



AONTÚ 
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Operation Shamrock

Giving Irish workers a reason to come home

Operation Shamrock Bring Essential Workers Home

We are losing a generation of key Construction Workers and Public Sector workers who we need to take care of the sick and build homes for the future.

This government and its predecessor have overseen a mass exodus of skilled workers from our shores – construction workers, doctors and nurses, all of whom are essential to Ireland's future.

Operation Shamrock is an initiative by Aontú to put in place effective incentives and support for Irish emigrants in key sectors to come home. Many respondents to surveys relating to leaving home for a life abroad have referred to working conditions (doctors and nurses) and rates of pay.

34,700 Irish citizens emigrated in the 12 months to April 2024 was the highest since the year to April 2015. This signifies an ongoing trend of Irish people leaving home for better prospects across the globe.

The reasons for this exodus of young people in particular are no secret – they are being locked out of the housing market, often living in their parents' homes for far longer, poor working conditions due to poor management and underinvestment in hospitals, or large infrastructure projects grinding to a halt because of wastewater deficits and public projects taking decades to come to fruition.

Irish workers are simply being offered a better deal in other countries. A better work-life balance, help to emigrate and long-term stability that they cannot get at home.

If we are to attract workers home, we need to put a focus on systemic change, addressing sector-specific problems and putting in place fixes that give confidence to those abroad that we can genuinely offer them a good standard of living, advancement opportunities and a future here.

This is our framework for doing just that.

Peadar Tóibín TD
Aontú Leader

Why are critical Irish workers leaving?

According to the Royal College of Surgeons in Ireland (RCSI), 442 Irish doctors were issued with temporary work visas for Australia in 2022. That is more than half of the cohort of 725 who graduated in 2021.

A survey released in the Irish Journal of Medical Science in 2023 outlined that in 2021, of the 2016 cohort of doctors awarded Certificates of Satisfactory Completion of Specialist Training (CSCST), 68% are employed in Ireland and 32% are abroad or unknown – a third are not working in the Irish health service.

A 2016 survey found that only a quarter of doctors and a half of nurses and midwives intended to return to practice in Ireland in the future and that the longer health professionals remain abroad, the less likely they are to return to their home countries.[1]

'Everything was just getting worse and worse'

A 2019 report outlines the key issues powering the migration of Irish doctors; "The deterioration in medical job quality and the normalisation of extreme working is a key driver of doctor emigration from Ireland, and deterring return. Irish trained hospital doctors emigrate to access good quality jobs in Australia and are increasingly likely to remain abroad once they have secured them." [2]

Furthermore, a 2021 report outlined the contrast in their working conditions in Australia as opposed to Ireland.

"The doctors interviewed used their working conditions in Australia to explain and contrast the strained working conditions they experienced in Ireland. In doing so they depicted how: (i) medical hierarchy; (ii) staffing, supervision and support; and (iii) governance and task coordination, shaped their contrasting experiences of work in Irish and Australian hospitals." [3]

Similarly, nurses who have emigrated have expressed concerns about staffing, training and support. The Journal recently published an article on Irish nurses working abroad. In it, two nurses outlined their experiences and why they sought to work in healthcare abroad.

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Becca (28) studied general nursing in Tralee and now lives in Perth.

"There's no such thing as a patient ratio in Ireland. I used to have eight patients on a day shift in a private cardiac unit," she explains. "In Australia, it's such a massive contrast - it's strictly four patients to one nurse in the public hospitals."

Becca could have had 12 patients to herself on a night shift when she was working in Ireland. "It's so dangerous. Would you be happy for one of your grandparents to be looked after by someone that has 11 other patients? It's not safe for the patients and it's not safe for the nurses," she says.[4]

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From 2020-2025, thousands of nurses and midwives requested their Certificates of Current Professional Status (CCPSs) to work in other jurisdictions. A nurse or midwife may request more than one CCPS at any time and may request a separate CCPS for each jurisdiction. For example, if seeking to work in several US States, then each will require a separate CCPS.

Table 1 – CCPS requests

Year	Number of Individuals Requesting CCPS	Number of CCPS Request Applications
2020	244	249
2021	1,619	1,757
2022	2,761	3,052
2023	4,910	5,343
2024	2,805	2,933
2025	523	831

Source: NMBI

Maud (27) from Cork also studied in Tralee and worked in two different hospitals in Cork once she qualified. In Australia, she now works in home care for palliative patients. Maud echoes Becca’s comments about hospital work in Australia, noting a much lower patient load.



*I had a nice run while working in Ireland because I was in a private elective ward. You’d know what’s coming in the door but training was a different story. I trained in a public hospital and there were staff shortages, long hours, and some days you were expected to be a staff member despite being on training, so it was sink or swim.”
“I don’t think I’ll ever go back to hospitals in Ireland. Pay would need to change, [plus] better working conditions, higher staff levels, lower patient to nurse ratio.*



Almost 14,000 CCPS have been issued in that period by NMBI division, with the vast majority from General Nurses.

