

Minutes of the Second Meeting of the Interim Advisory Board of the Reception and Integration Agency, 25 June 2001

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Attendance

Raymond Rooney (Chairman)

Board Members:	Noel Waters	Bishop William Murphy
	David Costello	Aileen O' Donoghue
	Remba Osengo	Mary Murphy
	Alexis T P Fitzgerald	Brian O' Raghallaigh
	Peter McCann	Christina Carney
	John Rowan	Joseph Moran

RIA: Catherine Byrne, Principal Officer, Head of Policy
Pat Wylie, Principal Officer, Head of Operations
Aileen Harrington, Assistant Principal, Board Secretariat
Bernadette Loughrey, Secretary to the Board

Apologies : Mary Aylward, Brian Glanville and Jim O'Farrell. Eugene Barry of the Department of Finance deputised for Mr. O'Farrell.

Minutes of Previous Meeting

The minutes of the inaugural meeting of the board on 25 June were agreed.

RIA Draft Business Plan

The Chairman thanked the members of the board for their comments on the draft business plan for the RIA. These are being examined in the context of finalisation of the Strategy Statement, 2001 to 2003 of the Department of Justice, Equality and Law Reform and related divisional business plans. In response to a query later in the meeting, it was pointed out that the RIA business Plan is not intended to be a rigid document. It will be kept under ongoing review and is subject to amendment over time to reflect changing circumstances and priorities.

(The general position with regard to business planning in the Department of Justice, Equality and Law Reform has recently been clarified by the Department's Organisation Development Unit (ODU). The Department's next 3 year Strategy Statement is targeted for completion in the third quarter of this year. Both the Minister and the Secretary General of the department have to sign off on this. It is anticipated that Business Plans, translating high level strategy, as set out in the Strategy Statement, into divisional action, will then come on stream. In the meantime, divisions are updating and reviewing their last business plans. A new Business Plan template to cover the remainder of 2001 and all of 2002 is being developed by the ODU.)

Clarification of the Role of the Interim Advisory Board

Arising from queries at the June meeting concerning its exact remit, Mr. Costello clarified the role of the Interim Advisory Board. He confirmed that the board's role is to advise the Director of the RIA on the implementation of Government policy in so far as it relates to the business of the RIA. Specifically, the role of the board is to advise the Director of the RIA on:

the discharge of its functions in relation to meeting the reception needs of asylum seekers through direct provision and dispersal;

the discharge of its functions in relation to the co-ordination and implementation of integration policy for refugees and those granted leave to remain in the State; and

the preparation of draft legislation to establish the agency on a statutory basis.

The agency is responsible for implementing agreed Government policy in relation to the reception of asylum seekers and the integration of refugees and recommendations made by the board should take cognisance of Government policy. For example, integration policy is directed at refugees and persons who have been given the right to remain in the State.

In subsequent discussions, members stressed the importance of the board providing practical assistance to the agency and advising/supporting it in its work.

Some members expressed the view that the right to work for asylum seekers needed to be put on the agenda of future meetings, seriously addressed and put to the Minister in the hope that this might influence a change of policy in this regard. Ms. Murphy stated that, taking cognisance of Government policy, she would like this issue put on the agenda for discussion later in the day. She expressed her reservations at partaking in policies which served to isolate asylum seekers.

Some members also considered it desirable that asylum seekers, particularly those that have been in Ireland for a long period, should have access to vocational training so that if ultimately, they are allowed to remain, their integration will be that much easier.

Presentation by Refugee Applications Commissioner

Berenice O'Neill, Refugee Applications Commissioner made a comprehensive presentation (written copies of which were circulated to board members) on the role and function of her office. She outlined, from start to finish, the process for determining asylum applications at first instance.

Some of the Commissioner's particular concerns are:

(1) Interpretation needs

The Office of the Refugee Applications Commissioner (RAC) has applications from upwards of 120 nationalities. It is necessary to provide interpreters fluent in a wide variety of languages and dialects and to take all reasonable steps to ensure consistency in standards of interpretation. She is currently looking at how to develop a system of validation of interpretation.

(2) Uniformity of decisions

At monthly meetings of caseworkers applications are discussed in detail. The objective is to achieve as much uniformity as possible in the decision making process.

The main issues raised by board members were:

(a) Reported difficulties in completing the questionnaire which forms the basis of the application for refugee status. The Commissioner responded that the questionnaire was almost entirely factual, the most important questions being "from what are you fleeing and why are you seeking refugee status?"

The Commissioner is anxious that asylum seekers avail of the Refugee Legal Service (RLS). At present, most only seek legal advice at appeal stage. However, the take-up rate for the legal service has gone up from 5% to 45% at first stage and the RLS budget increased from £1m. to £8m. this year. Arrangements are being made to open regional RLS centres. The first of these will be located in Galway and Cork. There are also plans for a centre in the South-East.

