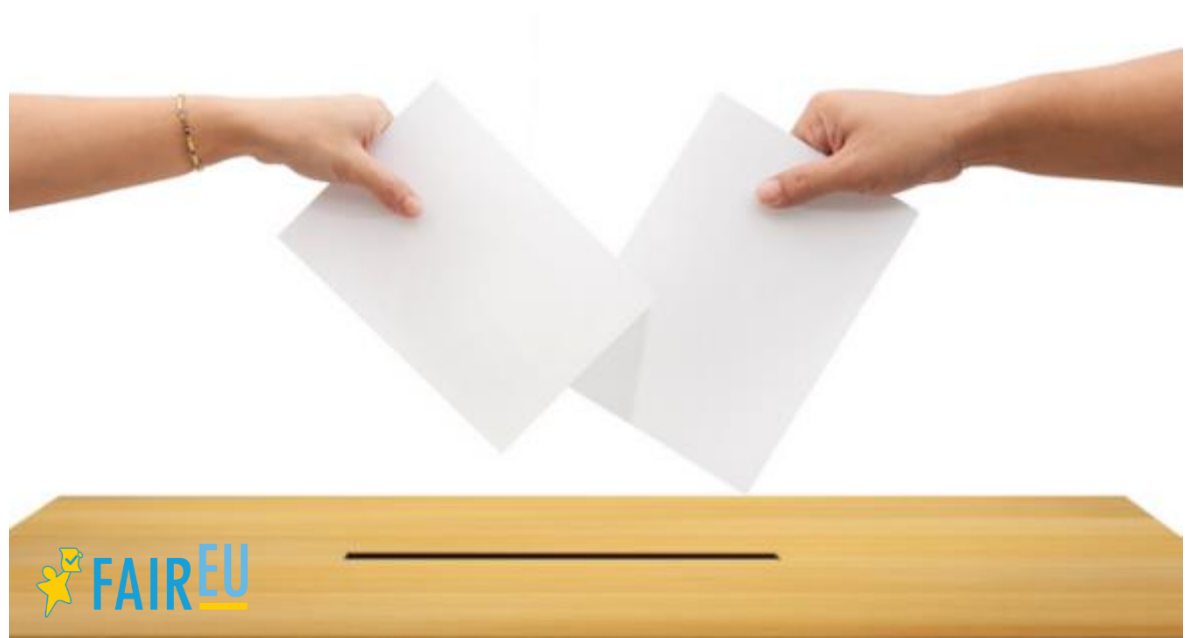


# OBSTACLES TO FREEDOM OF MOVEMENT AND POLITICAL PARTICIPATION OF MOBILE EU CITIZENS



**Report from the  
Focus Group in  
Dublin**

*ECAS Brussels, February 2019*

Co-funded by the Rights,  
Equality and Citizenship (REC)  
Programme of the European Union





# Report from the FAIR EU Focus Group in Dublin (EN)

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9 November 2018

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*FAIR EU was funded by the European Union's Rights, Equality and Citizenship Programme (2014-2020). The content of this report represents the views of the author only and is his/her sole responsibility. The European Commission does not accept any responsibility for use that may be made of the information it contains.*

## Table of contents

<b>Introduction .....</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>Discussion.....</b>	<b>4</b>
Obstacles to the exercise of free movement rights of EU mobile citizens in Ireland.....	4
Obstacles to the exercise of political rights of EU mobile citizens in Ireland .....	5
<b>Conclusions .....</b>	<b>6</b>

## Introduction

FAIR EU (Fostering Awareness Inclusion and Recognition) aims to foster the successful inclusion of EU mobile citizens in their host EU country's civic and political life through the provision of a holistic approach to tackling obstacles they face when exercising their rights. Within this framework a focus group was organised in Dublin, Ireland, on 9 November 2018.

The aim of the focus group was to identify and analyse the links between obstacles to free movement and the exercise of political rights of EU mobile citizens in Ireland.

The following people participated in the focus group:

**Participants:** Professor Imelda Maher (UCD), GERALYN McGARRY (Citizens' Information Board), Krzysztof Kiedrowski (Irish Polish Society), Kamila Weglicka (EURES), Tonya Myles (Cairde), Danielle McLaughlin (Crosscare Migrant Project), Sinead Lucey (FLAC), Gwendolen Morgan (Irish Human Rights and Equality Authority)

**Moderator:** Siobhan Duffy

**Observer:** Anna Zaremba, ECAS

## Discussion

### Obstacles to the exercise of free movement rights of EU mobile citizens in Ireland

It was generally agreed that significant obstacles remain to the free movement of EU nationals in Ireland, particularly those who are vulnerable and unemployed.

#### *Language barriers*

Many mobile EU citizens are also inhibited by language difficulties which means that they are unable to properly express their needs or understand requirements from them.

