

MRCI POLICY BRIEFING 2026

Reforming Family Reunification Policy so All Full-Time Workers Can Live With Their Families

Executive Summary

Ireland's current family reunification policy is denying thousands of full-time migrant workers the ability to live with the people they love. Workers recruited to fill essential roles—caring for older people, picking and preparing food, processing meat, building homes, and supporting our public services—are forced to live apart from their spouses and children for years due to restrictive rules on waiting periods, income thresholds, and permit categories. This policy is cruel, inhumane and is having devastating impacts on children and their parents.

This briefing demonstrates:

- The current policy undermines integration, children's wellbeing, and long-term economic outcomes.
- Ireland's approach is out of line with international norms, with significantly longer delays and harsher income requirements.
- Research by MRCI shows that if we were to grant immediate family reunification rights to all full-time workers they would continue to generate a *net financial benefit* to the state of €137m–€255m per year.
- There is no evidence-based justification for excluding General Employment Permit (GEP) holders or other full-time workers from Category A.
- Ireland's current regime risks breaching obligations under the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) due to long, blanket delays.

Change Required:

A comprehensive but simple reform would be to **expand Category A** to include **all full-time workers on Stamp 1 or Stamp 4**, thereby ending discriminatory treatment between Critical Skills and General Permit workers. This would remove unnecessary waiting periods and income assessments and enable all full-time migrant workers to have their family with them from the start.

This change is economically sound, socially transformative, and legally prudent. Ultimately, family unity is a basic human expectation—and a prerequisite for a fair, functioning, and humane migration system.

1. The Problem: Essential Workers Forced to Live Apart From Their Families

Ireland relies significantly on migrant labour in critical sectors including healthcare, food production, hospitality, transport, and construction. These workers were recruited precisely because we cannot fill these jobs domestically—but many are blocked from bringing their families simply because they:

- do not earn above high-income thresholds, or
- hold the “wrong type” of permit (e.g., General Employment Permit), or
- must wait 12 months before they are even *allowed to apply*, followed by 12–18 months of processing delays.

The consequences are severe:

- relationships deteriorate
- parents miss the childhoods of their sons and daughters
- children experience long-term psychological and educational harm
- workers face isolation, anxiety, poorer health, and reduced productivity

2. Evidence on Integration, Social Outcomes & Child Wellbeing

2.1 Long-term social and economic harms

The OECD’s *International Migration Outlook (2019)* found that when family members arrive late:

- spouses earn significantly lower wages even after 10+ years
- delays damage mental and physical health
- households experience long-term poverty risks
- children who arrive later have lower educational achievement, worse labour-market outcomes, and poorer language acquisition

Ireland’s policies therefore undermine the very integration goals the state seeks to achieve.

2.2 Child development and rights

The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (Articles 9 & 10) is clear:

- States must ensure children are not separated from parents except when necessary for the child’s best interests.
- Applications for family reunification must be handled **positively, humanely and expeditiously**.

Ireland’s built-in 12-month ban + 12-month processing delay = minimum 24-month separation, which the UN Committee (2023) warned is inconsistent with its obligations.

The policy is not child-centred, is not based on individual assessments, and disproportionately penalises children whose parents earn lower wages.

3. The Economics: Immediate Family Reunification Is a Net Benefit to the State

3.1 MRCI Survey of GEP Holders (2024)

A survey of 100 GEP workers provides a reliable representation of almost 29,000 GEP holders nationally. Key findings:

- **50%** do not require family reunification
- **97%** cannot meet current income requirements to bring one child
- **34%** cannot meet requirements to bring a spouse
- **98%** of spouses intend to work once reunited
- Families typically have **1–2 children**, not large numbers as sometimes assumed

3.2 Cost–Benefit Analysis

Across three scenarios (0%, 50%, and 100% spousal employment), results show:

- GEP households **generate far more in tax** than any entitlement costs
- Net annual gain to the state **per 100 GEPs** ranges from **€478,000 to €886,000**
- **Scaled to the national population, this equals €137m–€255m in net annual revenue**

In short: family reunification is not a fiscal risk.