Table 2 – CPS requests by NMBI division

Division	2025	2024	2023	2022	2021	2020
General Nurses	756	2,395	4,232	1,977	995	825
Midwives	57	111	102	95	52	72
Children's Nurses	30	98	97	96	72	55
Psychiatric Nurses	76	174	232	173	134	74
Intellectual Disability Nurses	28	54	59	54	34	37
Public Health Nurses	1	3	6	5	7	1
Nurse Tutors	1	4	7	3	4	6
Midwife Tutors	-	-	-	-	-	-
Nurse Prescribers	6	15	15	16	13	6
Midwife Prescribers	-	1	-	4	-	-
Advanced Nurse Practitioners	2	3	4	5	7	-
Advanced Midwife Practitioners	-	-	-	-	-	-

Source: NMBI

According to the Nursing and Midwifery Board of Ireland, the vast majority of those seeking their CCPS are seeking employment in Australia, New Zealand or the United States.

Table 3 – Destination of those seeking CCPS

Destination	Number of requests
Australia	4,286
United States of America	3,151
New Zealand	1,946

Source: NMBI

Construction workers

The government do not know how many construction workers have left Ireland, and do not keep records as to how many of these have returned. However, industry bodies such as the Construction Industry Federation and other media surveys demonstrate the impact that multiple factors have on Irish construction workers leaving.

These include pay (a shocking 0% of those surveyed in 2019 by the CIF said they returned home due to pay), career advancement, the housing crisis and qualification barriers. In April 2024, the Irish Times published an article quoting Irish construction workers living in Australia and their reasons for not returning home.

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Everyone knows the situation at home. There's nowhere to live for construction workers, or people in general for that matter, and wages do not match the cost of living. – Paul Lynch, Sydney

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The acceptance of overseas qualifications is also a barrier to returning home for many workers, even with mutual recognition agreements with the Britain ending due to Brexit.

The government's Diaspora Strategy, Global Ireland (2020-2025) has still not produced any changes to the mutual recognition of many professional qualifications or addressed barriers that would allow Irish workers abroad to bring their skills home.

Indeed, these act as a pull factor for workers to remain in their host countries as they would effectively be deskilled if they returned home.

Irish trained nurses and midwives

In 2023, more than 23% of all nurses and midwives directly employed by the HSE were from outside Ireland, and nearly 15% were from India (HSE workforce report, December 2023).

It should be noted that in 2023, the uptake of permanent offers was 83% and the health service saw a slight decrease in 2024, which is largely a result of the employment control measures, according to an Aontú PQ. (PQ 24055/25).

Despite a 5% increase in jobs offered in 2024, the rate of acceptance actually fell by 4% Prior to 2023, the HSE did not keep records or undertake monitoring of graduate nurses and midwives from Irish colleges being offered and accepting offers.

Future Human Resource Requirements in Ireland

Doctors

The Economic and Social Research Institute (ESRI) projects a 40–54% increase in demand for long-term care by 2030, which will require more doctors, particularly in primary care and specialties like geriatrics and psychiatry. A 2020 OECD report suggests Ireland needs to train more doctors domestically to reduce reliance on foreign-trained professionals, as 40.4% of doctors are foreign-educated.

Assuming a 37% increase in primary care workforce needs by 2031 (from 2018 estimates), and factoring in specialist shortages, Ireland could need an additional 7,500–10,000 doctors by 2035. This accounts for population growth (projected to increase by two-thirds for those over 65 by 2050), retirements (6.5% of doctors were over 65 in 2023), and emigration (61% of Irish medical graduates plan to practice abroad).

According to a 2019 OECD report, approximately half of the medical students in Ireland are international, with many coming from non-EU/EEA countries, particularly North America, Asia, and the Middle East, due to high tuition fees and Ireland's reputation for quality medical education.

Nursing

In 2023, 51.8% of practicing nurses have had obtained their first nursing qualification outside of Ireland. India, the United Kingdom and the Philippines were the top 3 countries for these foreign trained nurses, in that ranking order.

Construction

A report by BUSI2030 estimates that we will need to re-skill 164,000 building and construction professionals and add another 120,000 skilled construction workers just to continue 'business as usual'.

Most future job growth in Ireland up to 2025 will be construction, the distribution and transport sector and business and other services according to CEDEFOP. A major pinch point with in the housing crisis is the lack of construction workers. This is delaying projects and also leading to wage inflation which is reducing margins and preventing construction.

The original government housing target for 2025 of 41,000 new builds this year has been binned. Next years target will not be met either.

Minister James Browne has cut the official target by 20% and is now stating that only 34,000 homes will be built.

