Department of Justice and Equality
Irish Naturalisation and Immigration Service
Immigration in Ireland: Annual Review 2015
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1. Introduction

The mission of the Department of Justice and Equality is to ‘maintain community and national security, promote justice and equity, and safeguard human rights and fundamental freedoms consistent with the common good.’

One of the Department’s core objectives is to deliver ‘an efficient, responsive and fair immigration, asylum and citizenship system.’ The goals and actions contained within of its [Strategy Statement 2015-2017](#) express how this objective will be met.

<table>
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<th>Goals</th>
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| To provide immigration related services to applicants in an efficient and cost effective manner | • Civilianise frontline immigration controls at Dublin Airport and other major ports of entry  
• Rationalise and civilianise registration function around a small number of hubs  
• Continue to deliver decisions on citizenship applications within a six month timeframe  
• Continue citizenship ceremonies  
• Process visa and immigration applications in a timely manner |
| To maintain the integrity of the immigration system                   | • New immigration and residence legislation  
• Continued rigorous control of Ireland’s borders and immigration procedures to combat immigration abuse  
• Coordinate with relevant Government Departments |
| To maintain the integrity of and implement improvements to the protection and direct provision systems | • Implement improvements to the protection and direct provision systems  
• A Protection Bill to provide for a Single Procedure for Protection applicants with the aim of reducing processing times and, as a result, the length of time spent in the Direct Provision System  
• Working Group to recommend to the Government what improvements should be made to the State’s existing Direct Provision and protection process |
| To maintain and enhance the Common Travel Area with the United Kingdom | • Rollout of British-Irish Visa Scheme (BIVS) commencing with applications from India and China  
• Exchange of immigration information and intelligence with our UK partners  
• Ongoing cooperation with the United Kingdom Government |
2015: A positive, highly active year against a challenging backdrop

The growing Irish economy and our positive international reputation have again made the country attractive to migrants seeking to work, study and settle here. The number of citizens from non-EU countries legally living here at the end of 2015 rose to approximately 114,000, compared to 105,000 at the end of 2014. Visa applications rose by 14% compared to last year, to 115,000.

Over 13,500 people became Irish citizens in 2015, and a milestone was reached when the **one hundredth citizenship ceremony** took place.

A longstanding commitment to modernise the Irish asylum process was delivered with the signing of the **International Protection Act 2015**, which will simplify and streamline existing international protection arrangements and provide applicants with a final decision on their protection application in a more straightforward and timely fashion.

The year will be remembered for the migration crisis facing the European Union. Ministers from across Europe met on many occasions to discuss matters including the threat from international terrorism and the need for a unified EU response to the migration crisis in the Mediterranean and Western Balkans.

As part of the Government’s response to the crisis the Government established the **Irish Refugee Protection Programme** to provide a safe haven for persons seeking international protection. Ireland will accept up to 4,000 persons under Relocation and Resettlement programmes.

2015 saw many initiatives from the Irish Naturalisation Service (INIS) and An Garda Síochána to modernise the delivery of immigration services and to combat immigration fraud:

• As part of an overall civilianisation programme, Immigration Officers from INIS took on full 24/7 responsibility for passport checks at Dublin Airport Terminal 1.
• Reforms of the education sector were rolled out to tackle abuse of the immigration regime and labour market and improve protection for students.
• Operation Vantage was launched by the Garda National Immigration Bureau with the objective of investigating illegal immigration with a particular focus on marriages of convenience.
• The Report of the Working Group was published on improvements to the protection process, including direct provision and supports to asylum seekers. The Report contains a total of 173 recommendations many of which have implications for a number of Government Departments and services.
• The **British Irish Visa Scheme** was extended to India, further boosting high-value tourism and business visitors to the UK and Ireland.
2. Providing immigration related services in an efficient and cost effective manner

Residence: Living in Ireland for Work, Study or Family Reasons

Non-EEA citizens resident in Ireland
All non-EEA nationals living in the State for longer than 90 days are required to register with An Garda Síochána. In 2015, approximately 96,000 new or renewed registrations of permission to remain in the State were issued by the Garda National Immigration Bureau.

The provisional 2015 year end estimates of non-EEA nationals with permission to live in Ireland is approximately 114,000, compared to 105,000 at the end of 2014.