(b) Regionalisation of interviews. The Commissioner outlined some of the difficulties concerning proposals to operate outside of Dublin. The provision of comprehensive interpretation services at a regional level is an issue. In addition, there is currently a 40% "no show" rate at interviews (representing more than 5,000 cases). This is very wasteful of resources as it creates considerable additional work in trying to trace the whereabouts of applicants and reschedule interviews. Generally, there is no variation in the attendance rate at interviews as between those in direct provision and those not in direct provision. The potential difficulties were well illustrated recently when staff from the RAC travelled to accommodation centres outside Dublin to issue Temporary Residence Certificates and conduct fingerprinting. There was a 25% "no show" rate.

(c) Claim turnaround, positive decisions, backlog of cases, etc. Claim statistics for the RAC were circulated. The RAC has a target of one month (maximum) between date of interview and date of decision. In 2000, 7% of applicants were granted refugee status. This increases to 15% if those permitted to remain for other reasons (humanitarian leave to remain, parents of Irish born children, marriage to an Irish national, etc.) are included.

On average, 48% to 52% of asylum applicants are pregnant.

The "no show" rate referred to above raises questions as to the actual number of undetermined cases on hands and the RAC is engaged in an exercise to try to ascertain the real extent of the backlog. It is expected that this exercise will be completed by late Autumn.

The Commissioner pointed out that a significant number of extra staff has been sanctioned for her office and that the backlog is decreasing. Currently, 800 new applications are being received every month and the Commissioner expects shortly (when all new staff have been recruited and trained) to be able to process 1,400 applications per month.

Some board members asked for statistics on the numbers of asylum seekers in direct provision for less than and more than 6 months. It was agreed that these would be provided. Board members were also interested in seeing statistics on the processing of appeals.

(d) Unaccompanied minors These cases are referred to the appropriate health board. If an application for asylum is made, health board staff accompany the minor at the interview.

Reports and Significant Developments

Current trends in relation to asylum applications and significant developments concerning direct provision were outlined. At present, the RIA has 78 accommodation/reception centres located in 24 counties throughout the State. There is a 90% + occupancy rate in most centres. 40% of bed spaces in reception centres in Dublin are occupied by pregnant women and mothers with newborn children.

Future plans include 3 purpose built accommodation centres, each with a capacity of 400 at Knockalisheen, Co. Clare, Cork Airport and Baleskin, Co. Dublin. Completion dates for the centres in Clare and Cork are August and the centre at Baleskin will be ready at the end of this year. The centres include facilities for medics and social workers, recreation and smoking rooms, mother and child areas, etc. In line with a Government decision on the number of spaces to be provided in system built accommodation (4,000), 7 more centres of this type are planned.

Issues Requiring Priority Attention/Future Presentations

Due to time constraints items 5 and 6 on the agenda were combined.

A synthesis of responses from board members on foot of a request for views on items requiring priority attention was circulated.

Following discussion it was agreed that, for the present, the most efficient approach to future board meetings would be to arrange a presentation - to deepen the board's knowledge (a) of the legislation, processes and practices right across the wider asylum, immigration area and (b) the responsibilities of the various service providers - and to try to examine one particular issue in detail.

The Chairman's proposals in relation to agencies that might make future presentations are as follows:

Refugee Appeals Tribunal;
Refugee Legal Service;
Immigration Division, Department of Justice, Equality and Law Reform;
Fas Asylum Seeker Training Unit;
Refugee Language Support Unit;
Department of Education and Science;
Department of Environment and Local Government;
Department of Health and Children and/or representatives of the health boards;
Department of Social, Community and Family Affairs.

It was also suggested that a presentation from an organisation such as the UNHCR or Amnesty International would be useful.

In relation to the provision of services, the Chairman expressed the view that the board should attempt to establish what is already in place, identify any gaps and make proposals for responding to those gaps.

On the specific issue of integration, the Chairman said he was convinced that a lot of things are happening out there already and what the RIA needs to do is to pull all of this together in some way so that there is a cohesive and co-ordinated approach at regional and local level across the whole range of services that refugees need to access. He said the same is true in relation to service provision for asylum seekers.

Visits to a Reception and Regional Accommodation Centre

It was agreed that the Board would tour and meet at **Kilmacud House** (reception centre) and **Mosney** (accommodation centre) on 23 July.

It was pointed out that a draft policy document relating to all aspects of the reception and resettlement of asylum seekers, which is being prepared for Government, is nearing completion and would be circulated shortly to board members for their views. It was agreed, that if board members wished, there could be a preliminary discussion of the draft policy document on 23 July. However, it was pointed out that the document is a lengthy one and it would be important that board members submitted their comments in writing over the Summer months.

Any Other Business

Mr. O'Raghallaigh and Ms. Murphy raised the issue of the right to work for asylum seekers. Ms. Murphy suggested that the board might use the recent policy document published by an NGO on this issue (which had received some media attention) as the basis for discussion by the Interim Advisory Board. Both the Chairman and Director felt that this would be inappropriate as reports/recommendations to the Minister should emanate from the board. However, the Chairman indicated that he

would have no objection if members wished to draft and present their own Discussion document to the board.

It was agreed that the EU Commission Draft Directive on Minimum Standards for the Reception of Asylum Seekers would be circulated to board members.

Some members commented that not all members attended the full meeting on 25 June. The Chairman's response was to request that all members, when attending board meetings, should make arrangements to attend them in full and in person so that all items on the agenda can be attended to.