4. International Comparison: Ireland Is Now a Clear Outlier

A review of comparable countries—including EU Member States, Canada, Australia, the United States, and the UK—shows that **Ireland now has some of the most restrictive family reunification rules for full-time migrant workers in the developed world.**

Across all three major occupational groups that rely heavily on migrant labour (healthcare assistants, meat processors, and horticulture/agriculture workers), Ireland stands out in three negative ways:

1. Lengthy, structural waiting periods (12 months before application + 12–18 months processing)
2. Extremely high-income thresholds linked to Working Family Payment limits
3. No automatic or immediate right for spouses/partners or children to join

Most peer countries do **not** impose these barriers. Instead, they treat family unity as standard for all full-time migrant workers.

Comparison of Family Reunification Rules for Full-Time Workers

Country	Can Family Join Immediately?	Typical Waiting Time	Spouse Work Rights	Income Requirement / Test
Ireland	No – must wait 12 months before applying	24 months+ (12-month ban + 12–18 month processing)	Yes (after arrival – Stamp 1G)	Very high – €30,000 for spouse; €50,000–€70,000+ with children
United Kingdom	Yes – immediate application allowed*	8 weeks (standard)	Yes	Fixed income threshold (~£29k+) for sponsoring partner/children
Australia	Yes	0 months	Yes	No fixed family-income threshold (482 visa)
Canada	Yes	0 months	Yes (Spousal Open Work Permit)	No fixed amount – must show ability to support
United States	Yes	0 months	No (H-4 usually not work-authorized)	No fixed income requirement
Spain	After 12 months' residence	12 months	Yes (after reunification)	Moderate – ~150% IPREM + 50% per child
Germany	Yes	1–3 months	Yes	Must show “secure livelihood”; no fixed threshold
Belgium	Yes	0 months	Yes	Regular income ≥120% of social-integration income
France	After 18 months' residence	6–18 months	Yes	Income around SMIC level + adequate housing

(The UK has recently changed rules for some seasonal workers who are not allowed to bring family. However, for those employed in some sectors and where family reunion applications are valid a decision will generally be made within 8 weeks'.)

What the International Evidence Shows

Ireland has an extremely harsh combination of:

- structural 12-month bans on applying
- exceptionally long processing times
- income thresholds far above international norms
- permit-type discrimination (GEP vs CSEP)

- delayed or absent work rights for spouses

Most comparator countries:

- allow family members immediately or after short, reasonable periods
- grant full work rights to spouses
- use moderate, achievable income tests (if any)
- recognise that family stability improves retention, integration, and economic participation

In short: Ireland is now an outlier in family reunification policy for full-time workers.

The system is significantly more restrictive than international peers, despite Ireland's heavy reliance on migrant labour to sustain key sectors.

5. Working Family Payment Income Thresholds: An Overly Restrictive and Unachievable Barrier

The family reunification income requirement for spouses of migrant workers in Ireland is currently a fixed €30,000.

Under Ireland's current family reunification policy for migrant workers, applicants who wish to bring a child or children are assessed against the **Working Family Payment (WFP) income thresholds**, which act as the de facto minimum income requirement for sponsoring children.

However, these thresholds are excessively high, not evidence-based, and impossible for the majority of full-time migrant workers to meet. WFP has increased dramatically and repeatedly in the last 3 years creating completely inappropriate thresholds to bring a child/children here.

As a result, these thresholds function as a structural barrier that blocks family reunification for nearly all low- and middle-income workers, even when these workers are employed full time in essential roles the Irish economy relies upon.

The WFP thresholds used by the Department of Justice are net income thresholds, which means the *gross* income a worker must earn is considerably higher. Based on the new 2026 WFP levels a worker must earn €50,200 to bring one child, €60,200 to bring two children and €69,500 to bring three children.

The required gross salaries for family reunification (approximate 2025 & 2026 values) are:

Children	WFP Net 2025(€)	WFP Net 2026(€)	Gross Needed 2025(€)	Gross Needed 2026(€)
1 child	36,660	39,780	44,300	50,200
2 children	41,912	45,032	54,200	60,200
3 children	47,164	50,284	63,800	69,500
4 children	51,896	55,016	71,000	77,100
5 children	58,448	61,568	79,900	85,800

(Income Thresholds dataset factoring PAYE, PRSI, USC and tax credits.)

These gross salary levels are far above what most migrant workers earn. MRCIs survey shows that:

- **97% of GEP holders cannot meet the income requirement to bring even one child to Ireland.**
- **34% cannot meet the threshold to bring a spouse only.**

Even a worker earning €30,000–€35,000—well above minimum wage—does *not* meet the thresholds to sponsor even one child, let alone two or three.

