

Opening Statement

Joint Oireachtas Committee on Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth

Tuesday 30/05/2023 [4:15pm]

“The adequate and timely accommodation of refugees, asylum seekers and international protection applicants”.

Introduction:

I thank the Committee for the opportunity to come before it today to speak about the role our Department has played in accommodating those fleeing Ukraine. As Assistant Secretary in the Department I lead the Ukraine Response Division set up in March 2022. The division has approximately 150 staff seconded and otherwise dedicated to all aspects of the Ukraine accommodation response working across Government, with those in Local Government, communities and agencies. We work to help those who have sought refuge in Ireland and have provided accommodation to all those who need it. It is an evolving response which has been challenging but immensely rewarding for all involved.

Key Achievements:

The accommodation challenge arising from the largest displacement of people on the continent since the Second World War has been unprecedented. As of May 2023, over **83,000** Temporary Protection Orders have been granted and our Department and its staff working with others have successfully provided accommodation to over **61,000** people from Ukraine within the space of 14 months. This is equivalent to the population of Co. Carlow. Every person who has asked for shelter from our Department continues to receive it with daily

average arrivals presently standing at **88**. As the conflict develops we expect arrivals to continue and we continue to plan our response to this.

Following the invasion in February 2022, our humanitarian response has included the following:

- Putting in place the internal infrastructure necessary to respond effectively to large scale accommodation demands on a daily basis including overseeing the development of operations at Dublin Airport initially and then the Citywest Transit Hub, 60,000 processed to date.
- Ensuring that **95%** of arrivals are processed and transported to their new accommodation temporary accommodation on the same day as they arrive in the Citywest Transit Hub.
- Contracting in excess of **47,000** beds with over **770** providers to provide accommodation for Beneficiaries of Temporary Protection (BOTPs) across a multitude of accommodation types in every county in Ireland.
- Overall, there are **64,862** BOTPs in accommodation (combination of short and longer term). Since 1 January 2023, we have accommodated **11,503** BOTPs.
- Working collaboratively with implementing partners and Local Authorities to enable over **10,400** BOTPs accommodated to date through both pledged and Offer a Home Scheme accommodation – noting that over **€30m** has been paid out to hosts in respect of the Annual Recognition Payment.
- Working in partnership with both the Department of Defence and the Defence Forces in securing multiple additional accommodation settings

to provide shelter for over **600** BOTPs such as Gormanston, Kilbride and Mullingar.

- Procuring, allocating and managing the logistical arrangements in the accommodation of over **5,200** BOTPs in **6,000** beds in student accommodation during summer 2022.
- Working in collaboration with the OPW in planning of **700** rapid build homes with the potential to house up to **2,800** individuals in family units.
- Successfully managing approximately **45,000** relocations.
- Successfully managing over **900** critical incidents.
- Procuring accommodation in repurposed settings including Local Authority accommodation settings and working with sports organisations in securing sports facilities such as Croke Park, The Aviva, Pairc Uí Caoimh and the National Sports Centre Abbotstown.
- Working across Government as part of the Accommodation Working Group to plan for the medium term response to deliver accommodation solutions for BOTPs who may remain in Ireland.

Our response continues to evolve to address the challenges associated with the scale of accommodation provision in such a short time – to move from the initial crisis response to more stable response which continues to deliver better for BOTPs and providers and communities.

Business Process Improvement – Accommodation Portal:

The Department launched an updated commercial accommodation offer management process on Monday 23rd January, 2023. This updated approach

took into account all the learnings the Department had on the most efficient and effective approach to managing offers, since the war began. The improved process is working well and has been very effective in streamlining the triage and evaluation of accommodation offers received by the Department. To date, over **1,370** offers of commercial accommodation for BOTPs have been received through the accommodation offer portal.

Business Process Improvement – Payments to BOTP Accommodation Providers:

With over **770** contractors paid monthly, the payments process is an operation of considerable scale. The Department has trebled the resources including outsourcing certain functions to assist with clearing the payments backlog.

There have been understandable frustrations from providers but initiatives undertaken are making a difference. The Department has expended over **€976m** on Ukraine accommodation and related costs since the invasion in 2022. This year, the Department has paid out almost **€461m**, the bulk of this going on accommodation. In recent weeks the Department has been paying out around **€30m** per week with those in financial hardship and older invoices being prioritised.

In tandem, system reviews are underway to improve the payment process. The work focuses on developing new and efficient processes underpinned by key technologies and leveraging automation to streamline payments as much as possible. This project is ongoing and is currently yielding initial results that are pointing in a positive direction.

Accommodation Working Group:

All efforts are being made to develop a sustainable multi-strand accommodation solution as part of the whole of Government response. We are actively contributing to an ambitious programme of work aimed at implementing a more sustainable accommodation pathway.

An expanded programme of work has been agreed by Government that will allow consideration of commercial properties and sites for development, refurbishment, purchase and for the use of alternative modular housing – both rapid build structures and pod-style housing. This work will be progressed by all of the State actors working together as part of the Accommodation Working Group and a National Coordination Unit has been established in the Local Government Management Agency to ensure delivery on the expanded work stream at local level.

Work is ongoing to advance requirements needed for other ‘proof of concept’ sites which may be suitable for pods type accommodation for either BOTPs / IPs which facilitate independence and better integration. Some changes are being made in our accommodation offering for BOTPs, to improve equity between those arriving and those here already and ensure that we align with the offering in other jurisdictions.

Work is also ongoing across Government to intensify Communications and Community Engagement on the humanitarian response involving communications with Local Authorities, providers and BOTPs themselves. We appreciate the importance of this work for all public representatives and communities and are committed to improvements.

Concluding Remarks

No one could have envisaged the scale and breadth of the humanitarian operation that has befallen upon Europe since February 2022. I am proud to be able to represent the Department here today to confirm that all BOTPs who have arrived and asked for shelter from UCTAT (over **61,000** women, children and men) have been accommodated.

A recent survey of 7000 BOTPs in Ireland indicated positive findings with 76% of BOTPs reporting as satisfied with their accommodation and 90% provided words of gratitude in relation to a question about what they would like to say to the people and government in Ireland. The Department will continue to work with colleagues across Government and throughout our state agencies to do more, supporting this effort with further accommodation options as best we can.

Thank you Chair and Members for your attention and I will be pleased to respond to your questions.

ENDS

Sheenagh Rooney, Assistant Secretary