The current top 5 registered nationalities which account for over 47% of all persons registered are Brazil (16%), India (11%), China (9%), USA (7%) and Pakistan (6%). The majority of persons with permission to remain in the State are here for work or study purposes.

Applications to INIS for permission to live in the State
Certain types of application to live in the State need to be made to the Minister through INIS. Once their permission is granted, these people must register with An Garda Síochána as a legal resident. The Residence Division of INIS received approximately 17,400 such applications in 2015.
Visas

**Applications processed**
Provisional figures indicate that approximately 115,700 entry visa applications for both short and long stays were received in 2015, an increase of 14% on 2014, and a cumulative increase of 39% since 2011.

The approval rate for entry visa applications was 91%.

The top 5 nationalities applying for visas in 2015 were India (18%) China (12%) Russia (10%) Pakistan (7%) Nigeria (5%)

**Improvements in customer service**
http://reentryvisa.inis.gov.ie

In November 2015, an online booking system was launched for the re-entry visa service. This allows customers to book a time for their re-entry visa application at Burgh Quay, and it replaces the old ticketing system.

Customers may use this service in addition to applying by registered post. There is no need for anyone to queue for a re-entry visa.
Citizenship application processing
Provisional figures indicate that 13,570 citizenship certificates were issued in 2015. The top 5 nationalities awarded citizenship were India (1,611), Nigeria (1,364), Philippines (1,167), Poland (1,161) and Romania (903).

INIS also notes the ongoing success of the citizenship ceremonies of which there were 16 such events in 2015. On 23rd January a milestone was reached when the one hundredth citizenship ceremony took place.

Since the implementation of the far-reaching reforms to the citizenship process in 2011, decisions have been made in over 100,000 applications and the processing time for the vast majority of standard applications has been reduced from 31 months to less than 6 months, despite a significant increase in valid application volumes in the intervening period.
In September 2014, Minister Fitzgerald announced a major programme to civilianise immigration functions currently undertaken by members of An Garda Síochána.

One function to be civilianised is frontline immigration checks at Dublin Airport. On 22nd June 2015, Immigration Officers from INIS took on full 24/7 responsibility for passport checks at Terminal 1. The transfer of functions at Terminal 2 is a priority for 2016.

The civilianisation of passport checks at Dublin Airport will result in the release of approximately 75 Garda staff for redeployment to operational duties. The Garda National Immigration Bureau will continue to carry out investigative and detention functions at Dublin Airport.

In 2015 the immigration services at the airport's two terminals processed 12.4m visitors. Dublin Airport had its busiest ever year in 2015, with a record 25 million passengers travelling through its halls, an increase of 15% on the previous year, or an additional 3.3 million people. Despite this growth, the average queue times experienced by Irish and EU passengers are approximately three minutes and approximately five minutes for passengers from outside the EU.

As part of an overall border management programme, INIS are piloting self-service, automated border control gates at Terminal 1. In 2016 a procurement competition will be run to expand the use of self-service gates.
3. Maintaining the integrity of the immigration system

Controlling Ireland’s borders and combating immigration abuse

Deportations/Removals from the State

Approximately, 3,790 persons were deported/removed from the State in 2015. This figure comprises some 3,451 persons who were refused entry into the State at ports of entry and were returned to the place from where they had come. In addition, 251 failed asylum seekers and illegal migrants were deported from the State, 69 EU nationals were returned to their countries of origin on foot of an EU Removal Order and 19 asylum seekers were transferred under the Dublin Regulation to the EU member state in which they first applied for asylum.

Important changes to the Immigration Acts, provided for in the International Protection Act 2015, will also assist in respect of the State’s capacity to enforce deportation orders in certain circumstances where the subject of the order seeks to evade or frustrate their deportation. These amendments will improve the effectiveness of existing legislative provisions allowing for the arrest, detention and removal of non-nationals against whom a deportation order is in force and removal from the State of persons refused leave to land.

Voluntary Returns

Provisional figures show that a total of 132 persons chose to return home voluntarily in 2015. Of that number, 110 were assisted by the International Organisation for Migration (IOM).
Collection of biometrics of visa applicants
The requirement for applicants of Irish visas to provide their fingerprints as part of the visa application process was extended to India in February 2015. This has been a requirement in Nigeria since 2010 and Pakistan and China since 2014. The collection of visa biometrics is becoming an increasingly integral part of visa application processes worldwide as a means to combat immigration abuses such as false identities. In the case of Ireland the collection of this data is also a necessary aspect of the operation of the British Irish Visa Scheme with the UK.

