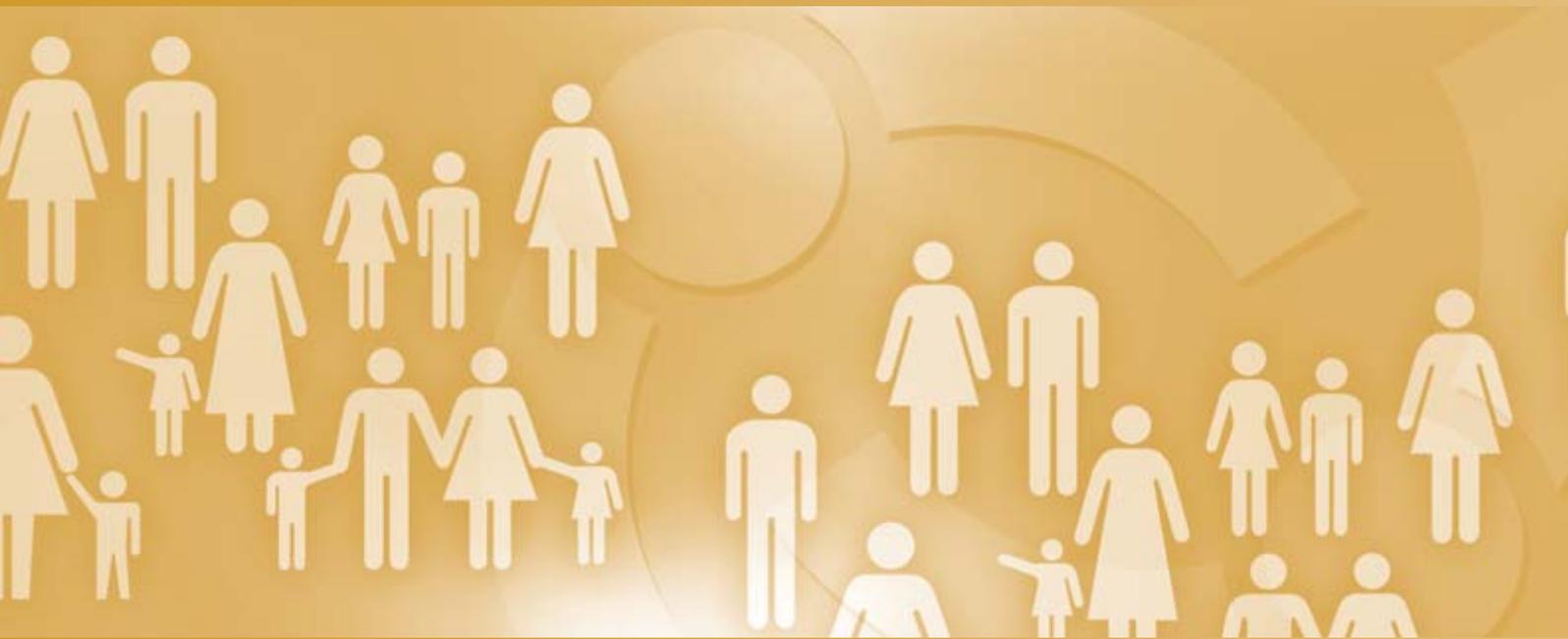




Office of the
Refugee Applications Commissioner
Customer Service Action Plan
2005-2008





Customer Service Action Plan 2005-2008



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I am pleased to present the second Customer Service Action Plan for the Office of the Refugee Applications Commissioner, covering the period 2005-2008.

This Action Plan builds on the firm foundations laid by our first Customer Service Action Plan which was published in 2002 and on the significant progress made in the area of customer service delivery since the establishment of the Office in November, 2000. The Plan was developed in consultation with our stakeholders, and in particular with customer representative groups as well as staff through partnership structures.

Since the establishment of ORAC we have initiated a number of significant customer service developments, including the establishment of a Customer Service Centre, the appointment of a Customer Liaison Officer and the formation of a Customer Liaison Panel. We have also developed an easily accessible and transparent customer complaints procedure. These initiatives have been supported by customer service training for staff as well as a high level of staff involvement in addressing customer service issues.

In late 2003 and during 2004 we carried out our first two customer survey exercises and I am pleased to be able to say that the results were overwhelmingly favourable. This indicates that our work to date has had a positive impact and encourages us to continue our efforts in the same direction.

