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Direct Provisions of support for asylum seekers

The Minister for Justice, Equality and Law Reform, John O'Donoghue TD, wishes to refer to media speculation and enquiries today (6 September) about the future treatment of asylum seekers in terms of social welfare supports, housing and basic needs generally.

This Government, like all Governments before it, are obliged to consider policy options in all areas of public concern including, in this instance, the range of supports for asylum seekers. The policy context in this issue is the range of measures taken in several other EU States to control illegal immigration and to manage the processing of cases of persons who seek asylum or refugee status. Already Belgium, Denmark and the Netherlands, among others, have arrangements in place to meet the basic needs of asylum seekers by means other than cash payments. On July 27, 1998 the British authorities announced through the Home Secretary Jack Straw MP their intention to provide supports in future to UK asylum seekers in kind rather than in cash. A White Paper has since issued on this topic and legislation is shortly to be tabled in Westminster to this end.

Given that we maintain a Common Travel Area with the UK which is of enormous value and relevance to the whole island of Ireland and Irish people generally, a decision of this character by the UK has to be taken into account in a very serious way by any Irish Government. Accordingly, the standing Inter-Departmental Committee on Immigration, Asylum and Related Issues has been studying the question of supports for asylum seekers and has reported to Government. The Government is now considering this Committee's report - which in fact ruled out the use of vouchers (in lieu of cash payments) and the use of army barracks for accommodation purposes. Direct support arrangements would not necessarily imply, nor would the Minister favour, the creation of large-scale reception centres but could involve a mixed approach with a high level of private sector/non-governmental organisation involved.

When the Government consideration of this matter is more advanced a full statement on its position on supports for asylum seekers will issue. The Minister for Justice, Equality and Law Reform wishes to emphasise that Direct Provision can incorporate a broad range of approaches including provision for needs of asylum seekers in communal settings.

6 September, 1998.