Immigration data sharing with the UK
In October 2014, Minister Fitzgerald and the UK Home Secretary signed a new agreement for the sharing of immigration data between both countries’ immigration authorities. This comprehensive agreement is aimed at protecting the Common Travel Area (CTA) from abuse as well as providing the means on which to extend the benefits of borderless travel between the two countries to genuine visitors through initiatives such as the British Irish Visa Scheme. In 2015, under data sharing arrangements the details of over 100,000 Irish visa applicants were checked against UK records.

Reform of the student education system
On 25th May, 2015, the Minister for Education and Skills, Jan O’Sullivan TD, and Minister Fitzgerald announced Government approval of reforms to the student immigration system for international education. These reforms are a response to practices within certain parts of the sector and the closure of a number of English language colleges in 2014 and 2015.

The reforms will deliver lasting change in the sector and will tackle abuse of the immigration regime and labour market, improve the overall quality of offering to international students and improve protection for learners whilst safeguarding the strong international reputation of high-quality Irish education providers.

The key reforms include:
• A more restrictive list of education programmes eligible for student immigration purposes. Further education and vocational education and training programmes will be excluded from the list
• Only higher education programmes accredited by Irish awarding bodies, or quality-assured EU universities, will be permitted to recruit international students
• Providers of English language programmes will need to demonstrate they have reached an acceptable standard to appear on the list
• The immigration permission for the purposes of attending a 25 week English language programme will be reduced from 12 months to 8 months
• All institutions will have to comply with new requirements including a clear declaration of ownership, shadow directors, physical infrastructure and teaching capacity
• A number of measures to protect students are being introduced including compulsory learner protection arrangements and a separate account facility to safeguard student advance payments.
Operation Vantage

Operation Vantage was established on 10 August, 2015 by the Garda National Immigration Bureau (GNIB) with the objective of investigating illegal immigration with a particular focus on marriages of convenience as defined under the Civil Registration Act 2014. There has been increasing concern about the growth in so called ‘sham marriages’ as evidenced by statistically improbable patterns of marriages. These include a large number of new notifications by males from the Indian sub-continent (e.g. Pakistan, India, Bangladesh) of intention to marry females from EU countries such as Portugal and Eastern European countries.

On 25th November 2015, a large number of searches across the country were conducted, involving over 200 members of An Garda Síochána. Over 40 searches were conducted on both business and residential premises to gather evidence of suspected fraud offences related to the organised facilitation of marriages of convenience.

This multi-agency operation involved INIS, the Department of Social Protection, the Office of Director of Corporate Enforcement, the Workplace Relations Commission and the Revenue Commissioners. The focus of the operation was specifically targeted at those engaged in organised facilitation of sham marriages for financial gains. It also focused on those who seek to gain illegal immigration status by engaging in such arranged marriages. A total of 11 people were arrested for a range of offences under the Immigration Acts and Criminal Justice (Theft and Fraud Offences) Act 2011. In addition a large amount of computers, memory devices, phones and documents, including false identity documents and a substantial quantity of cash were seized.

The operation on 25th November was not a once off intervention. Operation Vantage is ongoing and forms part of the overall response of the Department of Justice and Equality to prevent marriages of convenience from taking place. This includes a review of relevant applications by INIS with a view to revoking immigration permission which may have been obtained under false pretences.
4. Maintaining the integrity of and implementing improvements to the protection and direct provision systems

**International Protection Act 2015**

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**Legislative reform of the International Protection system**

The International Protection Act, signed into law by the President on 30 December 2015, will simplify and streamline existing international protection (asylum) arrangements and provide applicants with a final decision on their protection application in a more straightforward and timely fashion and, as a consequence, reduce the length of time that applicants spend in the direct provision system. The new Act, in providing for the introduction of a single application procedure, brings our protection system into line with other EU Member States.

The Department of Justice and Equality placed the ‘best interests of the child’ at the centre in preparing this Act and ensured that this value was placed in a number of specific provisions. The Minister assured the Oireachtas that this principle is at the heart of the Act and will be embedded in best practice in the protection process arising from the introduction of a new single application procedure.
A Working Group was established by Minister Fitzgerald and the Minister of State with responsibility for New Communities, Culture and Equality, Mr. Aodhán Ó Riordáin in 2014 arising from a commitment in the Statement of Government Priorities 2014-2016, to report to Government on Improvements to the Protection Process, including Direct Provision and Supports to Asylum Seekers.

