

CASE
STUDY



REGULATING VOLUNTOURISM



IRELAND

AS PART OF CHILD
PROTECTION
STANDARDS FOR
THE TRAVEL AND
TOURISM INDUSTRY

PARTNER



This case study has been developed as a contribution to the event organised by ECPAT International, PACT – Protect All Children from Trafficking, and the UN Special Rapporteur on the sale, sexual exploitation and sexual abuse of children.

Building on the findings and recommendations from the UN Special Rapporteur's report - A study on the exploitation and sexual abuse of children in the context of travel and tourism; a closer look at the phenomena of voluntourism.

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Introduction

Professional and regulated volunteering should be distinguished from **voluntourism**¹ which evolves around products offered through the travel market usually for unskilled volunteers that pay companies or other entities to travel and work in distant communities, as an attractive alternative to mass tourism. Although volunteers may have good intentions, such trips may negatively affect the well-being of children, with certain forms of voluntourism posing additional risks to their safety by providing unregulated avenues for offenders to groom, access, and sexually exploit children.



¹ Voluntourism or volunteer tourism is organized and packaged tourist trips with a duration of a few hours to a year in which the main purpose is to volunteer. It revolves around products offered through travel and tourism markets usually for unskilled volunteers, with no supervision and no criminal background checks required as an alternative to mass tourism. [The Code of Voluntourism Policy](#).

Background information and context

Ireland was selected for this case study as a country where collaborative actions have been undertaken in recent years in an attempt to end orphanage voluntourism.

This case study reflects information gathered through desk research, interviews, and the practice of civil society organisations that form Comhlámh's End Orphanage Volunteering Working Group (EOVWG). Established in 1975, Comhlámh is the Irish Association of Development Workers and Volunteers. The case study has been prepared to showcase examples of an actionable framework to regulate voluntourism in orphanages by governments and businesses, from the sending country's perspective.

This case study is complementary to the recommendations from the report of the UN Special Rapporteur on the sale, sexual exploitation, and sexual abuse of children. A study on the exploitation and sexual abuse of children in the context of travel and tourism; a closer look at the phenomena of voluntourism that will be launched at the UN General Assembly in October 2023.

Introduction and background to the Irish context

The idea of “giving back” or ‘making a difference’ by volunteering overseas is well known in Ireland. Many of us have either volunteered overseas or know someone who has. Volunteering in orphanages is popular with many travellers, who are interested in the idea of spending time caring for, or teaching children living in residential care. Ireland has its own traumatic history of orphanages and residential care institutions for children, which featured high levels of systematic abuse and neglect. From the 1940s, many children were placed in institutional care termed “reformatory” and “industrial schools”, and also through “special needs schools”, “Mother and Baby Homes” and the “Magdalene Laundries”. Many were placed in these institutions because of being born out of marriage or being deemed to be destitute. The Report of the Commission to Inquire into Child Abuse (the Ryan Report)² details pervasive and horrific levels of physical, sexual, and emotional abuse and neglect within the institutions that were run by religious orders; primarily Catholic orders, but often funded by the State. The Commission of Investigation into the Mother and Baby Homes: 1922 - 1998³ found high levels of deprivation, physical and emotional abuse and rampant infant mortality rates. The testimony of survivors contained in both reports speaks of the long-term negative impacts on those who have been brought up and lived in these institutions. Ireland is now committed to supporting families and to family based alternative care when and where it is needed with kinship and foster care by far the most prevalent approaches. Any decision to separate children from their parents is a last resort and not taken lightly.

Despite Ireland’s own history, volunteering in and support for overseas orphanages remains popular.

2 [The Report of the Commission to Inquire into Child Abuse](#) (The Ryan Report). Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, 2019.

3 [Final Report of the Commission of Investigation into Mother and Baby Homes](#), From Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, 2021.

Collaborative Action in Ireland

Comhlámh is the Irish Association of Development Workers and Volunteers. The association promotes values-led international volunteering and development work that is underpinned by a commitment to Global Citizenship Education (GCE). Over the past 20 years, Comhlámh members have developed a **Code of Good Practice**⁴ in international volunteering.

