



Ms. Éilis Fallon
Committee of Public Accounts
Leinster House
Dublin 2

13 December 2019

By email only to: pac@oireachtas.ie

Ref: PAC32-I-1709

Dear Ms. Fallon,

I refer to your correspondence of 28 November regarding the Committee's request for further information on accommodation centres for international protection applicants and on the international protection application process.

Firstly, I would like to address what seems to be a misunderstanding in relation to our ongoing regional public procurement process for accommodation, which is highlighted in the transcript of the Committee's meeting on 21 November 2019. The procurement process is not concerned with finding emergency accommodation. Its purpose is to find dedicated accommodation centres where the full range of State services and supports for applicants can be provided. It is open to new accommodation providers to tender or for existing accommodation providers to retender should they wish to continue providing accommodation in the longer-term. Requests for short-term emergency accommodation are issued through Expressions of Interest that are published in the national newspapers.

I will now address in turn the three items of further information requested by the Committee.

1. Criteria for determining whether an application for international protection is prioritised or non-prioritised

Some applications for international protection are prioritised in accordance with Section 73 of the International Protection Act, 2015. The Act states:

- 1) *Subject to the need for fairness and efficiency in dealing with applications for international protection under this Act, the Minister may, where he or she considers it necessary or expedient to do so-*
 - (a) *Accord priority to any application or,*
 - (b) *Having consulted with the chairperson of the Tribunal, request the chairperson to accord priority to any appeal."*

UNHCR Ireland, as part of its mandate in relation to international protection, has provided advice in relation to the prioritisation of applications and supports the approach taken by the Chief International Protection Officer. UNHCR supports the prioritisation of applications for international protection as a means to enable the early identification of, for example, likely well-founded cases and cases involving children or the elderly. UNHCR has also supported the International Protection Office (IPO) in providing training programmes to its staff and to the Protection Panel.

As mentioned previously, prioritisation under the 2015 Act is subject to the need for fairness and efficiency in dealing with applications for international protection. Accordingly, the scheduling of cases is primarily done on the basis of the date of application (oldest cases first).

It is important to say that prioritisation relates solely to the scheduling of interviews and does not pre-determine any recommendation to be made. Applications which are prioritised are scheduled for interview at the earliest possible date having regard to available resources. All applications, whether prioritised or not will receive the same full and individual assessment.

The scheduling of interviews occurs under two processing streams which run concurrently:

Stream one – which comprises the majority of applications are scheduled mainly on the basis of oldest cases first. These include new applications and cases which were open before the commencement date of the International Protection Act 2015 at the following stages and order of priority:

- i. Pending subsidiary protection recommendation;
- ii. Pending appeal at the former Refugee Appeals Tribunal; and
- iii. Pending refugee status recommendation.

Stream two – comprises certain categories of cases which were open at the commencement of the 2015 Act (on 31 December 2016) as well as some new cases based on the following criteria: age of applicants; the likelihood that applications are well founded on the basis of a medico-legal report; the likelihood that applications are well founded due to the country of origin or habitual residence of the applicant; and health grounds. Within each of these classes of cases, priority is mainly accorded on the basis of oldest cases first.

As a general rule, applications from family members are processed together. This applies to both prioritised and non-prioritised applications.

The approach to prioritisation is kept under ongoing review and will be updated, as required, having regard to the nature of the changing caseload in the International Protection Office.

2. The difference between services provided in emergency accommodation and direct provision centres

Our accommodation centres are contracted to provide a suite of services and supports to applicants in the international protection process. These services include but are not limited to management services, security, accommodation, catering (or provision of independent living), laundry facilities, integration supports, cleaning, maintenance, etc. Contracts are longer term (between 1 and 4 years).

Our centres must adhere to a range of policies put in place by the Department including in relation to child protection, sexual harassment and domestic violence, CCTV management, visitors protocols, etc. Each centre must also adhere to and apply the Department's House Rules, which includes a complaints procedure.

A key contractual obligation on service providers is the establishment and running of a Friends of the Centre Group, which addresses the social, recreational, and integration needs of residents through events and interactions with the local community.

In hotels and guest houses that are providing accommodation for applicants on an emergency basis, what we can provide is much more limited. Applicants are provided with bed and board (three meals per day). We may not have exclusive use of the premises and facilities such as laundry, playrooms for children and communal social space may not be available. These hotels and guest houses continue to operate commercially and are not bound to implement our policies. The contracts for these locations are short-term (between 3 and 6 months).

The use of hotels and guest houses on an emergency basis is sub-optimal and the Department is working hard to secure sufficient capacity through the procurement processes to provide sufficient capacity in accommodation centres and to eliminate our use of emergency accommodation as soon as possible. As the Committee may be aware, we have recently opened new accommodation centres in Borrisokane, Ballinamore and Ennis and we expect to open more centres in the New Year.

3. Details regarding mobilisation including a definition as well as information regarding the different stages in the mobilisation process

The mobilisation process allows successful bidders from the tender process to implement whatever works are necessary to deliver what they have proposed in their bid.

As part of the tender bid, a mobilisation plan, with a maximum period of 16 weeks for implementation, is submitted with key milestones identified. Some properties require the full 16 weeks for implementation. Other properties, which are turnkey or close to turnkey require much less or no time at all to deliver what they have included in their tender bid.

Examples of the type of work that have been undertaken during the mobilisation period include:

- Installation of communal cooking facilities;
- Installation of a food-hall where residents can obtain their groceries through a cashless, points based system;

- Provision of dedicated living space for families;
- Upgrading of fire alarms/safety equipment; and
- General decorative works.

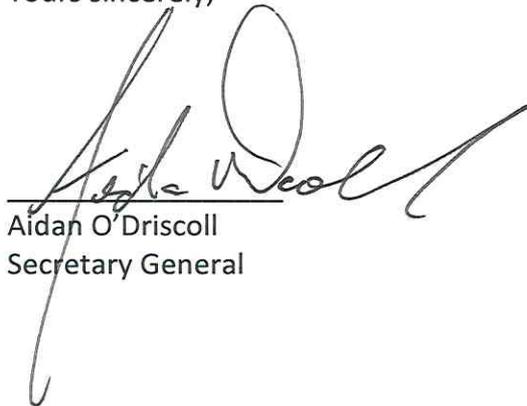
During the mobilisation period, the works are inspected by staff from the Department. No contract will be entered into until the Department verifies that the required works have been completed to the standards as set down in the Request for Tender.

Finally, I would like to provide some clarification on the issue of Official Development Assistance (ODA). I note from the transcript of the Committee meeting of 21 November 2019, that the Committee had some concerns that the costs of our accommodation centres are met in some part from the ODA budget. Where international protection applicants accept the offer of State provided accommodation, the costs are met from the budget of the Department of Justice and Equality.

Ireland started counting eligible in-donor refugee costs as Official Development Assistance in 2017 on the basis of a revised methodology developed by the OECD Development Assistance Committee following the 2015 EU migration crisis. Eligible costs include costs for basic services like accommodation, health and education, for the first 12 months of a refugee or an asylum seeker being in Ireland. In 2017, in donor refugee costs came to €36 million and in 2018 they came to €33 million.

I hope that this information adequately addresses the concerns of the Committee members and the requests for further information. Should the Committee members require any further explanations or clarifications, please do not hesitate to contact my office.

Yours sincerely,



Aidan O'Driscoll
Secretary General