

**Opening Statement from Deputy Secretary Oonagh Buckley –
Joint Oireachtas Committee on Public Petitions
25th November 2021**

Chairman, Committee Members,

Thank you for inviting the Department to update you on the measures we are taking to implement the Government's White Paper and, in particular, to speed up the processing of international protection applications.

Let me start by saying that both the Minister and the Department are fully committed to our objective of having decisions made on international protection applications as soon as possible. This ensures that those who are found to be in need of our protection can receive it quickly and begin rebuilding their lives here with a sense of safety and security.

We are also fully committed to implementing the key recommendations in the Expert Advisory Group Report to reduce average processing times of both first instance decisions and appeals to 6 months respectively, as outlined in the White Paper to End Direct Provision and Establish a New International Protection Support Service.

The White Paper proposes that the new system should be phased in and operational by 2024 and that the intervening period should provide an opportunity to progress improvements in the overall processing times for international protection.

That work is underway and I'd like to give the Committee a brief overview today of how we intend to reach that target.

In the first instance, the Department is prioritising the processing of all cases using improved processes and ICT investment in the system. A number of initiatives have already been introduced, including the relocation of the Ministerial Decisions Unit to the International Protection Office premises to improve work processes; the designation of the International Protection Appeals Tribunal as a body authorised to hold remote hearings; and the holding of virtual interviews with some applicants living outside of Dublin.

An end-to-end review of processes in both the International Protection Office and in the independent International Protection Appeals Tribunal, as recommended by the Expert Advisory Group, has been completed by a multi-disciplinary team from within the Department. The review included engagement with past and present applicants and with staff working in the IPO and in the Tribunal.

The Minister published the results of the review last month and its findings and recommendations for reform are now helping us to improve efficiencies within those processes and support our goal of reducing average processing times for international protection. The development of paperless processes is an important part of this reform.

It is also important to acknowledge that the dedication and professionalism of staff in the IPO and in the Tribunal, who participated wholeheartedly with the review, is specifically called out in the report.

I'm joined today by the Chief International Protection Officer, David Delaney, who was recently appointed to the role and is leading its reform

processes. The IPO is examining and implementing measures with a view to speeding up average processing times and reducing the overall number of applicants in the protection process. These measures include training more staff to conduct interviews and complete reports, whilst also streamlining processes to assist in expediting applications in the medium to long term.

The Department works closely with UNHCR Ireland and there is an ongoing quality assessment process in place with that organisation. This provides valuable feedback to staff on the quality of the decision-making process and ensures that any lessons learned are reflected in amended procedures, as required. The approach to the prioritisation of cases is also agreed with UNHCR and was most recently updated in June. A shorter and more user-friendly questionnaire for applicants was also introduced in June and has recently been made available online for the first time.

Following the successful piloting of a virtual chatbot for citizenship applicants on our new Irish Immigration website, plans are also underway to expand this service to international protection applicants.

I know that when the Committee met with our colleagues from the Department of Children recently, it was interested in how the Programme Boards are operating. I personally chair the Programme Board in our Department, which meets every month and has done so since the Advisory Group's Report was published in September 2020. A senior representative from the Department of Children participates on this Board, which oversees the work of an Implementation Working Group established within the Department to take forward the recommendations under our remit. My colleague, David, is our Department's representative

on the Programme Board more recently established by Minister O’Gorman’s Department.

It must be acknowledged that efforts to improve processing times have been seriously impacted by the Covid-19 pandemic. A decision was also made to stop issuing negative decisions by the Ministerial Decisions Unit during this time. As a result, the output of decisions was reduced considerably. Attendance in the office has been strictly limited in line with public health guidance and substantive protection interviews were suspended for the periods under Level 5 restrictions.

Despite this, the International Protection Office has remained open to offer applicants a service in line with our international obligations to allow those who wish to claim international protection the opportunity to do so. The provision of the facility to allow people claim international protection is considered an essential service at all times, including during the Covid-19 crisis.

IPO staff have worked both on-site and remotely throughout the pandemic to ensure the protection process continues to operate. I want to take this opportunity to publicly express my gratitude to them for this.

Applications for protection have continued to be made at all times during the pandemic, albeit in lower numbers. With the opening up of international travel again, those numbers are starting to rise. This makes the implementation of the Catherine Day recommendations all the more important.

In conclusion, I believe that the measures we are taking will have a demonstrably positive impact on waiting times for applicants in the short to medium term. Early results from this work can already be seen.

However, if this doesn't allow us to fully realise our ambitions, by next October, at the latest, the Department will commence a review of progress made in reducing and improving processing times. Based on the outcome of that review, we will decide by the end of 2022, whether additional measures are required in order to ensure that the new system can come into operation without the overhang of any significant number of legacy cases.

Thank you for your attention. My colleague and I are happy to answer any questions that the Committee Members may have.