Our Corporate Plan for the years 2004-2008 identifies quality customer service as one of five main developmental themes for the organisation. This Customer Service Action Plan is intended to detail how we will deliver on that high level commitment over the period to 2008. The Plan also fully integrates our Customer Charter, which was published last year and which sets out the standards of service our customers can expect from us.

The underlying strength of any organisation is in its staff and a key element of this Plan is the recognition of the significance of our staff as internal customers. The same principles of quality customer service apply internally as well as externally and this Plan reflects this. It also makes provision for specific measures designed to meet the needs of our staff. These steps, as well as being desirable in any modern organisation in themselves, will greatly enhance our capacity to meet our overall customer service commitments.

The Plan also sets out how we will monitor our progress over the next four years and make adjustments as necessary. My intention is that details of our progress will be available to all interested parties and, in particular, a section of the organisation's annual report will set out relevant information on how we are meeting our customer service commitments.

I look forward to working with staff and external customers in implementing this Plan and would like to express my appreciation to all who contributed to its preparation.

A handwritten signature in dark ink, appearing to read 'Berenice O'Neill'.

Berenice O'Neill
Commissioner

A key component of the public service modernisation programme has been 'Quality Customer Service'. In July 2000 the Government adopted 12 Principles of Quality Customer Service to inform public service delivery. As was the case with our first Customer Service Action Plan, this Plan is founded on these principles:

- Quality Service Standards
- Equality/Diversity
- Physical Access
- Information
- Timeliness and Courtesy
- Complaints
- Appeals
- Consultation and Evaluation
- Choice
- Official Languages Equality
- Better Co-ordination
- Internal Customer



This Action Plan begins by describing ORAC's core statutory and non-statutory functions (Chapter 1), and explaining the role played by each Unit within the organisation (Chapter 2).

The Plan then proceeds to set out our customer service commitments across a range of headings (Chapter 3) and to describe, by reference to the above principles of Quality Customer Service, how we intend to go about delivering on those commitments (Chapter 4).

Finally, the Plan sets out the mechanisms we will employ to regularly monitor and report on the progress we are making in meeting these customer service commitments (Chapter 5).

A number of appendices containing additional background material are also incorporated into this document, including a glossary of technical terms for ease of reference.

1

Functions of the Office of the Refugee Applications Commissioner

The Refugee Applications Commissioner derives her mandate from the Refugee Act, 1996 and is statutorily independent in the exercise of her functions.

The key statutory responsibilities under the Act are:

- to investigate applications from those who seek a declaration for refugee status and ensure appropriate recommendations to the Minister for Justice Equality and Law Reform on such applications, and,
- to investigate applications by refugees to allow family members to enter and reside in the State and report to the Minister for Justice, Equality and Law Reform on such applications.

Under the Act it is also the Commissioner's responsibility to:

- issue Temporary Residence Certificates to asylum seekers
- comply with any Ministerial directives under the Act concerning the prioritisation of certain categories of applicant
- to direct the presentation of the Commissioner's case to the Refugee Appeals Tribunal where recommendations made by the Commissioner are appealed to the Tribunal

- to furnish to the UNHCR, as well as relevant Government agencies, information as provided for in legislation.

While ultimately responsible for fulfilling these statutory functions under the Act, the Commissioner may delegate these functions to any member of her staff.

The Commissioner also has non-statutory functions. These include:

- ensuring that all applications for asylum at first stage are treated and processed in a fair, courteous and efficient manner
- issuing directives on the practical application of the Refugee Act and on procedures and standards of work
- ensuring that adequate information on countries of origin of asylum seekers and international jurisprudence and practice in the area of asylum is available to staff
- participating in international fora on asylum related matters
- management of staff performance and training and development
- dealing with press queries
- preparation and management of the budget and Business Plan for the organisation.

2

Units of the Office of the Refugee Applications Commissioner

The Office of the Refugee Applications Commissioner currently consists of fourteen Units, some of which are inter-linked. The services they provide, are set out below.

A detailed description of the asylum process is available on our website (www.orac.ie) or by contacting our Customer Service Centre on Lo-call 1890 202418.

