

**Update on the implementation of previous recommendations made by the Committee of Public Accounts to the then Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade following the Committee's engagement of 21 June 2018**

- [Committee of Public Accounts \(32nd Dáil\) - Periodic Report No. 4, May - July 2018](#)
- [Minute of the Minister for Finance and Public Expenditure and Reform, May 2019](#)

	<b>Recommendations from the Committee of Public Accounts</b>	<b>Minute of the Minister for Finance and Public Expenditure and Reform</b>	<b>Update on progress of implementing the Committee's recommendations</b>
1.	<p>The State committed to allocating 0.7% of gross national income to overseas development assistance in 1970 in order to help address the needs of some of the poorest and most vulnerable people and communities in the world. 48 years later, the target has yet to be reached. The highest allocation of Irish funding was 0.59% in 2008. As part of the UN sustainable development goals, the State has made a new commitment to reach the 0.7% target by 2030.</p> <p>The Committee recommends that the Government develops a clear, multi-annual plan to meet the commitment to contribute 0.7% of gross national income to overseas development assistance by 2030.</p>	<p>The Minister for Finance and Public Expenditure and Reform is informed by the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade that it will continue to engage with the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform, and with the other Departments engaged in delivering Irish Overseas Development Assistance (ODA), regarding the provision of the necessary funding to meet the UN target of 0.7% of GNI to ODA in line with the Government's expressed objective that Ireland reaches that target by 2030.</p> <p>As a first step total ODA allocated in budget 2019 increased by €110 million to €817 million, a 16% increase on the 2018 budget allocation. This compares with a 2015 allocation of just under €650 million. Further sustained, managed increments in ODA will be required if the Government's ambition to meet the 0.7% target is to be achieved. The ODA/GNI % depends on the allocation to total ODA and forecasted GNI. Despite the substantial increase in ODA allocations over the last few years, the strong growth performance of the Irish economy has had a dampening effect on the ODA/GNI % target outturn. The total</p>	<p>In Budget 2022, the Government allocated €1.044 billion. This is a 20% increase on the 2021 allocation, the highest ever amount allocated to ODA. In the context of competing budgetary pressures, achieving this amount was an important milestone. This 20% increase in the overall cash allocation to ODA is anticipated to correspond to at least 0.32% of GNI for 2022. However the percentage is likely to rise, on an exceptional basis, when donor in-country refugee costs are taken into account in the final calculations for the year. It is recognised the need to continue to strive for increases in GNI percentage terms. The Department is currently reviewing and building systems that will enable the development programme to grow further, including as a proportion of GNI, in a sustainable and responsible way. This includes working in coordination with the many other Government Departments and bodies spending Official Development Assistance, and with the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform, on how a</p>

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		<p>amount of ODA which Ireland will invest during 2019 is now the highest since the financial crisis and the fifth consecutive year the Government has increased allocations to ODA. The IMF's PIMA report points to the need to prioritise spending on the maintenance of infrastructural assets. This is also referenced in the recently published NDP for 2018 – 2027 which states that protecting the quality and value of the capital stock through appropriate levels of expenditure for maintenance and renewal purposes is a high priority.</p> <p>Ireland's policy for international development, A Better World published in February 2019, provides the framework for Ireland's expanding development cooperation programme and sets out how Ireland will reposition and strengthen its efforts in addressing key global development challenges and inform how increased ODA allocations will be invested.</p> <p>The Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade's imperative will continue to be the maintenance of a quality development programme, ensuring impact and quality, while maintaining a continued rigorous focus on value for money, in the implementation of the forthcoming new policy.</p>	<p>growing ODA allocation can be managed most effectively across Departments. This work will inform whether it might be possible and appropriate to provide a roadmap to 0.7% for 2030.</p>

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2.	<p>With the advent of online Irish passport renewals, Passport Express is no longer the fastest way to renew an Irish passport.</p> <p>The Committee recommends that the Department publicises the fact that online passport renewal application is the fastest method for renewing Irish passports, particularly in Post Offices, and Garda stations, where the Passport Express forms are available.</p>	<p>The Minister for Finance and Public Expenditure and Reform is informed by the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade that it accepts this recommendation.</p> <p>The Passport Service issued the largest ever number of passports in 2018, with over 862,000 Irish passport books and cards issued.</p> <p>The award-winning Online Passport Renewal Service was expanded further in November 2018 to include new categories of applicants. This expanded online service permits the renewal of children's passports, introduces a Passport Card for children, and expands the cohort of adults eligible to renew online.</p> <p>This expanded service means that all Irish citizens can now renew their passports online 24/7, from anywhere in the world. This service brings significant benefits for citizens, with faster turnaround times of 10 working days for all on line applications, excluding postage delivery time.</p> <p>The Department has worked hard in recent years to ensure the provision of a modern, secure and efficient passport service. However, it remains very important that prospective travellers check the validity of their passport before booking a trip overseas and apply for their passport in plenty of time.</p> <p>Citizens who plan to renew their passport in 2019 are strongly encouraged to do so online</p>	<p>Passport Online is now available to all Irish citizens who wish to renew their passports worldwide and to first time applicants in over 50 countries. A programme of expansion commenced in 2019 to also allow those applying for their first passport to do so online. This means that 97% of Irish citizens worldwide can now use Passport Online. Passport Online is the preferred application channel as it provides many efficiencies for both the applicant and the Passport Service. Passport Online is consistently 4 times faster than paper-based applications for passport renewal. 90% of all applications are now received through Passport Online.</p> <p>The Passport Service has been working closely with the DFA Communications Team to promote Passport Online to all passport applicants.</p> <p>2019 – National radio ads, print ads in Northern Ireland, stadium advertising (Aviva), digital and social media campaigns. National and local radio interviews with Passport Service Director.</p> <p>2020 – media campaigns developed but not delivered due to Covid-19 pandemic</p>