What is the Comhlámh Code of Good Practice?

The Comhlámh Code of Good Practice is a set of standards for Irish Volunteer Sending Agencies facilitating international placements. It is recognised as the sector-leading standard for values-led international volunteering.

The Code is based on a vision of volunteers working in solidarity for a just, equitable and sustainable world and aims to support long-term action on priorities identified by those most affected. It works to challenge problematic approaches and highlight emerging shifts in practice.

The Code is a key part of Comhlámh's work to shape practice in the sector, supporting and nurturing the emergence of transformative models of engagement that are rooted in Global Citizenship Education and reflect our complex, interdependent and unequal world. There is a strong emphasis on collaborative learning and peer support within the Code.

Every few years the Code is reviewed by Comhlámh members and new principles are developed and adopted in accordance with international best practice. Since its inception, the Code has been funded and supported by Irish Aid, the Irish Government's Programme for overseas development that is located within the Department of Foreign Affairs.

⁴ Comhlámh Code of Good Practice.

The Comhlámh Orphanage/End Orphanage Volunteering Working Group

At any one time, Comhlámh has a number of working groups of members working on particular aspects of good practice in international volunteering. Recognising that volunteering is a strong driver of institutional care, the original Orphanage Working Group (OWG) was set up in 2016 by Code of Good Practice signatories⁵ who were concerned at the negative effects of institutional care on children and the particularly harmful impact of international volunteering in orphanages. From the beginning this process has been a slow, step by step journey of mindset change with different groups in Ireland.

Key Milestones since 2016

- 1. Forming a Working Group:** The initial OWG was formed in 2016 to simply look at the issues and bring recommendations to the wider Comhlámh membership. The working group ranged from members who saw no particular difficulty with volunteering in orphanages, to others who had deep concerns. Much time was spent exploring different perspectives.
- 2. Collating research for the Irish context:** The OWG was aware that research demonstrated that international volunteering in children's orphanages or residential institutions is not in the best interests of the child and can carry significant child protection risks. However, the fact that there was little or no Irish literature on these issues was a hindrance to progress. Thus, the OWG took some time to work together in 2018 to collate a report⁶ exploring the key issues and harmful impacts. From their findings the "Children First: A Global Perspective on Volunteering in Orphanages and Transforming Care"

5 These organisations included Maintain Hope and Nurture Africa who had both stopped sending volunteers to orphanages and Tearfund Ireland who works with partners to reintegrate children from institutions back into family and community.

6 [Children First : A Global Perspective on Volunteering In Orphanages and Transforming Care](#). Comhlámh and the Volunteering and Orphanages Working Group (OWG) 01 May 2019.

report was compiled, making recommendations on next steps to Irish Government departments, volunteer sending organisations, the education sector, sporting bodies and the general public to end volunteering in orphanages.

- 3. Public launch:** The report was launched publicly in the Mansion House in central Dublin in 2019 with speakers including international experts and a care expert/advocate from the global south with lived experience of growing up in an orphanage. The launch attracted some, but limited, interest from national media, as well as engagement from Government Departments. The report subsequently became a very useful tool for advocacy with different groups.
- 4. Incorporation into the Comhlámh Code:** Between 2017-19, a lot of work was done to educate Code member organisations about the impacts of volunteering in orphanages. As a result, they collectively agreed on a new principle for the Code to end the practice of sending volunteers to orphanages: this was incorporated into the document as part of revisions made in 2019 to strengthen organisations' commitment to child-safe volunteering.
- 5. High-level conference:** In 2021, OWG member Tearfund Ireland hosted an online conference entitled "Beyond Institutional Care: Rethinking how we care for orphaned and vulnerable children". Speakers at the conference included international experts and advocates together with Care Experts from Cambodia and Kenya with lived experience of growing up in orphanages.⁷ A representative from the Australian Embassy in Dublin also took part to speak of the Australian experience of changing their practice in relation to overseas volunteering and support for orphanages. The recorded sessions from this conference continue to be used in Irish workshops exploring the issues of volunteering in orphanages.