Last year, just over 30,000 homes were built, far short of the Government's targets of 40,000. A 2024 report from the Department of Further and Higher Education suggested that up to 80,000 new construction workers would be needed to achieve an annual target of 50,000 homes.

Irish Government Schemes to Bring People Home

In relation to the HSE, it offers a relocation package for those wishing to return home, across all disciplines.

Relocation package includes allowances payable to candidates to meet initial costs of relocating. This allowance is payable towards vouched accommodation and flight expenses up to a combined total amount of €4,160 for candidates relocating from the EU / Britain and €4,710 for candidates relocating from non-EU countries.

Additional other costs such as initial registration fees to Regulatory Bodies, Visa fees, aptitude test fees, etc. are also payable and is dependent on where the candidate is relocating from, the discipline and specialty of the post. (HSE Circular 001/2023)

Aontú had issued a number of Parliamentary Questions to determine how many doctors and nurses availed of this policy and returned home to work in the HSE, but any information on the numbers was not 'collated centrally' and so there is no method to determine the effectiveness of the level of uptake. (PQ 15638/25)

Construction

As of 2023, there were 27,500 migrant workers in Ireland's construction sector, an increase of 84% (or 12,600 workers) since 2021.

There are no direct financial incentives for construction workers to return home. Aontú sought information from the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science relating to initiatives his department has run to encourage workers to return to Ireland.

He told us that the Department had run a targeted international social media campaign in October 2024 focussed in Australia and Canada, and prior to that, undertook market research with workers in Britain , USA, Canada, New Zealand and Australia that showed many were aware of the opportunities in the sector at home and were open to returning.

However, no cost-benefit analysis was carried out for that project which cost €170k in total in order to determine if workers returned home as a result, though the Minister did outline that 'engagement metrics indicate strong reach and interest among the target audience.'
(PQ 23484/25)

Pull Factors Keeping Essential Workers Abroad

We have undertaken a desktop analysis of the offers being made to international applicants in Australia for healthcare positions to determine the level of support an Irish healthcare worker could receive to relocate versus the package the HSE is offering for them to return home.

St John of God Healthcare is a major healthcare provider across Australia in both primary and secondary care with a major international recruitment section. As part of their offer to overseas healthcare professionals, they offer the following package:

- Assistance with Australian work visas and progression to permanent residency (where applicable)*
- A personalised meet and greet and support from a relocation specialist to assist with housing, school tours, temporary accommodation, taxation, banking and settling in
- Financial relocation assistance for eligible items.*

*Maximum benefits and eligibility criteria applies

They also offer the following benefits:

- Competitive salary and conditions
- Generous salary packaging options – up to \$18,550 on mortgage and other expenses
- - Up to \$15,900 on a range of benefits such as mortgage, your rent, or other everyday living expenses
- - Up to \$2,650 on meal entertainment, holiday accommodation and venue hire
- - Access to novated leasing to use pre-tax dollars for a car and expenses
- A welcoming and supportive culture
- A dynamic multidisciplinary team environment
- Opportunities for post-graduate support for your chosen career path and interests
- Additional professional development and qualification allowances.

Our Solutions

1. Operation Shamrock would provide a grant of €12,000 to necessary construction workers, doctors and nurses who are willing to work in the sector for 5 years. If a worker does not remain within the sector for 5 years, they will have to repay the proportion amount to the state.
2. Aontú will seek to reform the health service to ensure that hospitals are paid for the operations, treatments, consultations, therapies and engagements that they undertake. This will ensure that money gets to the front line and does not get caught in layers of internal administration. We will also implement a 2-year recruitment moratorium for administration in the HSE.
3. Aontú will implement the health care worker to patient ratio that is contained in the Framework for Safe Nurse Staffing within 5 years. We will develop a similar document for doctors, consultants and speciality health care workers. This will improve working conditions in the health service. We will look to make this legally binding. Implementing Phase 1 and 2 of the Framework will cost €16,211,476 following a re-assessment by the HSE last year.
4. Utilising powers outlined in Section 4 of the Planning and Development Act 2000, Aontú will task the LDA to build 2,000 homes a year with planning exemptions and expedited process to be made available to essential workers based on the Shanganagh Castle model, with unit costs estimated around €268,000 depending on the configuration.
5. Aontú will initiate a revolution in data collection in emigration and sectoral worker movement to manage trends, inform policy formulation and identify issues. These will include emigration surveys and integration with industry.
6. We will legislate to require the government to provide a pathway for recognition of non-EU qualifications in health and social care, construction, education and other sectors.
7. We will seek funding for a returner-specific element within the Skills to Advance programme, fast-tracking upskilling for construction workers returning from abroad with relevant skill gaps.
8. We will create a Centre of Excellence to allow returning construction and built environment workers who have gained international qualifications and skills to integrate those into training Irish workers and inform training strategies for SOLAS.

Sources

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