

DÁIL ÉIREANN

AN COISTE UM ACHAINÍOCHA ÓN BPOBAL

COMMITTEE ON PUBLIC PETITIONS

Déardaoin, 11 Samhain 2021

Thursday, 11 November 2021

Tháinig an Comhchoiste le chéile ag 1.30 p.m.

The Joint Committee met at 1.30 p.m.

Comhaltaí a bhí i láthair /Members present:

Teachtaí Dála/Deputies	Seanadóirí /Senators
Pat Buckley,	Jerry Buttimer,
Cormac Devlin,	Eugene Murphy,
Brendan Griffin,	Fintan Warfield.
Pádraig O'Sullivan.	

Teachta/Deputy Martin Browne sa Chathaoir /in the Chair.

Business of Committee

Chairman: I welcome everyone to our public virtual meeting using Microsoft Teams. Apologies have been received from Senator Craughwell.

The Ceann Comhairle of the Dáil, Deputy Ó Feargháil, and the Cathaoirleach of the Seanad, Senator Mark Daly, have appealed to everybody in the parliamentary community to continue to follow public health advice, wear a mask and maintain social distancing. I request that members, witnesses and staff use the wipes and hand sanitiser provided to clean shared seats and desks so as to supplement regular sanitation. This will help mitigate the risk of Covid-19, including the Delta variant, spreading among the parliamentary community.

Members and all in attendance are asked to exercise personal responsibility in protecting themselves and others from the risk of contracting Covid-19. They are strongly advised to practice good hand hygiene and will note every second seat in the committee room has been removed from use in order to facilitate social distancing. I urge those attending not to move any chair from its current position and they should always maintain an appropriate level of social distancing during and after the meeting. Masks, preferably of medical grade, should always be worn during the meeting, except when speaking. I ask for members' full co-operation in this regard.

The first item on the agenda is the approval of minutes from the previous meeting. I propose we approve the minutes of the private and public meetings of 14 October 2021, as already approved in private session. This must be done for procedural reasons. Is that agreed? Agreed.

I remind members of the constitutional requirement that they must be physically present within the confines of the place in which Parliament has chosen to sit, namely, Leinster House, to participate in public meetings. I will not permit a member to participate where he or she is not adhering to this constitutional requirement. Therefore, any member who attempts to participate from outside the precincts will be asked to leave the meeting.

Direct Provision Policy and Related Matters: Discussion (Resumed)

Chairman: The second item on the agenda is direct provision policy and related matters. This is our fifth public meeting on the topic. We have already met the Ombudsman, the Ombudsman for Children, Doras, the Irish Refugee Council, the Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission and the Law Society of Ireland. I am delighted to extend a warm welcome to our witnesses today from the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth Affairs, Dr. Fergal Lynch, Secretary General, Ms Carol Baxter, assistant secretary, and Ms Paula Quinn, principal officer. Before we hear from our witnesses, I propose we publish their opening statement and submission on the committee's website. Is that agreed? Agreed.

Witnesses should make their opening statements for ten minutes. We will then have questions and comments from members of five minutes each. Each member will be allowed in a second time or a number of times. They will be able to speak more than once. I invite Dr. Fer-

gal Lynch, Secretary General of the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth Affairs to make his opening statement.

Dr. Fergal Lynch: I thank the Chair for the opportunity to meet with the committee today. I am joined by colleagues from the Department with responsibility for international protection issues, Ms Carol Baxter, assistant secretary, and Ms Paula Quinn, principal officer. Ms Una Ni Dhubhghaill, principal officer, is also supporting us 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 other experts in the area. I will try not to duplicate what they have dealt with in their respective contributions. I will focus instead on the work we are currently engaging in to end direct provision and establish a new international protection support service.

I know 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 made so far. My colleagues and I will be happy to answer any questions that members may have.

For completeness, I would note 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 in 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 law, our Department is strongly committed to making much-needed changes to the conditions of people coming to our shores in these circumstances.

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 the end of 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. 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 suc-

cessful.

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 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 across every county in 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 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 inter-agency working groups which will be established in each county and chaired by the local authority. The working groups will also include representatives of relevant organisations such as the HSE, An Garda Síochána and the local education and training board. The inter-agency working group will also provide a 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 closely 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 premises. 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 supports element of the new system.

A total of €28.1 million has been allocated to the Department in 2022 for the implementation of the new model of accommodation. This breaks down between €12.5 million in capital

expenditure and €15.6 million 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 or 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 provide 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 co-ordinate 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 child-care; 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.

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 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 the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, Deputy O’Gorman. Its members are: Dr. Catherine Day, former Secretary General of the European Commission who was 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 cofacilitated the development of the UN-sponsored global approach to refugees and migrants; and 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 it 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.

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 to 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 multidisciplinary 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.

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

Deputy Pádraig O’Sullivan: I welcome the witnesses. This is an issue which many of us have taken an interest in over the last number of years. I have many questions and, hopefully, I can stay on for the second round of questions as well. My first question is about the establishment of these reception and integration centres and the stipulation that ideally people will be kept there for four months. I assume that is while their applications are being processed. Reading Dr. Lynch’s statement, the total budget allocated for the Department for 2022 is €28.1 million. The concern I have is how to bridge that gap between how we think people will stay in this accommodation for four months and the budget, as welcome as it is, of €28.1 million which probably will not scratch the surface in providing accommodation for those applicants who are subsequently successful. How realistic is that ambition to deliver this accommodation given that €28.1 million would not scratch the surface in terms of providing the number of properties that are probably required?

The second question is linked to that. It is evident we are in the middle of a housing crisis at the moment. Could the Secretary General comment on making that ambition a reality?

I wish to clarify two other points and I will give the remaining time to the Secretary General. The Secretary General said in his submission that income support payments will be provided. Can he clarify what he means? We know of the very small amount of money asylum seekers receive each week at present. It is hardly an amount on which they could sustain themselves if they were in their own turnkey property. Can the Secretary General clarify what income support payments will be provided? Will it change from the current system?