⁷ [Beyond Institutional Care: Rethinking how we care for orphaned and vulnerable children](#), May 2021.

6. The value of Development Education/Global Citizenship Education approaches:

Some members of the OWG were Development Education/Global Citizenship Education practitioners. These members saw the value of using a DE/GCE approach to exploring the issues of volunteering in orphanages with groups due to the sensitive nature of the subject. This approach complemented advocacy initiatives, which, on their own, had the potential to give some individuals and organisations the impression that the work they had been doing in good faith was being condemned and undermined. The pandemic of 2020-2021 gave the time and space for OWG members to work together under the leadership of Tearfund Ireland on the Irish Aid-funded “Just Care: Just Volunteering” GCE resource.⁸ This gives youth leaders, facilitators and others the tools to explore the harms of volunteering in orphanages with groups in a non-threatening way. It was launched in 2021 and has provided interactive activities for use with groups to help foster critical thinking alongside advocacy work. The resource also added legitimacy to the advocacy work of the OWG as it was funded by Irish Aid.

7. New season, new name: In 2021, reflecting the progress made by the group resulting in a new, clearer emphasis, the working group name was changed from the Orphanage Working Group to the End Orphanage Volunteering Working Group (EOVWG).

8. Focused Advocacy: Also in 2021, a new wave of advocacy on the issues began with a concerted effort to garner support from relevant officials at DFA, specifically its Developmental wing ‘Irish Aid’. The “Put Children First: End Orphanage Volunteering” campaign⁹ was launched with key asks of the Government and the Education sector.

8 [Just Care: Just Volunteering – Exploring the impact of volunteering in orphanages and institutional care on the lives of vulnerable children](#). A youth work resource that uses an informal approach through human rights education to explore the impact of volunteering in orphanages and institutional care on the lives of vulnerable children.

9 [Put Children First: End Orphanage Care and Volunteering](#) campaign. Comhlámh and the End Orphanage Volunteering Working Group are calling on you to help end the practice of orphanage volunteering and change how children are cared for. Alongside a [Pledge to Put Children First: End Orphanage Care](#) and not to volunteer in orphanages was launched, to date it has attracted 765 signatories.

Recommendation 1 - Irish Aid should introduce a dedicated funding stream for care reform strategies including family and community-based support programmes.

Recommendation 2 - The Department of Foreign Affairs should introduce foreign travel advice warning of the harm caused by volunteering in orphanages (including the risk of incentivizing trafficking) and encouraging people not to visit or to volunteer.

Recommendation 3 - Irish Aid should recognize the harm of orphanage volunteering and introduce funding criteria that no programmes or activities that involve the sending of volunteers to orphanages will be supported.

Recommendation 4 - The Departments of Education, and Children, Equality, Disability and Integration and Youth, should develop child-safe guidelines for trips overseas, including guidance not to visit or volunteer in orphanages.

- 9. Focused awareness raising sessions with a broad range of stakeholders:** Throughout 2022 and 2023 sessions were conducted with students, student bodies, youth organisations, NGOs, INGOs, teacher unions, volunteering bodies and volunteer sending agencies, using a blend of GCE and advocacy approaches. Where possible, the voices of care leavers from the Global South have been centered in awareness raising sessions. Being able to have conversations with care leavers has helped participants to better understand the lifelong impact of growing up in residential care and the harm (often unintended) caused by volunteers and visitors.¹⁰

¹⁰ Interview with Stephen Ucembe. To date more than 35 organisations, unions and student bodies have endorsed the Put Children First campaign.

10. Dáil (Irish Parliament) Session: The EOVWG received prudent advice from a former politician and advocacy advisor in 2022 in terms of how best to highlight and progress our campaign, and ultimately led to an audience with key parliamentary figures in early 2023. A care leaver from Kenya joined the information session remotely, giving live testimony of his lived experience in an orphanage visited by volunteers. The session was sponsored by a member of the Irish parliament and was well received by those in attendance, which further to the many politicians, included officials from the key Government Departments and representation from the Irish Civil Society network. There was significant national and local media coverage of the event, which helped to raise the campaign's profile.