1. Reception/Fingerprinting Unit

This is usually the first point of contact that asylum seekers have with ORAC. The Unit's main functions are as follows:

- Accepting applications for a declaration as a refugee.
- Completing an initial interview in order to obtain the basic details in respect of a person's application.
- Fingerprinting and photographing asylum applicants.
- Issuing Temporary Residence Certificates to applicants.
- Electronic transmission of applicant fingerprint data to a central EU database (EURODAC).
- Providing information to applicants on how the asylum process in Ireland operates, as well as how to access legal assistance and

how to make contact with the UNHCR.

- Providing applicants with the application questionnaire and monitoring its return.
- Scheduling interviews for applicants who are in a prioritised category.
- Assessing the age of persons presenting as unaccompanied minors and, where such persons appear to be minors, referring them to the Health Board.
- Dealing with a wide range of other callers to the Office, such as applicants wishing to withdraw from the process or to notify us of a change of address.

2. Dublin Unit

The Dublin Unit is responsible for establishing whether Ireland or another EU Member State is responsible for processing a particular asylum application. The Unit's work is governed by the EU Regulation (Council Regulation (EC) 343 of 2003, known as the 'Dublin II Regulation'), which succeeded the Dublin Convention in all Member States of the EU (except Denmark), plus Iceland and Norway. The Dublin Convention still applies between all EU Member States and Denmark.

The Unit examines applications to ascertain if the Dublin II Regulation/Dublin Convention criteria apply and, if so, forwards a request



to the relevant Member State to take responsibility for the application. Similarly, the Unit receives and examines applications from other EU Member States for Ireland to take responsibility for a particular application.

Council Regulation 2725/2000 (EURODAC Regulation) governs the comparison of fingerprints for the effective application of the Dublin Convention/Dublin Regulation.

3. Scheduling Unit

This Unit arranges, as soon as possible after the initial application, the scheduling of interviews for applicants. It also arranges the services of interpreters in whatever language is requested by applicants. The Unit arranges for the translation of application forms, questionnaires and other documentation as necessary. The Unit manages the Interview Waiting Area and receives applicants and interpreters when they arrive for their scheduled interview.

4. Case Processing Unit

Case Processing is the largest single function within the office and is made up of several sections, each of which is responsible for a particular range of countries. The role of Case Processing is to fairly and efficiently investigate applications for refugee status and to make recommendations on such applications to the Minister for Justice, Equality and Law Reform. Applicants are interviewed by a trained caseworker and a detailed report on the case

is completed, based on the provisions of the Refugee Act, refugee law jurisprudence and relevant country of origin information. The report sets out the reasons for the decision to recommend a grant or refusal of refugee status. A copy of the decision and the report on the application is provided to the applicant and, if applicable, his or her legal representative.

5. Presenting Unit

The Presenting Unit is responsible for representing the Refugee Applications Commissioner at the appeals stage of the asylum process. The main functions of the Unit are to represent the Commissioner at oral hearings, to assist the Member of the Tribunal in reaching a fair and just decision and to respond at the oral hearing to the issues raised in the appellants appeal. The Unit also prepares responses to statutory enquiries from the Members of the Tribunal.

6. Country of Origin/Refugee Status Determination Support

The role of this Unit is to provide effective support to Case Processing and Presenting Units through developing ORAC's country of origin information (COI), Quality Assurance (QA) and Refugee Status Determination (RSD) briefing resources. By so doing, the office is kept abreast of developments in legislation, jurisprudence and international best practice. In addition, and in conjunction with the Policies and Procedures Unit and the Training Unit, this Unit is involved in developing and delivering training programmes in RSD, QA and COI Research.

7. Policy and Procedures Unit

The Policy and Procedures Unit is responsible for the review and development of procedures and policies for Case Processing Units. It also liaises with the Department of Justice, Equality and Law Reform as well as with other agencies and NGOs on matters relating to ORAC's case processing procedures. In addition, it co-ordinates Refugee Status Determination training for the Case Processing Units.

8. Family Reunification Unit

The Family Reunification Unit is responsible for investigating applications from people already recognised as refugees for permission to have family members join them in the State. These applications are referred to the Commissioner by the Minister for Justice, Equality and Law Reform and, following investigation, the Commissioner provides a report to the Minister.

9. Judicial Review Unit

The Judicial Review Unit prepares the ORAC response to applications for Judicial Review and to applications for leave to apply for Judicial Review of ORAC recommendations and/or procedures. The Unit examines the applications and prepares briefing material for counsel and, where our legal advisors consider it appropriate, swear responding affidavits. If a Judicial Review application discloses an error or omission which is material to the ORAC recommendation, the Unit will seek to reach a mutually agreeable settlement without delay.