The State sets GEP minimum salaries and minimum wage levels, yet simultaneously claims these wages are *insufficient* to support a family—even though the State itself deemed them sufficient for full-time employment.

Children of low-wage full-time workers are effectively barred from living with their parents, while children of higher-earning workers face no barrier.

6. The Human Cost of Inaction

Behind the statistics and policy frameworks are real families and real children whose lives are being permanently altered by Ireland’s restrictive family reunification rules. The harm caused by the current system is not accidental—it is **predictable, preventable, and entirely the result of policy choices.**

The current system produces consistent and well-documented impacts:

- **Children lose formative years with their parents**, missing out on emotional security, guidance, and support.
- **Workers become depressed, isolated, and financially strained**, experiencing prolonged loneliness and mental health crises.
- **Long separations destabilise families and reduce productivity**, undermining retention in essential sectors.
- **Integration is delayed and long-term social costs increase**, placing additional pressure on public services.
- **Ireland appears indifferent to family unity**, damaging trust in the migration system and in the State itself.

These harms do not arise from exceptional cases—they are built into the system and entirely foreseeable.

The Voices of Those Living Through Family Separation

In a recent MRCI questionnaire and through media interviews, migrant workers shared the personal toll of these policies. Their words speak to the emotional devastation that prolonged separation causes:

Angelina Nyoni, a support worker, described the pain of raising a child through a phone screen:

“My son’s name is Angelton...he’s my baby. I left him when he was 9, and now he’s turning 12. Three years. The other day he told me ‘You know mummy I’m almost reaching puberty’. Over the phone – heartbreaking. You don’t know what it means to go home to an empty house. You cry in bed. You

cry on your way to work, and then you get to work and you do your best, you get home again, and cry yourself to sleep.”

Tsitsi Handreck, a healthcare worker and mother of two, explained the everyday moments she is forced to miss:

“I miss watching them grow and learn every day. Hearing their voices and laughter around the house. I miss their love. I miss hugging and kissing my boys.”

Another **healthcare assistant**, separated for years from her children, said:

“I’m crying right now as I type. I’m lonely, I feel lost. It’s traumatic and draining not being a mother to your kids for two long years. I miss my family and had a time when I had a breakdown.”

These stories represent only a fraction of the human suffering experienced by thousands of workers who are filling essential roles across Ireland.

A Matter of Basic Fairness

No full-time worker doing permitted, essential work in Ireland should be forced to live without their family.

Family unity is not only a moral imperative—it is also the foundation for stability, wellbeing, integration, and productivity.

Ireland has the opportunity to end these preventable harms by reforming its family reunification system in line with international standards and basic human dignity.

7. Policy Solution: Expand Category A and Remove Structural Barriers

7.1 Recommendation 1: Expand Category A to include all full-time workers.

Include the following in Category A:

- **All Stamp 1 holders**, including General Employment Permit holders
- **All Stamp 4 holders in full-time employment**

This would:

- Remove discriminatory treatment between Critical Skills and General Permit workers
- Remove the salary assessment requirement
- Remove the 12-month waiting period
- Increase integration and workforce stability
- Align Ireland with international partners

Rationale

- The State itself sets minimum wages and GEP salary floors; using state-set wages as grounds for exclusion is illogical.
- Economic evidence shows GEP workers are net contributors, not costs.
- Many spouses will work, increasing tax revenue.

- Children’s rights and wellbeing demand immediate, humane processes.

7.2 Recommendation 2:

Process all family reunification applications within 6 months

This aligns Ireland with:

- France (6 months)
- Spain (3 months)
- Germany (1–3 months)
- UK (8 weeks)

7.3 Recommendation 3: Integrate a “best interests of the child” test into all decisions

This would ensure legal compliance with CRC Articles 3, 9, and 10 and follow the UN Committee’s 2023 recommendations.

8. Conclusion: A Modern, Fair, and Prosperous Family Reunification Policy

Ireland has a choice:

- continue a system that keeps families separated for years, harms children, hurts integration, worsens labour shortages, and costs us economically
- or**
- adopt a simple, evidence-based reform that aligns with our values, international obligations, and economic interests

Expanding Category A is fair, efficient, and transformative. It recognises that full-time workers—regardless of income or permit type—deserve to live with their families.

It strengthens our labour market, upholds children’s rights, and positions Ireland as a humane, forward-looking country.

The time for reform is now.