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		<p>and in the off-peak period, to ensure the shortest possible renewal time. Useful information and guidance on the range of channels through which passport applications can be made is available on the Department's website at <a href="https://www.dfa.ie/passports">https://www.dfa.ie/passports</a>.</p> <p>In line with the Committee's recommendation, the Department has been extremely active in publicising information about the advantages of online processing through all media including social media. To coincide with the post-Christmas summer holiday planning time, the Department launched an advertising and media campaign in late December 2018 to highlight the much faster processing times for the on-line renewal service compared to other options.</p>	<p>2021 –media campaigns, social media, promotion of extension of Passport Online to First Time applicants in Australia, New Zealand, USA and Canada, promotion of Appointments Service available in Dublin and Cork. Social media promotion of Passport Online.</p> <p>2022 – National radio and print (10 newspapers) campaigns promoting Passport Online (Jan, March and June). Aviva stadium poster campaign. Poster campaign at Belfast Airport. Print campaigns in Northern Ireland (March and June). 4 national radio interviews with Passport Service Director (April and May). Digital and social media campaigns. Print ads in <i>Garda Review</i> magazine.</p>
3.	<p>The Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade did not have sufficient staff in place to deal with the surge in passport applications in 2018, and this contributed to delays in the provision of passport services.</p> <p>The Committee recommends that the Department reviews its balance between temporary and permanent staff, and takes steps to ensure it has the necessary staff numbers in place to meet forecast demand for passport</p>	<p>The Minister for Finance and Public Expenditure and Reform is informed by the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade that it accepts this recommendation.</p> <p>A key part of the Passport Service's strategy in managing increasing application volumes is a focus on implementation of service improvements. Since 2016, a significant programme of reform to enhance passport services for citizens has been underway, including the introduction and expansion of online passports services. The award winning</p>	<p>A key part of the Passport Service's strategy in recent years has been a focus on implementation of service improvements. As part of that, the staffing requirements were considered in light of the forecasted demand, deferred demand for passports as a result of the Pandemic and efforts to reduce the turnaround times for the processing of passports.</p> <p>In 2019 the Passport Service issued 935,000 passports which was a record</p>

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	services in 2019.	<p>online passport application service will continue to make a major contribution to the effective management of exceptionally high volumes by allowing existing resources to be more effectively deployed within the Passport Service. The Online Renewal Service allows Irish citizens (both adult and children) to renew their passport twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week from anywhere in the world, has led to exceptional efficiency gains.</p> <p>Staffing needs in the Passport Service are assessed on the basis of a number of factors including forecasted demand, the balance between more complex first -time applications and renewals as well as the uptake of online services and associated productivity gains. The Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade sought and has been provided with additional funding in the 2019 Estimates for additional full-time staff in the Passport Service in order to better cope with periods of peak demand and the rising volumes of applications. Additional full-time staff have already been recruited and the Passport Service will continue to monitor operational requirements during the year.</p>	<p>volume at that time. As a result of the careful forecasting and planning that was implemented all services operated within the agreed timelines set for that year.</p> <p>COVID-19 has been a significant challenge for the Passport Service with the impact of social distancing reducing the number of staff who could be hired to process applications.</p> <p>Between 27 March 2020 and 4 May 2021, routine passport services were paused for a total period of approximately 8 months and restricted throughout the period due to Covid-19 public health restrictions. The Passport Service commenced the scaling up of operations from 4 May 2021 when the Government announced the categorisation of the Passport Service as an 'essential service' within the COVID-19 Resilience and Recovery Framework.</p> <p>In the last 10 months the Passport Service has held two temporary clerical officer recruitment campaigns with a view to doubling staff numbers since June 2021. DFA has also been working closely with the Public Appointments Service to recruit and assign additional staff.</p>