My final point relates to child welfare and the process of inspections or lack thereof in the system. Dr. Muldoon was before this committee some months ago and his report was fairly damning in that regard. Could the Secretary General give us an update on the number of inspections that have happened since then because there were concerns that inspections were not taking place? Does he have any detail on that?

Dr. Fergal Lynch: In terms of what Deputy O’Sullivan was inquiry about under a number of headings, I will take them in order. On the reception and integration centres, the initial work on that will start as soon as possible. There will be six of them in all, with 330 people per centre. We are conscious of the need to plan and organise those as quickly as possible and we are working on that as one of our top priorities in terms of identifying locations and putting them in place. That is a key part of what we will be doing.

In regard to the budget of €28.1 million, €12.5 million of that is capital and the balance is non-capital. It is important to say that we regard that as a starting point. We have an agreement with the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform that in the event we require further funding during 2022, it will be forthcoming. I do not believe a shortage of budget in 2022 or

in subsequent years will be an obstacle for us. I am satisfied the money we have for 2022 is a very good start and we will plan on that basis.

It is important to say we will be using both capital and non-capital money for these purposes. For example, part of the accommodation will be done on the basis of capital expenditure and partly on the basis of non-capital expenditure. We will be able to use non-capital expenditure for the urban renewal provisions and for a number of others. The reception and integration centres will involve capital expenditure. I am reasonably satisfied we can make a very good start on that during the course of 2022 and the budget will not be an issue as such.

With regard to the housing crisis issue the Deputy raised, certainly we are very conscious that we are attempting to provide additional accommodation which we regard as very important during what is a significant housing crisis. However, not in any way to diminish what we are trying to do, we are conscious that we are catering for a relatively modest number of people. At any one time we want to provide for 3,500 people working their way through the system. Relative to the total number looking for accommodation, this is small. I am not in any way diminishing the challenge that faces us but we are a relatively small component of a much larger issue to do with the housing crisis. That is a good thing in terms of being able to move ahead.

With regard to income support payments, a very important point raised by the Deputy was the fact that when you move to phase two, you will no longer benefit from the in-kind and direct benefits given to people in phase one. Clearly we will take full account of that. The income support approach we are designing will be based on a payment that takes account of the fact that people are now living in the community and have to organise themselves accordingly. We are probably looking at the supplementary welfare allowance or an equivalent rate of payment for phase two applicants once they leave phase one. That takes account of the fact that they will be living in the community and will have a much more significant expenditure profile and cost of living than in phase one.

With regard to child welfare and inspections, we place a huge emphasis on that. We have been concerned to ensure they are done properly. We have done inspections in the current year and will continue doing those into next year. At the moment, we have an arrangement where an external company does two inspections and then our International Protection Accommodation Service, IPAS, does the other one, so that is three. The other good thing that will start in the near future is the HIQA approach which will start with monitoring and then move to inspections of our facilities. That will be a very important step forward and will be seen as an independent, external monitoring of what we are doing.

In regard to inspections in the current year, if memory serves me correctly, although I will check with colleagues, we have done 55 inspections of facilities so far this year, of which 12 were done by IPAS and the other 43 by an external company. We hope to meet our full target by the end of the year, and we are conscious of doing so, in order that we will meet the requirement or target we have set ourselves to ensure we at least three visits of each centre per year. I hope that covers each of the points raised by Deputy O'Sullivan.

Deputy Cormac Devlin: I welcome the witnesses and thank them for their time and the statement. I have a few questions, and I might leave some of them to the second round depending on my own availability. When we last spoke with the Ombudsman, Mr. Peter Tyndall, about this, his office had dealt with a number of complaints and a number of issues had arisen particularly in light of the pandemic. I recognise the work done on the White Paper but I also acknowledge the challenges that Covid-19 presented not only for the Department but for the

service users and providers. In that vein, I welcome the reforms around the complaint procedures the Secretary General, Dr. Lynch, outlined. It is very welcome and it is timely. Some might argue it is overdue but it is there now and that is important.

On Dr. Lynch's last comment on the 55 inspections, were they unannounced inspections or pre-arranged? What is the breakdown? If you want to have three inspections per year, is there a breakdown between notified and unannounced inspections?

Deputy O'Sullivan mentioned the White Paper and phase one. I am wondering about those reception and integration centres. Is there a likelihood that the existing ones will be redeveloped or are there going to be new ones because some of them are not fit for purpose? Dr. Lynch might elaborate on that.

My second question for now, although I will come back in with others, is in regard to what Dr. Lynch said applicants receiving income support but only when they move into phase two. For those in phase one, what are the income supports? A number of years ago we had a reception centre in Dun Laoghaire for unaccompanied minors. Obviously there was a big challenge in terms of their well-being and safety but equally there were constant challenges for them from a financial perspective. What happens to families and individuals who are received under phase one of the proposed new reforms? I thank the Chair and I will come back in later.

Dr. Fergal Lynch: I thank Deputy Devlin for the questions. Again, I will take them in order. We are very conscious of the issues raised by the Ombudsman and I very much welcomed the practice of the Ombudsman's team of visiting centre before Covid-19 hit. That was very much welcomed. He commented that the residents welcomed it because they had a means of chatting directly to the Ombudsman's team. We very much welcomed the feedback that produced as well.

In terms of complaints, we fully understand it is a very difficult time and it has been particularly difficult for people in direct provision during the pandemic, which unfortunately is still with us to a certain degree. We have put in place a number of measures to meet, as much as we possibly can, the concerns and complaints in the system, be it to do with the pandemic or otherwise. We have a customer service team, which is developing a form of feedback system for International Protection Accommodation Services, IPAS, residents. We also have-----

(Interruptions).

Deputy Cormac Devlin: I missed that point. The sound broke up.

(Interruptions).

Deputy Cormac Devlin: The sound is breaking up a little.

(Interruptions).

Chairman: Dr. Lynch, the sound has been breaking up for the past minute. We do not know what you said.

Dr. Fergal Lynch: I will repeat-----

Chairman: Will you repeat it to see if the sound improves?

Dr. Fergal Lynch: I will repeat what I said about the Ombudsman and the complaints mechanism. I made the point that we very much welcome the fact that the Ombudsman's team have been visiting individual centres. We always welcome the feedback we get from that. I know the residents of the centres welcome the opportunity to talk the Ombudsman's team.