10. Customer Service Centre

The Customer Service Centre is a central contact point for enquiries to this Office. It also has responsibility for, *inter alia*, the monitoring and development of customer structures with particular reference to the commitments outlined in this Customer Service Action Plan

and our Customer Charter. The Unit is also responsible for the management of customer enquiries, liaison with other organisations (governmental and non-governmental), file management and file copying.



11. Corporate Office

The Corporate Office is responsible for the preparation of the office's Annual Report, Strategy Statement and other policy documents as well as for the development and monitoring of the Business Plan. It also co-ordinates management meetings and provides the secretariat function for the Partnership Committee. It is furthermore responsible for press liaison and for co-ordination of material for Parliamentary Questions and other material where requested by the Department of Justice, Equality and Law Reform.

12. Organisation/Finance Unit

The Organisation/Finance Unit is responsible for the provision of corporate services to other Units in the office. The Unit is also responsible for the identification of the financial resources required to achieve the objectives of the office and for the management of these resources.

13. Human Resources Unit

The Human Resources Unit, which incorporates a dedicated Training Unit, is responsible for managing the personnel functions which have been devolved to this Office (i.e. flexi and annual leave and special leave with pay). It liaises with the Department of Justice, Equality and Law Reform in relation to assignment of staff and on other staffing issues. The Unit is also responsible for overall management of the PMDS process as well as organising and co-ordinating relevant training courses, including induction training for new staff.

14. IT and Management Information Unit

The IT and Management Information Unit is responsible for the procurement, maintenance and development of all IT and fixed-line telecommunications equipment, systems, software and infrastructure for the office and provides technical training and support on a range of issues. The Unit is also responsible for compiling statistics and management information for the Office.

3

Customer Service Commitments

In line with our commitment under the *Programme for Sustaining Progress*, we published a Customer Charter for the organisation in June, 2004. The purpose of the Charter is twofold; it advises our customers of the standards of service they can expect from us and it also highlights our organisational commitment to quality and transparency in customer service delivery.

It is important for any organisation seeking to achieve quality customer service delivery that staff are equally recognised as customers. This is based on the premise that excellent customer service starts internally and is reflected externally. The standards set out in our Customer Charter apply to staff as well as to external customers. We have also set out below a number of key additional commitments relating specifically to internal customer service.

In Chapter 4 of this Plan we set out in detail the steps we are taking to live up to the commitments in our Customer Charter, by reference to each of the principles of Quality Customer Service for the Public Service. These principles inform every aspect of our customer service activity.

Customer Charter

At the Office of the Refugee Applications Commissioner, we are committed to delivering a high-quality service to our customers. This charter sets out the standards of service customers can expect from us.

Our Commitments

1. Quality service for all

We are committed to making sure that our services take into account the needs of all our customers whatever their background, and in particular, the needs of those groups identified in equality legislation.

2. Personal callers to our office

- Our office will be open from 8.45 a.m. to 4.00 p.m. Monday to Friday (apart from public holidays).
- We will try to keep waiting times in our reception areas to a minimum.
- If you have an appointment we will see you promptly when you arrive.
- We will deal with you politely and as quickly as possible.
- We will keep our reception and waiting areas clean and tidy, and will improve our facilities where necessary.
- If you need an interpreter, we will provide one.

- We will continue to review and improve our access for our customers with disabilities.

3. Documents

- We will produce all documents (such as forms and information leaflets) in as user-friendly a format as possible and in an appropriate range of languages.

4. Phone enquiries

- We will answer your calls from 9.15 a.m. to 5.30 p.m. Monday to Thursday and from 9.15 a.m. to 5.15 p.m. on Friday (apart from public holidays).
- We will deal with your call politely and as quickly as possible.
- We will give you our name and tell you which unit we work in.
- If we cannot deal with your enquiry promptly, we will explain this and arrange to call you back or write to you as soon as possible.
- If we have to transfer your call, we will tell you who we are transferring you to and why.

5. Correspondence

- We will acknowledge all correspondence (letters, e-mails or faxes) within five working days of receiving it.
- We will send you a full reply within 20 working days or, if this is not possible, we will send you an explanation of our current position and what we will do next.
- All our letters will give a contact name and phone number.
- All our letters will be written in simple English and we will only use technical and legal terms where necessary.

