

## **Joint Committee on Public Petitions**

### **Opening Statement by Dr Fergal Lynch, Secretary General,**

### **Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth**

**Thursday 11 November 2021**

Thank you for the opportunity to meet with the Committee today. I am joined by colleagues from the Department with responsibility for international protection issues, Carol Baxter, Assistant Secretary and Paula Quinn, Principal Officer. Shane O'Connor, head of the International Protection Accommodation Service and Úna Ní Dhubhghaill, Principal Officer, are also supporting me today.

I am conscious that the Committee has already held four meetings this year on the issue of Direct Provision involving the Ombudsman, the Ombudsman for Children and a number of experts in the area. I will try not to duplicate what they have dealt with in their respective contributions, and will instead focus on the work that we are currently engaged in to end Direct Provision and to establish a new International Protection Support Service.

I know that the Committee will be familiar with the main elements and overall approach of the White Paper on this issue, which the Government published last February. I will not repeat many of the details of the White paper's contents, but I hope it will be helpful if I outline the process we in the Department have put in place to advance its implementation as soon as possible, and to summarise the progress we have made so far.

My colleagues and I will be happy to answer any questions that members may have. For completeness, I would remind the Committee that our Department is responsible for providing accommodation and supports to applicants for international protection, and for implementing the changes to these as promised in the White Paper, but that responsibility for processing applications, processing times and other aspects of processing asylum claims remains with the Department of Justice and the International Protection Appeals Tribunal.

The Committee will be aware that responsibility for matters relating to international protection accommodation and services was transferred to our Department from the Department of Justice in October 2020. We have taken on these new functions with enthusiasm and a sense of determination to get things done. We have an ambitious agenda of change ahead of us, and we are keen to make the changes that will bring real improvements to the quality of life of those in the international protection system.

Of course, there are very clear legal obligations in this area – Ireland is obliged to provide accommodation and supports to persons seeking international protection – but in addition to the provisions of the law, our Department is strongly committed to making much-needed changes to the conditions of people coming to our shores in these circumstances.

#### **Programme for Government and the White Paper**

The shortcomings of the current system of so-called 'direct provision' have been widely recognised, and the *Programme for Government* has pledged to replace it with a new system centred on a not-

for-profit approach, underpinned by the principles of human rights and the integration of applicants into Irish society from the point of arrival in Ireland. Under the White Paper, there will be a particular focus on children's rights and on ensuring dignity, privacy and respect for all applicants and their families. The White Paper also contains a commitment to phase out the use of congregated settings by December 2024, when the new system is scheduled to be fully rolled out.

The Committee will recall that the new model outlined in the White Paper is based on a two-phase approach to accommodating applicants for International Protection.

### **The new model**

In Phase One, the applicant will be accommodated in a Reception and Integration Centre for up to four months. We will seek to encourage integration from day one and to place people on the most successful pathway possible towards an independent life in Ireland, should their application prove successful. Accommodation in Reception and Integration Centres will be own-door for families and own-room for single people, with specific tailoring for people with identified vulnerabilities. Comprehensive information about the international protection process will be made available to all applicants and will include information on Legal Aid Board services, Health services, Education supports, Childcare and Employment activation. This information will be translated into the most common languages spoken by applicants, and an intensive orientation and English language programme will also be provided.

In Phase Two, our emphasis will be on fostering an independent life within the community. All accommodation for families will be own-door, self-contained houses or apartments to provide privacy, agency and independence. Single people will be housed in either own-door or own-room accommodation. Homes will be located in cities and towns in every county across the country, and supports will be put in place to help encourage integration. Vulnerable applicants will have additional supports provided to them by NGOs contracted by the Department.

In order to support independent living, applicants will be provided with income support payments funded by the Department, including child support payments. All accommodation units will be managed by independent not-for-profit organisations operating on behalf of the State.

In both phases, there will be an emphasis on child welfare and child protection. Children and Young People's Services Committees (CYPSCs) will ensure that there is a specific focus on the needs of children, young people and their families in International Protection accommodation settings, with the input of Tusla in key areas such as Prevention, Partnership and Family Support and Educational Support Services.

Parenting supports and child development services will be made available to applicant families to support child development during the application process for international protection, and childcare will be provided to enable parents to attend English language classes.

Phase Two supports will be co-ordinated at the local level by Interagency Working Groups, which will be established in each county and chaired by the Local Authority. The Interagency Working Groups will also include representatives of relevant organisations such as the HSE, An Garda Síochána and the local Education and Training Board. The Interagency Working Group will also provide the framework for notifying public authorities and community structures when the Department is

deciding to build, acquire or lease Phase Two accommodation in a particular area, in line with the national allocation key that has been agreed between the Department and the County and City Management Association (CCMA).

