

## **Opening remarks for the Committee on Children**

### **Deputy Secretary General**

### **International Protection**

I would like to thank the Chair and the members of the Committee for the opportunity to discuss with you today the current position in relation to International Protection applications in Ireland.

I am joined today by Mr. David Delaney, Director of Immigration Service Delivery and Chief International Protection Officer and Ms. Emer Mullins, Principal Officer in the International Protection Office.

As the Committee is aware, Ireland has obligations under EU and International Law to consider applications for international protection from those who come to our country fleeing persecution.

The International Protection Office (IPO) of the Department of Justice is responsible for examining all international protection applications received. The staff of the IPO are independent in the exercise of their international protection functions.

The International Protection Appeals Tribunal is an appellate body providing an effective remedy for applicants for international protection in respect of negative recommendations of international protection officers.

Ireland is party to the 1951 UN Convention on the Status of Refugees. The Convention defines the term 'refugee' and outlines the rights of refugees as well as the legal obligations of States to protect them.

Ireland is also bound by the EU Asylum Procedures Directive. The Directive applies to all applications for asylum made in the territory of a Member State. The Directive sets out a common procedure for processing applications and provides asylum seekers with certain rights and guarantees, including the right to access the procedure and the right to remain in the Member State pending the examination of an asylum application.

The International Protection Act 2015 transposes the Asylum Procedures Directive into national law and gives further effect to the 1951 Refugee Convention and its 1967 Protocol.

Ireland, like other EU Member States, has experienced a significant increase in applicants for International Protection from a broad range of countries since the resumption of international travel post pandemic.

To put this increase in context, the number of International Protection applicants last year was 13,651. This figure represents a 186% increase on 2019, the most recent comparable year pre pandemic. The Catherine Day report, and its associated targets, were based on an average number of applicants of 3,500 per year.

Although this is a large increase for Ireland, the number of applications we are now receiving brings us more in line with other Member States.

The Department has introduced a range of measures to deal with the increase in applications.

The IPO has also developed a Modernisation Strategy with the key objective of the strategy being to further increase the number of decisions in 2023 and to continually improve the quality of that decision making.

A new modernisation team has been established to drive innovation across the IPO. The team will monitor progress across four key areas: infrastructure, resources, process engineering and technology.

Additional funding of nearly €18m this year for the IPO is being utilised to recruit a significant number of extra staff and office accommodation. As of end April there were 289 staff in the IPO. The number of staff there has more than doubled since 2019, from 143 to 304 staff as of Friday 26<sup>th</sup> May – another 23 will arrive in the coming weeks. An additional 160 contractors are also being recruited to boost the panel who conduct International Protection interviews. These resources will be supported by increased training and quality control support from the UNHCR.

On November 8 2022, the International Protection Office (IPO) introduced accelerated procedures for international protection applicants from safe countries of origin. This was in response to a very significant increase in applications from some designated safe countries in recent years.

The determination process remains the same for all international protection applicants and applicants under the new procedure will still have the same rights to appeal a negative recommendation by the IPO to the International Protection Appeals Tribunal.

The new process has allowed applicants from safe countries of origin to receive a first instance decision in less than 3 months, which is a significant reduction from a norm of 22 to 26 months last year.

The International Protection Appeals Tribunal has also been resourced to deal with an increase in the number of appeals they receive. The IPAT has also introduced new measures within its processes to reduce waiting times.

While the volumes of applications to the IPO have increased significantly, this had not materialised into significantly increased volumes to IPAT until early 2023. In 2022, IPAT received 1,180 appeals and disposed of 1,571. In recent years, the International Protection Appeals Tribunal (IPAT) has been resourced to deliver 2,300 appeals per annum.

A budgetary increase of €1million was allocated for 2023, based on a forecasted caseload of 3,200 appeals coming to the Tribunal in 2023, which is allowing for recruitment of ten additional administrative staff.

We are continually reviewing the resource needs at all steps in the process, with a view to anticipating the impact of the increase in applications at each stage and ensuring that we in a position to maintain the momentum of processing.

The Department is confident that these new measures will significantly improve the operation of the international protection process in Ireland, and critically keep processing times to a minimum. It is important to emphasise that, notwithstanding all of the new efficiencies introduced, all applications for international protection are and will continue to be examined fully and individually on their merits, including those from countries which are designated as safe countries of origin.

All decisions on international protection applications are made in accordance with relevant legislation and Ireland follows the guidance of the UNHCR and the European Union Agency for Asylum (EUAA) in relation to claims for international protection.

Comprehensive training for IPO caseworkers and interviewers is conducted, in conjunction with the UNHCR. The IPO and UNHCR also operate a quality assurance process to ensure each decision made by the office is of the highest standard.

Finally, I want to acknowledge the huge efforts of staff in the International Protection Office to achieve this progress. In addition to the very experienced existing staff, many new staff have joined, along with staff from around the Department that have been redeployed to assist in our efforts to reduce processing times for International Protection applicants.

I would again like to thank the Committee for the opportunity to be here today to set out the progress we have made in recent years improving the

International Protection process in Ireland. My colleagues and I look forward to going into further detail as members require.