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1

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UK-6/11

Department of Social, Community and Family Affairs

Mr. Tim Dalton,
Secretary - General,
Department of Justice, Equality and Law Reform,
72 - 76 St Stephen's Green,
Dublin 2.

22nd October 1997

Dear Tim,

I read the report in today's *Irish Independent* that "Department of Justice officials are investigating the possibility of major welfare fraud by asylum seekers after at least 1,000 refugees disappeared during a mass registration campaign in the last two weeks (and that) this lends weight to fears that hundreds of applicants were claiming multiple welfare benefits". If it is true that most of the missing 1,000 represent multiple applications for supplementary welfare, it does, of course, have implications in terms of follow up and expenditure for this Department and I am naturally concerned to pursue this quickly. In that regard, I understand that we have now received details of these 1,000 applicants so that we can establish if any are being paid welfare benefits.

This Department has not always separately identified asylum seekers within its records of recipients of welfare benefits - the issue simply never arose before this year. However, our best estimate at present is that we, through the Health Boards, are paying Supplementary Welfare Allowance to some 2,000 people who may be asylum seekers. This broadly corresponds to the total number of live cases which your Department has now established following the mass renewal of asylum cards.

I am anxious that our two Departments, along with the Eastern Health Board, should continue to co-operate to the greatest extent possible in relation to the asylum seeker issue. There is, in our view, a need for representatives of the three organisations to meet more regularly at a management level to consider various operational issues so as to facilitate co-operation across the full range of matters arising and to ensure to that momentum is not lost in relation to medium term developments. Two such meetings have been held so far and a third is planned for 24th November. These meetings supplement ongoing ad hoc contacts between officials of the three organisations.

1...

I also feel that there may be scope for the use of more modern technology, such as computer matching of digitised photographs, to identify multiple asylum claims. This is an important issue for us as payments to asylum seekers rely on the identity established by your Department for the individuals concerned. I would be anxious, as I am sure you would be, that we explore all possibilities of improving controls on the identity of asylum seekers, given the expenditure implications arising for this Department. This Department has a well established Information Technology function and the technical expertise of officials is available as necessary, if this would be of assistance.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'E. Sullivan', written over a horizontal line.

E. Sullivan
Secretary-General

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Document 2

Department of Social, Community
and Family Affairs

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From: Mel Cousins, Minister's Advise

(COUSINS_M)

TO: Brian Ó Raghallaigh, PO **

(BOR)

CC: Secretary

(SULLIVAN_E)

Subject: Draft letter to M/JELR

Brian

Here is the final draft of the letter to JOD. I understand it
went as it stands.

Mel

www.exploringdirectprovision.ie

Mr John O Donoghue,
Minister for Justice, Equality and Law Reform,
72 - 76 St Stephen's Green,
Dublin 2.

23rd October 1997

Dear John,

I read the report in yesterday's Irish Independent concerning the "1,000 refugees" who had "disappeared" allegedly giving rise to fears of "major welfare fraud". Your Department reported in September that it had over 3,300 active asylum cases on hands at that time. My understanding is that my Department is paying some 2,000 asylum seekers and that that was conveyed to officials of your Department on Monday of this week. It would seem that the 1,000 cases disappeared, therefore, only in the sense that your Department brought its records up to date.

Details of the 1,000 cases have only now been provided to my Department so that the question of whether they received social welfare payments can be investigated. Until this is done, there is no evidence to indicate how many of these disappeared cases are or were in receipt of payments from my Department. I was surprised, therefore, that the story was run in the Independent in the terms in which it was presented and in particular, that a spokesman for your Department was reported as saying that "most of the missing 1,000 represent multiple applications for supplementary welfare".

I have no doubt that there is an element of fraud and abuse amongst some asylum seekers. I feel it is important that we concentrate our efforts on taking practical steps to identify this abuse, for example, through the introduction by your Department of information technology to assist in identifying multiple asylum claims lodged in your Department and through enhancing co-operation between our two Departments. I would point out that my officials are fully co-operating with your Department in attempting to address this issue both at a policy level on the Working Group on Illegal Immigrants and on the operational side through ongoing meetings with representatives of your Department and the Community Welfare service.