11. Parliamentary Question: To keep the issues live, a parliamentary question was lodged following the Dáil session. This asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs about progress on the campaign's recommendations.¹¹

12. Progress on recommendations: Since the Dáil event in January 2023, the EOVWG has continued to work in partnership with Irish Aid on the implementation of the recommendations.

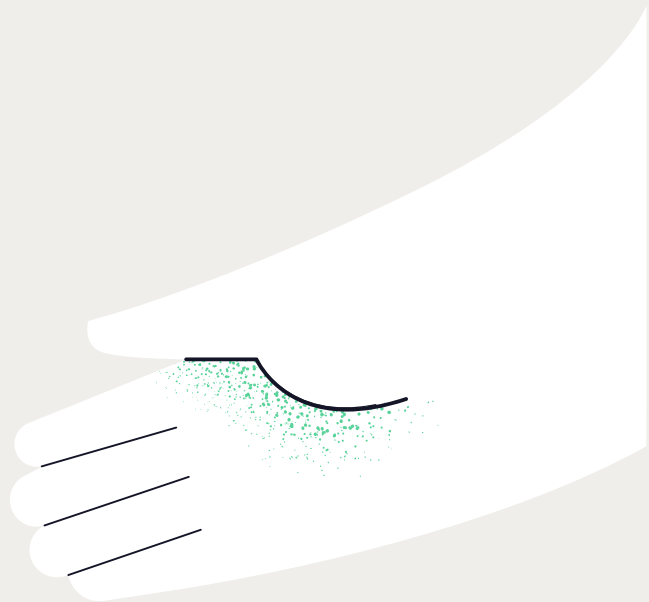
The Irish Aid Civil Society Unit (CSU) has implemented funding criteria for INGOs to ensure that no programmes or activities that involve the sending of volunteers to orphanages will be supported. In line with Principle 12 of Comhlámh's Code of Good Practice, the only exception to this is sending skilled volunteers in a capacity-building role to support de-institutionalisation. These skilled volunteers should have the relevant expertise to support de-institutionalisation strategies and processes and if direct work with children is planned, must be trained to work with vulnerable and traumatised children. The EOVWG welcomes this development and hopes that the CSU's approach will be mainstreamed across all areas of Irish Aid's work.

¹¹ Departmental Policies – Tuesday, 21 Mar 2023 – Parliamentary Questions (33rd Dáil) – Houses of the Oireachtas.

DFA has made initial updates to its travel advice for Backpacking, Volunteering and Adventure Tourism, and gap year travel¹² which include links to Comhlámh's Code of Good Practice and an international code of good practice that specifically states volunteering in orphanages is not appropriate.

The EO VWG is continuing to advocate for the introduction of a dedicated funding stream for care reform strategies.

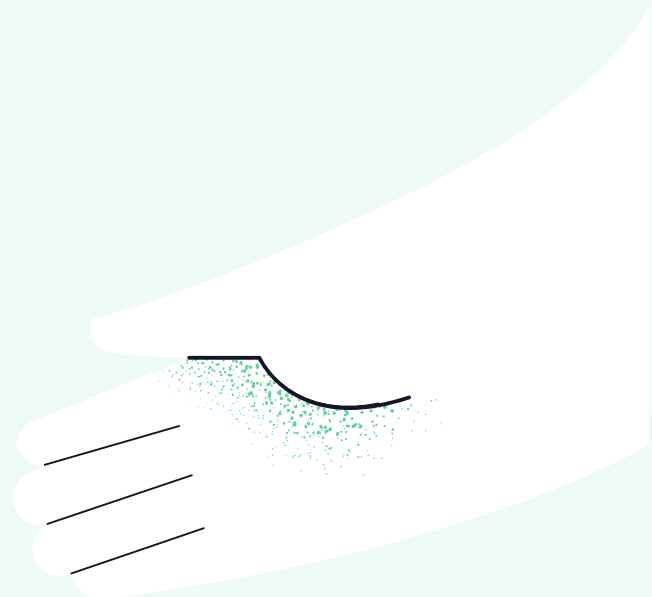
Further awareness-raising and advocacy work is ongoing with the education sector. Many schools throughout Ireland send volunteers to orphanages or support orphanages through fundraising activities, and the EO VWG is continuing to link with the Department of Education and teachers' unions to highlight the negative impacts of this engagement.