I also made the point that we have put much work into a customer service team to deal with complaints in the centres. We have put in place a central processing and reporting of complaints mechanism. We have also worked on an internal set of review meetings and discussions in relation to complaints, with a helpdesk in place as well.

We have placed a good deal of emphasis on dealing with people's complaints, be it in relation to the pandemic or other issues that they have. We are also developing and scoping a consumer consultation group from our customer base in IPAS to try to seek input, observations and suggestions as to how we might develop that for future. We have placed a good deal of emphasis on that in terms of complaints.

I can confirm that the inspections were all unannounced. That is the way we do our business. It is important that we would do it that way so that we ensure that we are seeing the centre as it genuinely is.

On the reception and integration centres, we are looking at different options at the moment. I do not want to be too specific because decisions have not been made as yet, but certainly we are looking at the scope for locating some of those centres on existing sites. They will be new build as opposed to the existing facilities. We are also obviously looking at developing new centres in other parts of the country but one of them will be in Dublin.

On income support, there is already a system of income support in phase one. Essentially, the plan is that would be maintained in more or less an equivalent way. There will be no question of not having support in phase one. However, when we move to phase two we recognise that we need a much more developed system. I hope that answers the Deputy's questions.

Deputy Cormac Devlin: I thank the Secretary General.

Chairman: Senator Buttimer, do you wish to speak?

Senator Jerry Buttimer: I welcome our witnesses to the meeting and I thank the Secretary General for his presentation. I had the pleasure of working with him in his previous capacities in other Departments and I can safely say the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth will be in very good hands.

In the context of the White Paper, the Secretary General said the processing of applications and the processing of asylum claims is not under his Department's remit, but has any cross-departmental work been done with the Department of Justice, the International Protections Appeals Tribunal and the Secretary General's Department to try to fast-track the process and to make it more streamlined on behalf of the individual?

Dr. Fergal Lynch: I thank the Senator for his question. It is good to see him again and I thank him for his kind words. On the White Paper and the processing of applications, we have been linking in very closely with our colleagues in the Department of Justice, which has been doing a good deal of work in this area. It has recently published an end-to-end review of the

whole processing approach and it is a useful document in terms of setting up where it will go next. It has a number of approaches planned as a result of that.

It is investing in a new IT system and in online applications. The purpose of that is to improve and speed up and streamline the processing of applications. It plans to train more staff to be decision-makers, to be able to conduct reviews and to carry out reports and to complete reports. As I mentioned, it is streamlining its application process to try to expedite applications. It has been hugely conscious, as have we, of the unfortunate backlogs that have built up, particularly over Covid, but indeed before that. It is very concerned to make sure that we can develop a system that gives people responses within reasonable periods of time. Its objective is to have a first decision, a decision of first instance, within six months, and a final decision within the subsequent six months. I could not say, and the Department of Justice would not say, that is achieved at the moment because it is not. There is a good deal of work required to do that.

We are equally concerned to make sure that happens because our planning for the new system is based on a system in which there would not be this backlog. Both Dr. Catherine Day's report and the White Paper would have acknowledged that you cannot realistically or easily implement the new system if you have not dealt with the backlogs.

The Department of Justice has committed to a further review of its own processes and the progress made by no later than October next, to see if any additional processes or measure are required. There is a good deal of work being done on that and we are liaising closely with it on that work.

Senator Jerry Buttimer: How do we compare to international norms in regard to processing times? I know it is not the Secretary General's Department, but out of interest, does he have any figure on that?

Dr. Fergal Lynch: I would have to check for the Senator, as I do not have that particular figure at the moment. We would certainly be conscious that the current figure is not satisfactory and we will be anxious, and the Department of Justice will be anxious, to reduce it significantly.

Senator Jerry Buttimer: It is fair to say we all share the view that it is not satisfactory and it needs to be addressed. The White Paper commits us to phasing out the use of congregated settings by December 2024. Is the Secretary General confident we will meet that deadline?

Dr. Fergal Lynch: It is a challenging deadline, about which there is no doubt, but it is one of the first things that we very much want to do. Perhaps as the first step to that, much earlier than that, what we hope to be able to do in the current system is to phase out the use of emergency centres. At one stage we had more than 40 of them and we are now down to 24. We have closed 19 of them. The reason I mention those specifically is that they were ones where a deal of congregation would have taken place. We are pleased at the progress in that regard. However, we are under no illusions and we know that it is a big challenge for us to work on this so that we can phase out congregation settings. It is one part, and a key part, of what we will be doing under our implementation plan by the end of 2024.

Senator Jerry Buttimer: I do not mean this to be a discordant note, but I am not sure that we will meet the 2024 deadline given the issues we have with congregation settings in disability, in direct provision and the need for a ramping up of the construction sector in terms of the building.

In terms of the €28.1 million allocated to the Department for 2022, which is €12.5 million

in capital expenditure and €15.6 million in current expenditure. If the capital expenditure is not spent in the calendar year, is there a provision for that to be carried over as separate, and not new money, for the following year's budget?

Dr. Fergal Lynch: We would normally make an arrangement with the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform to allow us to carry forward money. It is a particular issue, as the Senator knows, with capital expenditure as to exactly how quickly it would be spent. We would certainly aim to carry forward anything unspent in 2022 into 2023, and indeed the same would apply for subsequent years.

Senator Jerry Buttimer: My final question is on the transition to the new model. As the Secretary General said, it is ambitious. The Minister, Deputy O'Gorman, has appointed a three-person external advisory group. Has the Department met with it? I understand the group has independent oversight, but does it engage with the Department, talk to it or assist it in any way?

Dr. Fergal Lynch: Yes, indeed. I had a very useful meeting with Dr. Catherine Day and her two colleagues last week. We had a very useful exchange of information and views. They were obviously very interested in looking at how best to assist us and support us, as well as monitoring our work. We have promised them all possible assistance and support, including, for example, giving them full access to any of the documentation they would require while they are reviewing progress. We expect to report back to them on a regular basis.