The Working Group was chaired by retired High Court Judge Bryan McMahon and its membership was drawn from a range of interests in the international protection area including UNHCR, non-governmental organisations, the protection seeker community, academia and relevant Government Departments and Offices.

On 30 June 2015, the Report of the Working Group was published by the Government. The Report contains a total of 173 recommendations many of which have implications for a number of Government Departments and services. Following publication, the Report was referred by Government to the Cabinet Committee on Social Policy and Public Service Reform where it remains under active consideration.

Since the publication of the Report, a number of important recommendations have been implemented, including:

- **Persons in the protection system for more than 5 years** - A total of 1,384 persons were granted permission to remain in 2015 having spent at least 5 years in the international protection system
- **The International Protection Act 2015**, which provides for the introduction of a single applications procedure, one of the key recommendations of the Working Group. The Act responds to 26 of the Working Group recommendations
- **Increase to the Direct Provision Allowance for children from January 2016**
- **Pilot scheme for school leavers who are in the protection system** (other than at deportation stage) for the 2015/2016 academic year which grants access to student support in line with the current Student Grant Scheme on a pilot basis
- **Exemption from prescription charges for Direct Provision residents.**
International Protection

Asylum applications
3,276 asylum applications were received in 2015 as compared to 1,448 in 2014 equating to a 127% increase.

This continues the reversal of the trend of recent years when application numbers were decreasing year on year. The top three countries of application in 2015 were Pakistan, Bangladesh and Albania.

Subsidiary Protection
Responsibility for the processing of almost 3,800 existing Subsidiary Protection applications transferred from the Department to the Office of the Refugee Applications Commissioner on 14th November 2013.

By the end of 2015 only 375 of the original number remained to be processed. Of these cases remaining, there are only 40 live cases.

A further 183 cases, received between 14 November 2013 and the end of December 2014, were also processed during 2015.

Some 297 new cases were received in 2015 of which 113 were processed to completion during 2015.

Direct Provision System
Provisional figures for end 2015 indicate that there were 4,696 persons seeking international protection accommodated in direct provision centres in the State, some 332 more than at the end of 2014 (a 7.6% increase). This relatively small increase is attributed to the increased number of asylum applications in 2015 but was offset by the increased rate of processing of cases of those in the system for over five years. It should be noted that the 2015 figure is over 1,400 fewer than the number of persons accommodated at the end of 2010.
The year 2015 will be remembered for the migration crisis facing the European Union, which is set to continue into 2016.

Minister Fitzgerald and her colleagues, Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade, Charlie Flanagan TD and Minister of State for European Affairs and Data Protection, Dara Murphy TD, met throughout the year with ministers from across Europe to discuss matters including the threat from international terrorism and the need for a unified EU response to the migration crisis in the Mediterranean and Western Balkans.

Minister Fitzgerald attended a number of emergency Justice and Home Affairs Councils in relation to the crisis. In response to the pressures at frontline EU Member States such as Greece and Italy, EU Ministers have agreed on the relocation of 160,000 asylum seekers. Ireland will accept up to 4,000 persons under Relocation and Resettlement programmes.

The Minister stated that ‘Ireland is ready to accept the first tranche of migrants on relocation. We have appointed Liaison Officers to Italy and Greece and nominated two experts in response to the European Asylum Support Office call for experts. Real progress is being made and I am determined that this momentum continues.’
At the EU Africa Heads of State and Government Summit on Migration in Valletta, Malta, a comprehensive Declaration and Action Plan was agreed by consensus.

Addressing the Heads of State and Government meeting, Minister Fitzgerald welcomed the Declaration and Action Plan as an expression of the serious intent and commitment of EU and African countries to work together to bring the migration crisis under control and to address its root causes.

The Minister also welcomed the establishment of the new EU €1.8 billion Emergency Trust Fund for Africa as an important initiative to support the successful implementation of the Declaration and Action Plan. The Department of Foreign Affairs has committed €3m to this fund.