#### *Access to social housing*

The participants focused on the current housing crisis in Ireland and agreed that it may affect vulnerable migrants disproportionately. This may be partially attributable to the fact that the Department of Housing requires that those seeking social housing should be able to demonstrate that they have 52 weeks of employment before being accommodated. As many migrants seeking housing cannot fulfil this requirement, a significant number elect to leave the country and return to their home country. This was evident among the Polish community in Ireland.

#### *Social welfare*

Analysis by the Citizens' Information Centre in Ireland showed that the areas in which assistance was sought by EU migrants in Ireland mirrored those in which assistance was sought by Irish nationals. These areas are mainly:

- eligibility for medical cards
- entitlement to means tested payments.

However, access to social welfare payments for EU migrants is complex. EU mobile citizens appear to be often subject to unjustifiable requirements, many of which conflate the notions of habitual residence with legal and ordinary residence. Therefore, this experience endorses the hypothesis provided by ECAS that those mobile EU citizens who experience problems in accessing healthcare or social security benefits may prioritise these issues over participation in elections.

#### *Residence formalities*

There is no requirement to register residence for EU nationals. However, third-country family members of EU citizens face significant delays and excessive documentary requirements imposed before a residence card is granted.

In the period between January 2015 and June 2017, YEA has received at least 153 enquiries concerning Ireland, with delays of even almost two years reported<sup>1</sup>.

Delays and obstacles make it difficult for both the third-country national and the EU spouse to have a normal life. Thus, the participants agreed that EU citizens may prioritise family life over political engagement in these situations.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://ecas.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/03/ECAS-Long-report-final.pdf>

## **Obstacles to the exercise of political rights of EU mobile citizens in Ireland**

The question was asked what was meant by the “exercise of political rights” and whether this included exercise of civic rights. It was agreed that “exercise of political rights” should encompass exercise of civic rights for the purpose of the focus group discussion. On this basis, there was a general consensus that while there is limited political participation by EU migrants in Ireland, civic participation is more prevalent.

### ***Registration procedures***

According to the European Commission’s report on the right to vote and to stand as a candidate in municipal elections, in Ireland, 24.7% of mobile EU citizens registered to vote in municipal elections<sup>2</sup>. The participants discussed the registration procedures and agreed that it is relatively straightforward to register to vote in Ireland. The process can be completed online. However, not all mobile EU citizens are aware or informed that they are allowed to vote and that the registration procedure is relatively easy.

Krzysztof Kiedrowski from the Irish Polish Society (IRS) explained that the IRS has started to conduct an awareness-rising campaign for the upcoming local and EU elections in Ireland (May 2019). Special leaflets in Polish have been developed to explain the role of local authorities and registration procedures.

### ***Lack of understanding***

It was pointed out that Ireland is a highly centralised system in which the local authorities have limited power. EU migrants, who very often do not understand the system, therefore have little to gain in engaging with their local politicians. They often do not have enough information and knowledge about candidates and political parties.

### ***National elections***

To exacerbate this situation, there is no opportunity for EU migrants to vote in national elections. Therefore, their voices go unheard as they do not represent votes for prospective politicians in national elections. This is a significant lacuna in the Irish political system where 1 in 6 citizens is a non-native Irish.

### ***Lack of interest***

Participants believe that there is mutual lack of interest between mobile EU citizens and politicians. The point was made by the moderator that in preparing for this focus group, a significant number of politicians and city councillors from areas where there are high numbers of immigrants were invited to attend. None took up the invitation.

Coupled with the lack of advantage in political engagement is the fact that many EU migrants in Ireland, for reasons connected with their own culture and experience in their home country, are suspicious of the political system and do not seek to engage.

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<sup>2</sup> European Commission, Report from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions. The Application of Directive 94/80/EC on the Right to Vote and to Stand as a Candidate in Municipal Elections, 2018

### *Civic engagement*

Notwithstanding this lack of political engagement, EU migrants are very active at civic level. The participants' shared examples of many civic activities that mobile EU citizens get actively involved in, including volunteering, signing petitions, participating in demonstrations. They are also active on local level – especially in local diaspora organization and community groups.

### Conclusions

The conclusion drawn by the focus group participants was that there are no immediately identifiable links between the obstacles to free movement and exercise of political rights in Ireland among those EU migrants with whom the focus group participants engaged. Even if EU migrants were to engage politically, this may prove futile due to the limited power of local councillors and the lack of provision for engagement of EU migrants at national level.

However, obstacles faced by third-country nationals of mobile EU citizens may have indirect influence on political participation of EU citizens. Delays and obstacles make it difficult for both the third-country national and the EU spouse to have a normal life. Thus, EU citizens whose family life is endangered may not consider local political participation relevant.

Participants also pointed out that many EU mobile citizens are concerned principally with establishing themselves in Ireland and do not appear to be concerned about political engagement.

When they encounter problems, EU mobile citizens are generally sufficiently perspicacious to avail of advice provision services to realise their rights and entitlements rather than seek to rely on political engagement.