The programme board, which is the other important board I mentioned in my opening statement, meets about once a month, and that is the one that I chair. I would anticipate that after each of those meetings I will be talking to the external group as well. I am very pleased that they are switched on, interested and committed to making progress in this area and to assisting us. We will regard them as a critical friend and as an external observer, looking and monitoring what we are doing and the progress we are making.

Senator Jerry Buttimer: I thank the Secretary General. We all share the common goal of ending direct provision and recognise that people who are in direct provision are human beings who deserve to be treated with dignity and respect. They have come from difficult situations, are in trauma, and have stress in their lives. I thank the Secretary General and his staff for their work and for the courtesy they have always shown to. Go raibh maith agat.

Dr. Fergal Lynch: I thank the Senator.

Chairman: I call Deputy Buckley.

Deputy Pat Buckley: I thank the Chair and the witnesses for coming in today. Many things have been covered. I welcome the fact that the Department is working towards a not-for-profit approach because anything for-profit does not really ring a bell when it comes to proper services; it is profit is profit.

The oversight group and congregation settings have been covered. One of the things I am always worried about is that the people who arrive here have come from very stressful places. I am always worried about their mental health. There will also be people who have disabilities, and people with both disabilities and mental health issues. We know that in this country, even in the Thirty-two Counties, we do not have a service to provide assistance or help to people who are suffering disabilities and mental health issues. Has this been looked into?

I am worried about the timelines. I welcome the fact that money not spent this year may be

carried over. Hopefully, the Department's budget will be increased because there is much work to be done.

I would like to flag the fact that something will have to be done as these people are very traumatised. I remind people watching this committee that these people are not coming here for a holiday. They have not come from a happy place. People have to be conscious of the fact that this is about helping people. The Irish people may have a short memory in that we had to go to Australia, Great Britain and America. I would like people to be more conscious of that and more supportive.

Many of these people are very well educated. They are very willing to work so the process should be sped up as quickly as possible to get them back into the workforce and get them out of congregated settings. Has that been looked at? If not, will it be looked at? There is no service in this country for someone with a disability and a mental health issue. I am flagging this issue and maybe the Secretary General will flag it with the new independent oversight group and say to it that it is going to be another problem that will come down the line and that these people will get lost through the cracks.

Dr. Fergal Lynch: I thank Deputy Buckley. May I respond to that, Chair?

Chairman: Yes, please.

Dr. Fergal Lynch: I thank the Deputy for making a very important point about the needs and special needs of people arriving to our shores. We are very conscious of the stress that they have been through, that they may have mental health issues and that they may well have other needs. They are likely to be vulnerable people and they do not come here for nothing. As the Deputy said, they do not come here for holiday. We completely agree and we want to treat them with absolute respect and dignity and to provide them with the best possible service we can to help integrate them into the community. We talk about integration from day one, which is something on which we place a significant emphasis in the White Paper.

On the services available, when people arrive, one of the first things each person will be offered is a vulnerability assessment. These vulnerability assessments have been taking place for all new arrivals since February of this year. They are an important initial component of the service we provide to them. We then, as appropriate, link people who have mental health needs to mental health services, including engaging with a number of mental health organisations. We also link with the HSE and with health teams. It is not simply a case of seeking to accommodate people in a particular place when they arrive and leaving it at that. We place a great emphasis on what their needs are, be they mental, physical or otherwise. We then try to agree with them the best supports we possibly can provide and to provide those services as best we can. That very much includes mental health services.

I could not agree more in regard to people's willingness to work. The emphasis must be on their ability and willingness to work because we all know they are very interested in working, and in the great majority of cases, they can do so. As the Deputy said, many of them are well qualified. One of the good things that has happened in regard to the right to work, or the work permit, is that the timescale has been reduced from nine months to six months. They can seek work after that and we will support them in terms of training and access to employment after six months within the international protection system. Those are some of the things we are anxious to offer when people arrive on our shores.

Deputy Pat Buckley: I thank the Secretary General for his work.

Chairman: I have a few quick questions but I will come back in later as well. I was sent some stuff an hour or an hour and a half ago and I want to raise it with the Secretary General while he is here. I welcome you today and thank you for giving comprehensive answers. It is an ambitious agenda for change and we all need to embrace it and to improve the situation for people who are in these centres. When will the transition team in your Department publish the detailed implementation plan of the new system? As asked by Senator Buttimer, is 2024 a realistic deadline, especially given Covid over the past two years? It sounds very ambitious.

The transition from the direct provision model to the new international protection support service includes a year-by-year progress schedule. Although we are only in year one, the first year of the programme, have the targets set out in that first year been met? What progress has been made to enable applicants for the international protection to secure driver licences? I will leave it at that and come back in later.

Dr. Fergal Lynch: Thank you Chair. I agree it is an ambitious programme and it is important to embrace that. My view of it is that while it is ambitious, if we set ourselves a much longer timetable, the danger is that it would simply take that longer period of time to achieve. Therefore, we have set ourselves something that is very challenging indeed. I do not think we are being utterly unrealistic, but we are challenging ourselves. We are taking what we have described as a multi-strand approach to the accommodation, so we are not putting all our eggs in one basket, so to speak. We are talking about housing and apartments, we are talking about existing buildings, we are talking about rent-a-room, we are talking about private tenancies where these are required and so on. We are not attempting to do this all through the one single means.

We are developing the implementation plan at the moment and we would hope to publish an implementation plan next year. That will be very much a live and an iterative document. It will change and we will update it as we go. Our current version of it is very much in draft form so we deliberately have not published it. However, we do have a web page where we keep people up to date with what is happening so far and the progress we have made. The implementation plan will be quite a detailed document and we would hope to publish that next year.

In terms of realism and achieving what we are setting out to achieve, there are a couple of other points I would like to make. We are using a project management approach, which is based on specifics of what you will do, when you will do it, how you will do it, the components that you need, the deadlines that you need to set and so on. Another thing we are doing to be sure to be realistic about this is we are drawing on existing expertise in the area. For example, the Housing Agency has been hugely helpful and supportive to us already. We are working with the local authorities and with the County and City Management Association, CCMA, we have got a very strong programme board, as I mentioned earlier, and we are taking a phased approach. It is a very ambitious programme, but one that is doable, although obviously challenging.