¹² [Backpacking, Volunteering and Adventure Tourism](#). Department of Foreign Affairs.

Achievements to Date:

- **The Department of Foreign Affairs** has updated its foreign travel advice with links to the Comhlámh website.
- **Irish Aid** has actively engaged with the recommendations of the campaign, with dialogue ongoing.
- **The Comhlámh Code of Good Practice** signatories are required to transition away from sending volunteers to orphanages.
- **Key volunteering networks in Ireland** have endorsed the Put Children First campaign.



Key learnings:

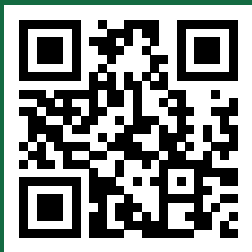
- The introduction of regulation on this issue is unlikely to materialise in the short term. Thus, **the approach is to work with all stakeholders for mindset change.**
- **Working together as NGOs under one banner** achieves more than working separately – for example on the Put Children First Campaign, in information sessions, in the Dáil etc.
- **Many in Ireland have either visited or volunteered in an orphanage** themselves or know someone who has. It is still perceived by many in the population to be a good practice, and there has been some pushback on the campaign’s messages. The EO VWG’s approach is to listen to people’s concerns and responses, to engage with the questions they raise, and to consistently address these, while still conveying the campaign’s key points.
- **It is important to center the voices of care leavers from the Global South** in advocacy and GCE/development education work, in support of long-term change that is guided by those most affected. Providing opportunities for question-and-answer sessions with care leavers has been helpful for many.
- **Pulling together key research in an Irish report has been important** – this is an Irish campaign, not something imported.
- **Ireland has its own sad history of institutional care**¹³ but has not yet made the link between the historic experience of Irish children and the potential experience of children in orphanages today.

¹³ [Final Report of the Commission of Investigation into Mother and Baby Homes](#). Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, 2021.

- **A Development Education/Global Citizenship approach** alongside the advocacy work is important to bring groups on a journey to begin to think more deeply about the implications of volunteering in or visiting orphanages. This can support people in longer-term exploration of what may be a sensitive and emotive issue.
- **Research on how to engage with different influential groups has been important.** We are always learning. For example, to reach the education sector merely contacting the Department of Education to issue guidance may not yield desired results. School patron bodies, teacher unions, school principal networks, educators working on sustainable development, students of tourism, and others all need to be targeted.
- **Many ask what volunteers should do instead.** The EOVLG is reluctant to give advice; however, we discourage knee-jerk reactions that would put children at further risk. Where volunteers are supporting orphanages overseas, we seek to link people to the Better Care Network and to organisations that are on a journey to de-institutionalise in the same country. For those seeking volunteer placements, we direct people to the list of Comhlámh Code signatories for placements that are developed in line with Code principles.
- **This is not a big topic for the media to date – many in the media still promote support for orphanages.** Our efforts to engage them have only really attracted attention when we have had events like the Dáil session in early 2023 and the Report launch in 2019. We need to be ready for moments when it will be news. We feel that it is better to be making slow, steady progress bringing more and more groups and people on board with the issues, changing hearts and minds rather than a flash in the pan media campaign that could result in pushback from significant public figures and influencers.

Next Steps for Ireland

- **Work with various stakeholders in the Education sector** to change the practice of sending school trips to orphanages and support for orphanages, including with the Department of Education to issue guidance on child-safe school trips.
- **Continue to raise awareness among tourism students** so they can influence the market by promoting responsible ways of travel in their future careers.
- **Continue to engage and advocate with businesses** that are facilitating voluntourism overseas.
- **Continue to work constructively with DFA** to strengthen travel advice and on wider matters relating to values-led international volunteering. **Explore routes to support legislative changes to the Charities Act**, with the aim of creating an environment where the priorities for national and international child-safe volunteering are aligned.



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