Following the conclusion of the summit, Minister Fitzgerald visited the European Asylum Support Office (EASO) in Valetta where she was briefed on progress on the implementation of the EU programme to relocate migrants from Greece and Italy. The Minister was also briefed on the work of the Office generally in areas such as best practice training and quality in order to support the implementation by Member States of the Common European Asylum Policy.
Irish Refugee Protection Programme

As part of the Government’s response to the migration crisis in central and southern Europe, on 10th of September, 2015 the Government established the ‘Irish Refugee Protection Programme’ (IRPP) to provide a safe haven for persons seeking international protection.

A multi-faceted approach is being adopted to the implementation of the Irish Refugee Protection Programme. The main features of the programme are as follows:

• Provision of international protection for up to 4,000 persons overall under the EU Resettlement and Relocation Programmes. The resettlement of 520 people mainly coming from Lebanon and predetermined as refugees by the UNHCR has already commenced with 176 arriving in 2015 alone;

• Approximately 2,600 of the overall total of 4,000 will be taken in from migration ‘hotspots’ in Greece and Italy under EU Relocation Programmes. The first of these are due to arrive in January 2016. (The mechanism under which the balance of the 4,000 will be taken in has yet to be determined);

• A new cross-departmental Taskforce, chaired by the Department of Justice and Equality, has been established to deal with the operational and logistical aspects of the support programme.

• There will be engagement with the general public and volunteer groups on their pledges of support. The Irish Red Cross will lead this task;

• A network of Emergency Reception and Orientation Centres for the initial reception of those arriving under the relocation programme will be established;

• Asylum applicants will be processed expeditiously by the Office of the Refugee Applications Commissioner;

• The implementation of the International Protection Act 2015 as a major priority; and

• An additional package of processing resources to deal with major increases in asylum and other immigration cases is to be provided.

A Programme Office has been established in the Department of Justice and Equality to oversee the implementation of the IRPP and to support the work of the Taskforce.
5. To maintain and enhance the Common Travel Area with the United Kingdom

British-Irish Visa Scheme

The British-Irish Visa Scheme (BIVS) is an historic initiative to boost tourism and business visitors to Ireland by facilitating visa-required nationals to travel freely between Ireland and the UK using a single visa issued by either country. It was launched by Minister Fitzgerald and the UK Home Secretary in London in October 2014.

Conceived and implemented by the Irish Naturalisation and Immigration Service in cooperation with the UK Home Office, the landmark initiative means that tourists, business visitors and other eligible visitors will be able, for the first time, to visit both the UK and Ireland, including moving freely between north and south of the island of Ireland on a single visa.

The scheme commenced in the People’s Republic of China in October 2014 and was extended to India in February, 2015.

After its first full year of operation in 2015 INIS has noted a 27% increase in visas granted to Chinese and Indian citizens travelling for tourism or business purposes.
6. Looking forward to 2016

The targets set for the Immigration Service for 2016 include:

- Completion of the civilianisation project at Dublin Airport with extension to Terminal 2 in the second half of 2016

- Transfer of the registration functions at Burgh Quay from the GNIB to INIS.

- Carry out an evaluation of the Investor Programme in the light of experience gained to date taking into account the current state of the economy. The programme is targeted for significant further growth in 2016.

- Review and update as necessary procedures and systems at ports of entry taking into account development at EU level and potential threats to the security of the State.

- Continue to work closely with the UK authorities to further enhance the security of the common travel area taking into account emerging trends in EU migration.

- Actively work with our EU partners to provide shorter and longer term solutions to the EU migration situation including
  - Implementation of the EU Relocation Programme which Ireland is committed to accept over 2,600 persons from Greece and Italy to have their asylum cases processed in Ireland
  - Acceptance of over 500 persons under the Resettlement Programme mainly from Jordan and the Lebanon.
  - These numbers will be kept under review as the programme develops.

- Continued implementation of the recommendations of the Working Group on improvements to the asylum system including Direct Provision as decided by Government

- Prepare for the introduction of the Single Procedure as set out in the International Protection Act 2015 including the transition provisions contained therein so as to reduce the length of time taken to process international protection applications.

- Continue to meet the demands on the service including processing of a wide range of applications including visas, residency applications, citizenship etc.

- Continue to enforce immigration laws including removal of persons who have no legal basis for being in the state, implementation and continuing monitoring with the Department of Education and Science of the international education sector and revoking or refusal of immigration permissions for those engaged in marriages of convenience.