6. Interviews and decisions on asylum applications

If we are interviewing you about your asylum application, we will do the following:

- We will give you written notice of the date and time of your interview.
- We will try to meet any special needs you have because of a medical condition or disability that you have told us about.
- At your interview we will give you the opportunity to fully explain your case and any fears you might have about returning to your country.
- In carrying out your interview, we will take into account your age and sex, and any traumatic experiences you have had.
- If you need an interpreter for your interview, we will provide one.
- We will assess your case fairly and independently.
- We will make a decision about your application as soon as possible after your interview.
- We will write to you with our decision and tell you what the next step in the asylum process will be. For example, if your application is unsuccessful, we will tell you about any appeal options you may have.

You will find more information about the interview process in our information leaflet for applicants.

7. Complaints

You have a right to complain if the service you receive from us does not meet the standards set out in this charter, or if you believe that any action or decision that we have taken is not in line with our rules, practice or policy. If you want to make a

complaint, please write to our Customer Liaison Officer (see section 12 for details). For all complaints we receive, we will do the following:

- Acknowledge them by letter within five working days of receiving them.
- Investigate them thoroughly.
- Send you a full reply within 20 working days or, if this is not possible, send you an explanation of our current position and what we will do next.

You will find a copy of our complaints procedure on our website (www.orac.ie) or you can contact our Customer Service Centre by phone or e-mail (see section 12 for details).

Please note that this complaints procedure does not cover our decisions about asylum applications or how we arrive at these decisions. If, after your interview, your application is unsuccessful, you can appeal to the Refugee Appeals Tribunal.

8. Consultation

We are committed to ongoing consultation with various non-governmental organisations (NGOs) who represent our customers' interests. This formal consultation process involves the Customer Liaison Panel for NGOs. This panel meets every six months or more often if necessary. As part of our

continuing commitment to this process, we will continue to consult members of the panel about the following:

- Our customers' interests and needs.
- The range and quality of our service.
- The accuracy of the information we supply.
- The standard of the documents we produce.
- The suitability of our service delivery methods.
- How changes in laws and regulations affect our services.
- Our planned new services.

We will also continue to hold regular meetings with the various governmental organisations involved in the asylum process to deliver quality customer service.

9. Listening to you

As well as consulting NGOs, we will hold customer surveys at least twice a year to get your comments and views. These surveys will form part of our process to improve and, where necessary, change our service delivery so that we continue to meet our customers' needs.

If you want to take part in our surveys, please write to our Customer Liaison Officer (see section 12 for details).

10. Confidentiality

We will keep confidential any personal information you give us. We may pass your information to other government agencies in line with the Immigration Act 2003 so that they can perform their legal duties. We may also pass your information to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees in line with the terms of the



Refugee Act, 1996 (as amended), and to other countries using the Dublin II Regulation or Dublin Convention. The Dublin II Regulation and Dublin Convention provide the legal basis for deciding which EU Member State is responsible for examining an asylum application made in another Member State (including Iceland and Norway).

11. Our website

We will make sure that our website:

- is updated regularly;
- is accessible to people with disabilities; and,
- contains relevant information for our customers and other organisations we work with.

We welcome your comments about our website, which you can send on-line.

Our website address is: **www.orac.ie**



12. How to contact us

The Office of the Refugee Applications Commissioner

Timberlay House
79-83 Lower Mount Street
Dublin 2
Telephone: 01 602 8000
Lo-call: 1890 202 418
Fax: 01 602 8122
E-mail: oracmail@orac.ie

Customer Service Commitments to Staff



We are committed to ensuring that our staff are recognised as customers and this philosophy is integrated into our internal procedures and business planning. Similar standards in respect of timeliness, courtesy, consultation and clarity of information, as set out above, will also apply to the needs of staff as internal customers. In addition, we are committed to:

- Cultivating an environment in which communication at all levels of the office is effective and meaningful, within and between Units as well as between staff and their managers.
- Further embedding the partnership approach and encouraging staff participation in strategic and business planning as well as in the management of change at Unit and organisational level.
- Providing a structured approach to the management of human resources, having regard to the career development and other personal needs of all staff.
- Ensuring that a comprehensive training strategy and programme is in place and is successfully delivering the skills and knowledge to enable staff to perform to the best of their ability.

Chapter 4 of this Plan contains details of the actions we will take to deliver on these commitments.