In terms of year-by-year progress, we have achieved much of what we set out to achieve this year so far. For example, on the funding side, we have secured funding and a deeper commitment to give us additional capital expenditure should we require it in the current year. We have managed to reduce the number of emergency centres, which I mentioned earlier. The vulnerability assessments are in place. We have also put a residential welfare team in place, which was of the things we were anxious to do in the current year. We have a customer service team in place, and I mentioned earlier we were scoping out a customer consultation group. The programme board is up and running and doing very good work. It is giving us very good advice

and information. We talked briefly about the external advisory group. The transition team is up and running. We have national standards against which HIQA will be monitoring. They have been in place since 1 January. That is just a quick summary of the sort of things we have put in place so far this year.

Of course, I do not underestimate the number of things that have to be done in subsequent years. There is much to be done, but we have made good progress this year. I see this year and the early part of next year as very much developmental and very much in the context of planning and being ready to put bricks and mortar in place thereafter. We have made good progress.

Chairman: What progress has been made on the driver licence?

Dr. Fergal Lynch: On the driver licence, legislation is in preparation in the Department of Transport to advance that. We will be talking further to the Department of Transport as to how quickly that can be done. Certainly, that is acknowledged as something that needs to be done as quickly as possible so people can apply for and get driver licences and do driver tests. We recognise the importance of it in terms of mobility, independence and securing employment. I understand the legislation is complex, but the Department of Transport is working on it. I will see if we can get more specifics in terms of the timescale, but that is as much information I have on it at the moment.

Chairman: I have one last question before I let other members in for a second round. I appreciate you are working with the local authorities and housing bodies. Have you figured out how many houses you require per year and over what period?

Dr. Fergal Lynch: In terms of setting that, we are looking at something like 100 for the first year, 2022. However, obviously we are being careful in terms of our implementation plan of mapping that out very clearly as to what we need and when. We will work our way through that as much as we possibly can. We are looking at around 1,200 in total over the period of the programme. We will knock that out in much more detail in the implementation plan.

Chairman: Deputy Devlin, do you wish to speak?

Deputy Cormac Devlin: On the implementation of the White Paper and the new system, the Secretary General said it will be supported by a programme board. I understand it will be phased in between now and 2024. The Secretary General said it would include representatives of Departments, agencies, NGOs, a person who has transitioned through the direct provision system, which is very welcomed, and relevant experts. There is also a programme board which is chaired by the Secretary General and there is a separate external advisory group. Will the Secretary General go through that again? I am looking at the structures and I made notes as the Secretary General spoke. We have two programme boards, one from the Secretary General's Department and one from the Department of Justice. We have a co-ordination committee, we have an International Protection Support Services, IPSS, transition team, we have an external advisory group, we have the Cabinet committee on social affairs and equality and we have a risk committee. I understand that it is complex but I hope we have tried to simplify it. If that is the aim, it scares me that there are so many different oversight committees. I hope for the Secretary General's sake that he is not sitting on each one of those. For myself and other committee members, would the Secretary General run through that again so we can see how they all fit in with each other?

As we know, stakeholders can be very broad. Who are we hoping will fill the roles on these

very important committees and oversight groups? Speaking of people who have already transitioned through the system, as it were, I would like to hear the voices of current service users, be they adults or minors. The only way we can really and truly learn is from those who are experiencing it. That is not to detract from those who have gone through it, but by the time this is implemented, the system will have hopefully radically changed.

On the programme boards, what integration and co-operation will there be between the two Departments? It scares me to have two programme boards in two different Departments. I am worried about duplication or things falling through the gaps.

To go back to the Ombudsman, Mr. Tyndall's appearance at this committee, one of the big concerns highlighted was in respect of individuals who currently look to stay where they are being told they have to move, move school, move the whole family to another part of the country and without any regard for their feeling about it. How is that going to change with the full implementation of the White Paper? What can we expect from the perspective of those who want to relocate?

I refer to respecting people's cultural and religious ethos. The Secretary General mentioned a new customer service phone line, which is wonderful. I am wondering about the languages skills of those agents. The Secretary General mentioned literature being distributed. How broad is that?

The issue of unaccompanied minors is sadly a huge one, which could potentially get worse over the next few years. What specifically are we going to do to improve the reception and the greeting those individuals get, given the fear they faced getting here in the first place?

Dr. Fergal Lynch: I thank the Deputy and I will try to deal with those questions. He raised a very important question on the overall governance of the system. I agree that at first glance it may look very complex, and I take the point about the different groups. We have tried to streamline it and to make it as straightforward as we possibly can. For completeness, we have included all the different components. However, the major one in the first instance is the Minister and this Department in terms of taking responsibility for trying to pull all of this together.

On the programme board, we regard this as a particularly important component of the total. We then have the external advisory group. I will say a little bit about both of those. The other programme board in the Department of Justice is dealing specifically with the processing issues and how to improve those and at how to deal with the issues in the White Paper that deal with its part of the agenda. Even though it may look complicated, we can pull together the rest fairly successfully within our Department and through bilateral engagements with the other Department as well. We have a very good working relationship with the Department of Justice. For example, my colleague, Ms Carol Baxter, from our Department, sits on its programme board and we have a colleague in the Department of Justice who sits on our programme board, so there are good interlinkages between the two Departments. The programme board has a former resident of the direct provision system who is making a significant contribution to it. In terms of other stakeholders, these include the Departments, such as the Departments of Housing, Local Government and Heritage, Health, Justice as well as our Department. There is also the Irish Refugee Council, the Children's Rights Alliance, the UN High Commissioner, the Housing Agency, somebody with a health and social care background and an expert in programme management. That board is functioning very well so far and gives us advice and strong information and links us with organisations with which we would otherwise not have a strong contact. It also deals with monitoring, which is helpful to us.

In regard to the external advisory group I mentioned, I would describe that as having an external, critical friend. I used that term when I met the group last week and it liked it as it says we are not looking for a group that will pat us on the head or tell us we are doing a fine job. We are looking for an external group that looks in critically and objectively and identifies what is going right, what is going wrong, why is it going wrong, why are things being delayed, what things could we do differently and what other approaches could we take and asks whether we have thought about X, Y and Z. Those on the external advisory group are experts in their respective fields. We will probably engage with them informally and bilaterally as well as every other way.