The validity of social welfare payments to asylum seekers relies on the identity established by your Department for the individuals concerned. The primary factor determining the cost of these payments is the length of time it takes to process asylum claims to finalisation. I understand that only a relative handful of claims have been finalised this year and I believe that yesterday's story shows that there are also fundamental inadequacies in the arrangements for registering and keeping track of applications for asylum. For these reasons, I feel it is vital that the resources devoted to accepting and processing claims for asylum be strengthened to exercise more control at the registration stage and to bring more claims to the decision stage.

My Department will provide any assistance it can in that regard, particularly in relation to the use of Information Technology, co-operation on operational matters and exchange of information. I believe that it is only through enhanced co-operation between both Departments, carried out in an atmosphere conducive to the establishment of close working relationships, that these issues can be satisfactorily addressed.

I look forward to discussing this with you on our next meeting.

www.exploringdirectprovision.ie

Yours sincerely,

Dermot Ahern
Minister for Social, Community and Family Affairs

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Document
3

Secretary
C. B. O'Raghallaigh
WR. 5/11

OIFIG AN RÚNAÍ
An Roinn Dlí agus Cirt,
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Mr. D. O'Raghallaigh
Please discuss
WR. 5/11

4 November, 1997.

Dear Eddie,

Thank you for your letter of 22nd October regarding co-operation between our two Departments and the report in that days Irish Independent re asylum seekers.

First of all I would like to clarify what appeared in the report and assure you that any suggestion that officials of this Department "are investigating the possibility of major welfare fraud by asylum seekers" is of the newspaper's own making. In response to a query to our press office the Irish Independent was informed that there was a difference of approx. 1,000 between the number of asylum applicants registered at this Department and the numbers who turned up to have their I.D. cards re-issued in the major re-issue over the previous few weeks and that officials were endeavouring to reconcile the figures. Any interpretation or "spin" put on the reply was entirely the responsibility of the Irish Independent.

Secondly, I fully agree that our two Departments and the Eastern Health Board must continue to co-operate with each other to the greatest extent possible. However, I believe that the level of contact and cooperation in this regard is already quite sufficient and that we should not require the hard-pressed officials concerned to participate in further meetings etc. unless it is essential to the efficiency and effectiveness of our operations that they do so. There is, as you know, daily liaison at operational level in relation to multiple applications by individuals, false ID cards etc. At senior level there are the monthly liaison meetings between representatives of both our Departments and the Health Board - the last meeting was held on Monday 20th October. You will no doubt be aware that a special meeting was also called by this Department and included Gardai from the Fraud and Immigration areas when a potential major fraud was uncovered in the Eastern Health Board area.

I would suggest that the daily co-operation at operational level together with monthly liaison meetings at management level is the best way to proceed at this stage. Special meetings can of course be arranged at short notice as required. The

officials concerned will be keeping the matter under review and will be keeping us informed.

Returning to the ID cards, the reconciliation of the difference between the number who turned up for the re-issue of ID cards and the numbers registered with this Department as asylum seekers is on-going but is a very laborious task. For your Department's purposes I understand that the reference numbers alone will be sufficient and the reference numbers in respect of the 1997 applicants who did not turn up for re-issue of ID cards have already been forwarded to you. These form over 800 of the 1,000 or so to be reconciled. The balance will be forwarded shortly. I also understand we have already supplied your Department with

- (i) a detailed list of our asylum applicants up to and including October 20th 1997,
- (ii) a full list of reference numbers with a comments field indicating whether they have received ID cards or not,
- (iii) a list of applicants who have Irish-born citizens,
- (iv) a list of applicants who have married Irish citizens,
- (v) a list of decisions made in 1997.

In relation to the provision of new technology, I understand that payments of supplementary welfare allowances to asylum applicants are in the course of being computerised. This is a welcome development which will facilitate tracking and enumeration of applicants in respect of such payments. There have been discussions over the past year or so between officials of both Departments with a view to designing a joint ID card for both asylum and welfare purposes. This ran into some difficulties with the Data Protection Commissioner regarding the joint aspect of ID cards. It has been suggested, I believe, that this may be resolved by providing for the joint aspect in legislation being promoted by one or other of our Departments. A further meeting between officials is fixed for this week to progress the matter.

Yours sincerely,



Tim Dalton
Secretary General

Mr. E. Sullivan,
Secretary General,
Department of Social, Community
and Family Affairs,
Áras Mhic Dhiarmada,
Store Street,
Dublin 1.