4

Delivering on our Customer Service Commitments

This Chapter describes how we intend to live up to the external and internal customer commitments set out in Chapter 3, by reference to each of the 12 Quality Customer Service Principles which have been agreed for the Public Service.

1. Quality Service Standards

'Publish a statement that outlines the nature and quality of service which customers can expect, and display it prominently at the point of service delivery.'

We published our Customer Charter in June, 2004. The Charter sets out the standards of service customers can expect to receive on contacting us.

In preparing our Customer Charter we were conscious of the fact that English is not the first language of many of our customers so it was important that it be available in simple and easy to read English. This was achieved by referring the document in draft format for 'plain English' proofing to recognised experts in that field. The Charter was awarded the Crystal Mark to reflect the clarity of English language used and it was also published in a number of the most commonly used applicant languages (as well as Irish) and displayed in the various language formats on our website. Every applicant receives a copy of the Charter when making their initial application for asylum.

We also developed a poster summarising our customer commitments to complement the Customer Charter and a copy of this poster is displayed in prominent locations throughout our Offices, again in a number of the most commonly used applicant languages. Copies of the poster are also available for use by NGOs and State agencies should they require them.

Key Action Points

- Continue to ensure that information regarding our customer service standards is prominently displayed and widely distributed.
- Keep under review the content and presentation of our Customer Charter,



including the languages in which it is available, to ensure its continued relevance and accessibility.

- Highlight the significance of our customer service standards within the organisation and include them as part of staff induction and customer service training modules.
- Monitor our performance against these customer service standards, through direct customer surveys, liaison with NGOs and other methods and make available the results of such exercises.

2. Equality/Diversity

'Ensure the rights to equal treatment established by equality legislation, and accommodate diversity, so as to contribute to equality for the groups covered by the equality legislation (under the grounds of gender, marital status, family status, sexual orientation, religious belief, age, disability, race and membership of the Traveller community).'

Identify and work to eliminate barriers to access to services for people experiencing poverty and social exclusion, and for those facing geographic barriers to services.'

We are committed to ensuring that our services take into account the needs of all our customers whatever their background, and in particular those groups identified in equality legislation. Given the core function of our Office, considerable care must be taken to ensure the fair treatment of persons from diverse ethnic and religious backgrounds but other types of diversity, amongst staff as well as external customers, must also be accommodated. An Equality Officer has been appointed in order to highlight these issues and to co-ordinate how we address them.

An Equality Policy and Programme has been developed for the Organisation through our

Partnership Committee. One of the issues the programme emphasises is the importance of ensuring that staff are enabled to meet commitments to equal treatment through appropriate training, supplemented by other support structures. To this end we have developed an interculturalism awareness training module, with assistance from the National Consultative Committee on Racism and Interculturalism Awareness (NCCRI) and are making it available to all staff.

Key Action Points

- Further develop and ensure full implementation of ORAC's Equality Policy and Programme.
- Raise awareness of equality/diversity issues through training and information dissemination as well as 'lunch and learn' and similar presentations from customer groups.
- Liaise with the Equality Authority as well as other relevant statutory and non-statutory bodies to ensure that we remain up to date and informed of best practice in this area.
- Participate in public sector-wide programmes designed to address equality/diversity issues.
- Ensure that equality/diversity issues are considered in our business planning process and that new initiatives are 'proofed' in this regard.
- Continually evaluate specific needs which might arise as a consequence of our diverse customer base and liaise with relevant representative groups with a view to meeting such needs.



3. Physical Access

'Provide clean, accessible public offices that ensure privacy, comply with occupational and safety standards and, as part of this, facilitate access for people with disabilities and others with specific needs.'

We are committed to providing appropriate physical access to our buildings for internal and external customers and to ensuring that our offices are clean and safe. As an organisation with a busy reception area, this is an area where considerable work has already been done and customer feedback to date has been positive. In addition, as part of our Equality Policy and Programme, access issues are now fully integrated into the work of our Health and Safety Committee. This is an area which remains under continuing review and our practices and procedures are updated and amended as appropriate.

Key Action Points

- Continue to maintain all our offices to a standard which adheres to a high level of safety and comfort for staff and other customers.
- Ensure that a full access audit is conducted in respect of all our offices, with the assistance of relevant experts.
- Having regard to the issues identified in this audit, endeavour to improve access for persons with disabilities or special needs.