The other components described in the governance note we submitted as part of the briefing are all important, although I will not go into them now. Each has its job to do and they are pulled together by the Department as a whole. We have a co-ordination committee in the Department. Pulling the whole thing together is the Cabinet committee on social affairs and equality. We will ensure that we are not simply going from one committee or one group to the next. That is no way to do business and it would not help us to make progress. However having people from these different organisations and agencies on a specific group gives us a contact point and a liaison point with them. At the end of the note we circulated we identify many implementation partners ranging from Departments to the education and training boards to Tusla, the HSE, An Garda Síochána, local authorities, the Housing Agency and so on. It is a complex project about which there is no doubt. We try to streamline the delivery of it as much as possible but I assure the committee that there is good co-operation between the different levels.

In regard to the other questions about moving to other parts of the country and the experience of some people in direct provision who were asked to move elsewhere, we will place a great emphasis on consultation and ensure people are consulted fully and we will try to the greatest extent possible to meet their needs and concerns in terms of what part of the country they will be in. There will be no question of simply uprooting people from one part of the country and moving them to another. We will place a good deal of emphasis on that.

In regard to language skills, our materials are translated and are available in a number of different languages - obviously in the languages most used by those involved - and we will continue to place emphasis on that so that communication is good. Another important element of that is at orientation stage, we provide an offer of intensive English language courses for residents joining us for the first time to help them learn English as soon as possible. That hopefully will improve their level of communication and integration to the system. I hope that answers the Deputy's questions.

Deputy Cormac Devlin: I thank the Secretary General. I must head off to the Chamber.

Deputy Pádraig O'Sullivan: I echo the sentiments expressed by Deputy Devlin in regard to hearing the user's voice. That is important. In debates on education or health, we talk about listening to the students or the patients, so that should not be lost here either. It is good to see there will be extensive consultation throughout. I am encouraged by what I hear today and what has been presented, but I have some further questions for clarity. The Secretary General mentioned he will start funding local authorities to co-ordinate integration at local level. Apart from the housing side of things, are local authorities expected to do more in terms of integration? If so, can the Secretary General clarify what we are looking at there?

The second point is on the commissioning of NGOs to provide supports particularly for vulnerable applicants. "Commissioning" is the word I want clarity on there. Is the Secretary

General going to establish a new NGO or will he utilise existing NGOs which work with refugees or applicants as the case may be? The third point relates to the community integration fund to be established. Can the Secretary General provide clarity about that? What specifically is it going to target? Who is going to lead on it?

Dr. Fergal Lynch: In regard to local authorities, we will be funding them for integration. They will become involved in co-ordinating local provision of such things as health services, education and social services. One of the important elements that we want to put in place, and which is already in place in some areas, is that of inter-agency working groups which will be chaired by local authorities. They will include the education and training boards, the HSE, An Garda Síochána and others at local level. We will have an inter-agency group that meets the needs of individuals at local level and that operates at local level. The local authorities will play a particularly important role in regard to that.

The Deputy asked about NGOs. They will be existing NGOs. We are not particularly proposing the establishment of a further NGO for these purposes. We have a very good working relationship with a number of NGOs which do very important work, including the Peter McVerry Trust, Depaul and others which provide very important services, understand the system on the ground very well and have provided very strong and important supports for people in the direct provision system. We hope to be able to build on that.

In regard to the community integration fund, there is a fund of €500,000 available for next year. We are working on the criteria for that at the moment. We hope to have that in place early in 2022. These are important components of local delivery and we would stress the importance of locally based delivery and meeting people's needs at local level, while having an important co-ordination function at national level to ensure that everybody's experience is broadly the same and positive. We will lay a good deal of emphasis on trying to do things at local level.

Chairman: I thank the Secretary General. Does Senator Murphy want to ask a question?

Senator Eugene Murphy: I thank the Chair. I do not have questions as I was not here for the presentation. I was held up in a Seanad debate I was chairing. It is wonderful to see our guests here. I have spoken in the meetings in the past about this issue. I will talk to my colleagues about what has been discussed today.

Chairman: Will the direct provision centres that exist at the moment no longer be used? Can the Secretary General guarantee that the current practice will definitely be abolished by the end of 2024? On the legal side, legal assistance was another area where shortfalls were identified. We heard from the Law Society of Ireland that too many people still have to go through the preliminary international protection interview without having received any legal advice ahead of that. What are the plans to ensure that the level of legal assistance that is required will be provided?

Dr. Fergal Lynch: Our hope is to move beyond the direct provision centres that are not fit for purpose. We recognise that. I cannot guarantee that everything will be in place by the end of 2024 but that is most certainly our objective and we are working very intensively to do that. However, as I mentioned earlier in the meeting, the first priority is to move away from the congregated settings. Some of the more recently provided direct provision centres are of a much higher quality and we are happier with those than the ones that were in place at an earlier stage but we are anxious to move away from the current system to the one described in the White Paper which is very much based on own-door accommodation and accommodation that properly

meets the needs of individuals.

People are already entitled to free legal assistance at the beginning of their process. We are conscious that is not perfect by any means and I understand the Department of Justice is reviewing the legal aid and the arrangements for legal aid. Making sure everybody who requires legal assistance will get it is very much on our radar. There is a system of legal aid available for people as they work their way through the international protection system.

Chairman: Before any other member comes back in, I have a few things I would like to bring up. As I said earlier, I was contacted about three quarters of an hour before this meeting. The Secretary General's opening statement mentions that current residents have a right to expect quality service and we must ensure that it is functioning to meet their needs during the transition period. I do not doubt that. I was horrified to receive reports about people in two direct provision centres being fed out of plastic bags. Meat and other food was being put into plastic bags and Styrofoam boxes. In one of the centres, the residents were told to eat in their rooms because there was not room in the dining area for them. I received these reports about two different centres. I quickly checked before I came in and one of the centres received €11 million in funding last year. I have no doubt that the Department is not treating people like that, but some of these centres' health and safety is out the window if these reports are true. That kind of treatment of any person or people is inhumane. Deputy Buckley spoke about the countries and situations people have come from. To think that some centres, which are making massive amounts of money, would treat any human being like that is disgraceful. Will the Secretary General comment on that if he can? Was he aware of that?