It is clear that implementing this new accommodation model and its accompanying supports will require a whole-of-Government approach, and this was noted in the White Paper. With this in mind, we have a Transition Team in the Department that is preparing a detailed implementation plan for the new system. We are working with all relevant stakeholders on different aspects of the Plan. In particular, we are working closely with the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage, the Housing Agency and the Local Authorities on developing the new accommodation model and on acquiring suitable properties.

We are also working in collaboration with housing experts to prepare advice on the optimal ownership model for the accommodation, as well as on a funding model to enable Approved Housing Bodies and other not-for-profit organisations to act as our delivery partners for the accommodation and support elements of the new system.

A total of €28.1m has been allocated to the Department in 2022 for implementation of the new model of accommodation. This breaks down between €12.5m in capital expenditure and €15.6m in current expenditure. With this allocation the Transition Team will be focused on a range of areas. These will include, by way of example:

- Acquisition of Phase Two accommodation with a focus on turnkey properties and properties that require upgrading/renovations, rolling out a rent-a-room scheme and the sourcing of private tenancies.
- A funding scheme for Approved Housing Bodies so that they can begin to bring properties on stream and develop a pipeline for Phase Two accommodation.
- Starting the transition of International Protection applicants out of IPAS accommodation and into accommodation in the community.
- Starting the funding to local authorities to coordinate integration at local level.
- Beginning the commissioning of NGOs to provide supports, particularly for vulnerable applicants;
- Initiating the roll-out of applicant-based supports at a local level including income supports and childcare;
- Rolling out a community integration fund which will support community integration initiatives and deliver benefits for local communities;
- Rolling out employment outreach supports; and
- Launching a national consultation and information process to brief communities about the implementation of the White Paper.

### **Monitoring Implementation**

In order to monitor the implementation of the new system, a Programme Board to oversee the transition to the new International Protection Support Service has been established. As Secretary

General of the Department, I chair this Board, which includes representatives with lived experience of international protection, NGOs, UNHCR, independent experts in housing and change management and relevant Government Departments.

The Programme Board has already had three meetings and its next meeting is scheduled for 18 November. To date, the Board has considered a number of important issues, including a draft implementation plan, the income support payments that will be given to applicants, and the ownership model for any new accommodation that will be acquired. In the coming months the Board will be asked to review papers on the integration supports that will be offered to applicants and a draft policy for moving those who are currently in the Direct Provision system into Phase Two accommodation as it comes on stream.

In addition, I am pleased to say that a three-person External Advisory Group, which will provide independent oversight of the reform process contained in the White Paper, has been recently appointed by Minister O’Gorman. Its members are:

- Dr Catherine Day, former Secretary General of the European Commission and Chair of the Advisory Group that formed a key input to the White Paper;
- Dr David Donoghue, a retired diplomat and former Ambassador to the United Nations who co-facilitated the development of the UN-sponsored global approach to refugees and migrants;
- Dr Lorcan Sirr, a housing policy expert and lecturer in TU Dublin.

This group has had its own initial meeting, and I had a valuable initial discussion with them last week.

The Government will be kept informed of the progress of these reforms through the Minister, and the Cabinet Committee on Social Affairs and Equality will also review progress.

### **Supporting the existing system during transition**

In outlining our plans for major reform, I am conscious of the need still to support the existing system of direct provision even as we plan to end it. Current residents have the right to expect a quality service, and we must ensure that it is functioning to meet their needs during the transition period. With this in mind, we have recently introduced a number of initiatives aimed at promoting the well-being of residents.

A new dedicated IPAS Customer Services Team is working to strengthen the existing resident complaints system and take a more proactive approach to dealing with residents' issues, actively engaging with residents through regular resident feedback clinics. We have also established a Resident Welfare Team. This is a new multi-disciplinary team that focuses on residents with more complex issues, including those with physical and mental health issues and persons identified through the IPAS Vulnerability Assessment Process as having special reception needs. Officials from Tusla, the HSE’s Social Inclusion Team and the Department of Education support this team. Additional Social Workers are currently being recruited to provide further support to the team.

These teams have been going to considerable lengths over the past year to deliver improvements to the current system, and we will continue our efforts to promote a service based on quality, human rights and dignity of all those seeking international protection.

### **Conclusion**

To conclude, we have a very ambitious programme of reform ahead of us, with an ambitious deadline of the end of 2024 to have the new system in place. There is strong commitment and enthusiasm in our own Department, and we will work closely with all of the key agencies in a way that I believe will make a real difference to the lives of people applying for international protection in Ireland.

Thank you, and we would be happy to take your questions.