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			<p>There are currently 801 staff in the Passport Service (20/06/2022) comprising of 329 temporary clerical staff and 472 permanent staff. This is a 77% increase on the number of staff in the Passport Service compared to June 2021. Recruitment continues to have a positive impact on the Passport Service; new staff will start every week for the remainder of June and July. This is with a view to reaching a staff complement in excess of 900 staff across the Service. In addition, on 20 June 2022, the Passport Service opened an office in Limerick in which 50 temporary staff, previously assigned to the HSE as contract tracers, were hired to assist in dealing with customer queries.</p> <p>Since March 2022, the Passport Service has reduced the turnaround for online first time applications by 40% from 40 working days to 25 working days. This is as a direct result of the investment in staff and resources undertaken by the Department.</p>
4.	The annual rental cost of Irish embassies gives rise to significant long-term costs. As highlighted in the Committee's third periodic report, failure to purchase property when the	<p>The Minister for Finance and Public Expenditure and Reform is informed by the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade that it accepts this recommendation.</p> <p>The Department currently manages and</p>	Ireland's diplomatic and consular network continues to grow under the Government's Global Ireland strategy and now comprises 97 missions accommodated in 172 premises. Of those, 137 are rented and

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	<p>option is assessed as the most financially prudent does not make best use of public funds.</p> <p>The Committee recommends that the Department evaluates its rental properties abroad with a view to investing capital funding in the purchase of properties in countries where Ireland has a long-term diplomatic presence.</p>	<p>maintains 146 properties abroad of which 34 are State- owned, in addition to 3 properties managed and maintained, and 1 State-owned, in Northern Ireland. These properties are utilised by the Department in pursuit of its goals on behalf of the State. They consist of offices, public and promotional areas and official accommodation. They provide platforms for the mission network to support Ireland's political, trade, economic and cultural interests and values; are used to provide services to Irish citizens, to develop strategic stakeholder relationships and to ensure that Ireland is effectively represented in international organisations.</p> <p>A challenge facing the Department is the escalating costs of rents worldwide. The Department has engaged with the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform with a view to mitigating the risk of escalating rents through, where feasible, purchasing properties in strategic locations. The Department's capital allocation for 2018-2022, under the National Development Plan 2018-2027, was increased to, in part, allow for this. For example, during 2017 the Department acquired a site to facilitate the construction of an Embassy/Ireland House in Tokyo where the general rental market is one of the most expensive in the world. This project is a significant multi-year investment which, when complete this new Embassy/Ireland House will eliminate rental costs resulting in long term</p>	<p>35 (20%) are State-owned.</p> <p>The Department concurs with the views of the Public Accounts Committee that the Department evaluates rental properties abroad in relation to potential purchases. Mission property investments can offer real value for money for the Exchequer compared with long term rental options. There are also potential savings to be achieved by moving from older properties with high energy and maintenance costs, to newer and more sustainable premises. This was the conclusion of the 2021 Spending Review of the Department's overseas rented mission property portfolio.</p> <p>The Department's new Property Management Strategy 2022-2025 has set objectives in relation to looking at property purchase options in relation to providing modern and flexible workplaces to support the delivery of mission business delivery needs and support the overall strategy of the Department.</p> <p>For example, plans are at an advanced stage for two property purchases in the second half of this year - official accommodation in Santiago and in Bogotá.</p> <p>We are also currently developing State-owned office and official accommodation premises in an Ireland House construction</p>



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		<p>savings to the State.</p> <p>The Department, in consultation with the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform and subject to resource availability, will consider the benefits of purchasing properties versus renting when reviewing property options in new mission locations as well as countries where Ireland has a long-term diplomatic presence.</p>	<p>project in Tokyo.</p>
5.	<p>Once established, the International Election Observation Roster is fixed for a five year period.</p> <p>The Committee recommends that the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade examines whether five years is an excessive panel duration.</p> <p>The Committee also recommends that the Department has the necessary procedures in place to ensure that panels do not need to be extended prior to the establishment of subsequent panels.</p>	<p>The Minister for Finance and Public Expenditure and Reform is informed by the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade that it accepts this recommendation.</p> <p>The Department will, in 2019, undertake a review of the operation of the International Election Observation Panel, including the optimal panel duration.</p>	<p>A review of the Election Observation Roster was carried out by the Department's Evaluation and Audit Unit and the <a href="#">report</a> was published at <a href="http://www.irishaid.ie">www.irishaid.ie</a> in February 2021. The Terms of Reference included an examination of whether five years is a suitable roster duration. The review found that the large size of the roster was more of a challenge than the duration. It found that roster members have infrequent opportunities given the limited number of EU and OSCE calls for election observer nominations (which the report notes as approximately 15 missions per year). These opportunities were further limited due to the temporary suspension of nominations due to the COVID-19 pandemic from March 2020 to October 2021. The report recommended that the next roster mustering planning period, consideration should be given substantially</p>



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			decreasing the size of the election observation roster with a view to ensuring an optimal balance of opportunity for all observers, particularly those who may be new to the roster. The current Roster is due to expire on 31 December 2023