I was made aware of another death in a centre in the west of Ireland over the weekend. The venue is unknown, or I have not been told where it is. Apparently, this is the second such death in the last couple of weeks. I was horrified to hear that. Criticism has been laid at feet of the Government over the lack of transparency around deaths in direct provision centres. Previously, records were released each year on the number and nature of deaths of people seeking international protection. However, the Department of Justice stopped providing those details two years ago. Why was that change made? Why is the public no longer being made aware of the causes of deaths of people in direct provision centres?

Dr. Fergal Lynch: The issues the Chair raised go to the heart of the humanity of the system and we place a huge emphasis on getting these issues right. The suggestion that people would be treated inappropriately or inhumanely would be absolutely anathema to what we are about. We are certainly aware of the reports the Chair referred to. We investigated the report of food being offered in plastic bags or plastic containers very carefully and we found no evidence of it at all. I would stress that if any resident has a complaint of any sort relating to that or anything else, he or she has the absolute right to make a complaint and I strongly encourage him or her to do so. However, in that particular instance, we found no evidence. We reviewed video footage and discussed the matter locally with the centre provider and we were not in a position to find any evidence.

I am not familiar with the other issue about people being told to eat in their rooms. I know there was an issue at one stage in relation to Covid practises and Covid-related restrictions where it was necessary for residents to take certain precautions, but no more than the rest of us would have. However, if there are specific issues that residents or others want to raise about unsatisfactory or inappropriate practises in individual direct provision centres, we will be more than happy to investigate those.

On the deaths, I do not want to comment on individual cases. Where a death occurs, we provide significant support to family members and other residents in the facility. We have a particular reporting policy and we published a new policy earlier this year, which has been in place since June 2021. In it, we specify numbers of deaths and circumstances. However, we have to be very careful to respect the privacy of individuals and their families. Therefore, we are very careful about how we deal with individual cases and how we respond to queries about them. However, we publish details of them. It is important to acknowledge that the cause of death and the fact of the death need to be confirmed through the normal channels, through the coroner and so on, if that is required, rather than through our system. We wait until those appropriate provisions have been observed before recording them formally in the information that we publish. We publish information on deaths in direct provision but we lay a particular emphasis on the supports that we offer to the family of the deceased first and to other affected residents in the facility. This is very much part of basic humanity and it is something that we place a great emphasis on.

Chairman: I understand the Secretary General cannot speak about individual cases and I would not expect it. However, previously records were released on how many died in these centres and the causes. That did not identify an individual case or the area. It seems strange that kind of reporting stopped two years ago.

I know the Department is not involved in what I spoke about earlier in regard to people being fed out of bags and all that. I place the blame solely on those who own the centres. If found guilty, the centres should be closed down as soon as possible. Anybody who would treat any human being that way should not be getting a penny from any agency in this country. I want to put it on record that I was not apportioning blame to the Department.

Dr. Fergal Lynch: I absolutely take that point. We will be publishing a statistical report on a twice yearly basis which will record the number of deaths that occurred for the previous six months. This will include records of deaths to date since the commencement of the system. We will be publishing that information and it will be publicly available as soon as possible.

To go back to the complaints issue, I should mention that residents can make complaints to the Jesuit Refugee Service, which we fund on an independent basis. It is on hand to support residents. Again, we emphasise the personal nature of the supports we are anxious to provide to people in the facilities.

Chairman: Has the Secretary General come across people in these centres who are afraid to report? The Ombudsman raised the issue that there was a fear among some people that there would be repercussions if they made complaints against centres. Has the Secretary General come across that? He said he was aware of the instance I mentioned about people being fed out of a bag and investigated it. Has he come across people who would be afraid to make that type of report against these centres?

Dr. Fergal Lynch: I was very much struck by what Mr. Tyndall, the Ombudsman, said, in that regard, when he reported that people were saying that this was the case. I cannot identify specific cases where we would have been told that, but what I would like to do is to offer an absolute reassurance to all people using our international protection system that they have every right to make a complaint. There are well-developed structures in place for making those complaints and there is absolutely no question of them being in any way negatively affected as a result of having made a complaint. It is very important that we get that message across. I hope the complaint system that we now have in place and the fact that we have a resident wel-

fare team and a customer service team in place helps get across the message that we are open to hearing people's complaints. We would far prefer to hear people's complaints and try to deal with them, rather than hearing about them subsequently or perhaps people feeling that they have to go elsewhere. They should have the right, and feel they have the right, to come to us as the people who can seek to resolve their issues. We are very much committed to doing that. I would like to emphasise the importance of getting across the message that people have this right and they certainly will not be victimised as a result of making a complaint.

Chairman: Does any member wish to put anything more to the Department? No. I invite the Secretary General to make any final comments he wishes to.

Dr. Fergal Lynch: I thank the Chair very much for the opportunity to have met the committee. I am conscious how committed the Committee on Public Petitions is to this issue. It is to its credit that it has held five meetings dealing with this important issue. It deserves public ventilation and it is very good that the committee has held these meetings. I hope the material we supplied to the committee and the answers offered today will have given it a broad overview of what we are about. I reiterate our enthusiasm about and our commitment to implementing the new system. We are acutely conscious that the current direct provision system is not where we want it to be. While we have managed to make progress on, and some improvements to, it over the last number of years, it is not where we want to be. We are also acutely conscious that this is a Government priority. It is in the programme for Government to implement a new system to replace the current system and have the new system in place by the end of 2024. My colleagues and I will continue in our efforts to achieve that. I thank the committee very much for the opportunity to talk to it today.

Chairman: Thank you Secretary General. This discussion has been very beneficial and informative. On behalf of the committee I would like to thank the Secretary General, Ms Baxter and Ms Quinn for meeting us today, if only virtually. We will continue our discussions with the Department of Justice about the management of the asylum application process at subsequent meetings. I hope that at that stage all will be in a position to come to the committee room and that we will not have to meet virtually. On behalf of the committee I wish the three of you all the best. We will not see you before Christmas, so happy Christmas. We will see you sometime in the new year.

Dr. Fergal Lynch: Thank you very much Chair.

Sitting suspended at 2.54 p.m. and resumed at 2.56 p.m.

Decisions on Petitions Received

Chairman: The next item on the agenda is consideration of public petitions. We have six petitions for consideration today: P00009/21 and P000023/21, P000018/21, P000019/21, P000034/21 and P000037/21. Summary notes and replies from Departments and other bodies were circulated to members. Is it agreed that the petitions considered by the committee at this meeting and at the previous meeting be published? Is it agreed that the replies from Departments and other bodies be published? Agreed.

The first two petitions are P00009/21 and P000023/21 and they are being taken together. They were submitted by Mr. Michael Barrett and Mr. Jamie Forde Kelly and pertain to the

unauthorised development on the River Shannon. The updated recommendation as of 19 November 2021 is that, first, the Joint Committee on Public Petitions invite the Department of Housing, Planning and Local Government and Westmeath County Council to appear before the committee to discuss the matter, second, the petitioners be invited before the committee to discuss the matter and, third, on reviewing the files, it appears that Waterways Ireland has a major role in licensing marinas and should also be invited in. Do members have any views on this? I call Deputy Buckley.

Deputy Pat Buckley: I would like to thank the secretariat and the case manager. As we, in Cork, would say, your head has to be absolutely wrecked because I can understand the amount of paperwork that went with this. Going through the correspondence, I was struck that in my constituency, even in the town council and urban district council, we have problems with developments on rivers and seaways. We are going back to more than 400 years ago when King James I bequeathed something in Youghal. We cannot even develop a marina there, believe it or not. We are still backing that today.

I looked at the two cases here and I remember the case of Mr. Barrett which was before the last committee meeting. There was substantial information in it. Even in the midst of a Covid pandemic - the dogs in the street would know this - there is photographic evidence showing that there was development on the estuary between 31 August and 28 October. It is from a greenfield site to what looks like the base of another jetty. I do not know if members can see that. Certainly, if this is ongoing, and these two petitioners in particular have mentioned it, I very strongly welcome the recommendations from the committee on this. When we were setting the committee up again, we wanted to adjust the rules, regulations and powers. That is proper order. I agree that Westmeath County Council, Waterways Ireland and the Department of Housing, Planning and Local Government should be invited in to help answer these questions. I certainly support that.

Chairman: Thank you Deputy Buckley. I support your call there. To correct you, I think it was Mr. Jamie Forde Kelly's petition that was before the previous committee, and not Mr. Barrett's. This has been going on since the last Government was in office and, as you said, concerns were raised that work is still going on. Despite the work the secretariat and others have put into this, I find it very disingenuous of Westmeath County Council that it has not even responded to the committee. It will have to answer for the likes of that as well when it comes in. I fully support what the secretariat is recommending, that is, that we bring these bodies and the petitioners in to ask these questions and to let them answer them. Does anybody else have anything they would like to add?

Deputy Pat Buckley: I mentioned the case manager. The record states that the petitions case manager corresponded with the Department of Rural and Community Development on 14 July. The case manager then corresponded with the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage on 29 September 2021 and again on 27 October 2021, outlining that the Joint Committee on Public Petitions was still waiting on a response to the previous letter. The petitions case manager also corresponded with Westmeath County Council on 29 September and on 27 October, outlining, again, that the Joint Committee on Public Petitions was still awaiting responses to the previous letters.

I refer to the amount of work done. The Chair is right. With any committee, it is about accountability and responsibility. I reiterate that I am very disappointed with the way these authorities have treated staff and members of this committee. I want to put that on the record as well.

Chairman: I agree with Deputy Buckley. This committee and the staff have been very lenient with these authorities because the European practise is that if you have not heard anything back after three months, you start an investigation. We are four months down the road, trying to get information or even a response from them. We will get the secretariat to write to them, inviting them in. We will take it from there.

Deputy Pat Buckley: That is agreed, Chair.

Chairman: Agreed.

The third petition is P000018/21, submitted by Mrs. Alexandra Koster, on prioritising urgent environmental issues and enforcing actions against non-adherence to environmental laws and regulations. The updated recommendation as of 19 November 2021 is that, first, permission be sought for Mrs. Koster to borrow the response of the Department of the Environment, Climate and Communications for comment and, second, that this petition be raised with Department of Education as the petitioner specifically mentioned schools in her response. Do members have views on this matter? Is that agreed? Agreed.

Our fourth petition is P000019/21, submitted by Mr. Cormac McKay, on banning all fossil fuel and hybrid vehicles advertising on all Irish media. The updated recommendation as of 19 November 2021 is that the petition's case manager will engage further with Mr. McKay to seek additional information in relation to the petition. Do members have views on this matter? Is that agreed? Agreed.

Our fifth and sixth petitions are P000034/21 and P000037/21 propose that foreign-trained doctors conduct the pre-registration examination system, PRES, 3 exam or give an exemption. I will not try to pronounce the two names of those who submitted the petition. The updated recommendation is that, first, the correspondence from the Irish Medical Council be forwarded to the petitioners and, second, that the committee decide to close these petitions as the actual PRES 3 exams are to resume on 14 November 2021. Do members have any views on this?

Deputy Pat Buckley: I have no views to add, Chair. I would like to thank the secretariat and the case manager for getting the information for these people. I welcome the fact that everything is resuming on 14 November.

Chairman: The recommendations are agreed.

That concludes our consideration of public petitions this afternoon. I invite members of the public to submit petitions via our online portal. A petition may be addressed to the Houses of the Oireachtas on a matter of general public concern or interest or on an issue of public policy. Next on our agenda is any other business. Would members like to make any final comments? No.

The committee is adjourned until 11.30 a.m. on Thursday, 25 November 2021 for a virtual private meeting which will be followed by a public meeting at 1.30 p.m.

The joint committee adjourned at 3.04 p.m. until 1.30 p.m. on Thursday, 25 November 2021.