- Consult staff with special access needs and with organisations representing the interests of other customers with such needs.
- Include access and disability issues as a standard agenda item on all meetings of our Health and Safety Committee.
- Ensure our information on our services and processes is disseminated widely, including by electronic means and through NGOs and relevant State agencies, to help to reduce physical or geographical barriers to accessing our services.

4. Information

'Take a proactive approach in providing information that is clear, timely and accurate, is available at all points of contact, and meets the requirements of people with specific needs. Ensure that the potential offered by Information Technology is fully availed of and that the information available on public service websites follows the guidelines on web publications.'

'Continue the drive for the simplification of rules, regulations, forms, information leaflets and procedures.'

Refugee status determination is a complex process and, in order to comply with the requirements of the Refugee Act as well as natural justice, we have always provided comprehensive information to applicants. This information includes details on the refugee determination process from start to finish, as well as on applicants' entitlements and obligations generally. Information is also provided about the other relevant State agencies, including the Refugee Legal Service and also some of the main NGOs which may be in a position to assist them. This information is provided in a broad range of applicant languages (currently 26). Expressing this information in easy to understand terms is

a challenge, given the inherently technical and legal nature of many of the concepts and terms.

We are also committed to ensuring that comprehensive information is available to other customers, including members of the public, NGOs, academics, journalists and other government departments. It is also our policy to advise key customer representative groups of important developments in our procedures and services as they happen. Effective internal dissemination of information is equally important, both as an end in itself, and in order to deliver quality external communications.

While information is of course available by attending the Office in person, the main points of external contact for information provision is our Customer Service Centre (Lo-call number 1890 202 418) and our website (www.orac.ie). Our Customer Charter sets out the standards we are committed to achieving in respect of dealing with all correspondence, including requests for information.



Key Action Points

- Ensure that all forms and information leaflets are written in simple and easy to understand English. Achieve this by regular review and with advice from relevant experts as necessary.
- Continue to provide all forms and information leaflets in a broad range of applicant languages and provide interpretation facilities where necessary.
- Monitor our success in achieving the standards set in our Customer Charter for handling correspondence and keep those standards under review as necessary.
- Ensure that all front line staff are trained in best customer service and telephone technique practice and that they are aware of, or have ready access to, the most up to date information relating to our activities and the customer service commitments of the Office.
- Monitor and evaluate our website to ensure that it is kept up to date, is well presented and easy to use (including for persons with a disability) and contains all relevant information and statistics relating to our activities.
- Adopt a proactive approach to maximising dissemination of information concerning the organisation's activities, including through relevant NGOs.
- Ensure that our Internal Communications Strategy enables all staff within the organisation to be familiar with significant developments affecting the office and the background to them.
- Consult with customers directly, and through representative organisations, with a view to ensuring that we are meeting our commitments in the area of information accessibility and clarity.
- Review the content of the information leaflet issued to applicants for family reunification to ensure that it fully explains the process.
- Develop an External Communications Strategy in 2005 to meet the organisations needs.
- Conduct a comprehensive review of the External Communications Strategy in 2007.

5. Timeliness and Courtesy

'Deliver quality services with courtesy, sensitivity and the minimum delay, fostering a climate of mutual respect between provider and customer. Give contact names in all communications to ensure ease of ongoing transactions.'

Our Customer Charter sets out the standards we aim to meet in respect of courtesy and timeliness. These standards will apply in all our dealings with customers, whether over the telephone, in writing or in person.

Our success to date in meeting these standards can be seen from the very positive results of our first two customer surveys, carried out in late 2003 and in 2004 (details are available on our website – www.orac.ie).

For many of our customers, the most important single interaction with the Office is the interview held in connection with their application for asylum. We are committed to ensuring that this experience is as relaxed and constructive as possible, that interpretation is provided as necessary and that a fair, well-informed and clearly reasoned decision is provided to the applicant with minimum delay following the interview. In order to make this possible, considerable staff resources have been assigned to the processing of cases and extensive case processing training and support systems are in place and continually being enhanced.

Specialised procedures and training have also been provided to enable staff to deal with applicants that might have special needs insofar as the refugee process is concerned, such as minors, as well as how best to manage gender or trauma issues in the interview setting.

The period of time an applicant must wait before being interviewed is not entirely within the control of this office and is influenced by a range of factors, including the level of applications on hands, the staff resources

available and whether the particular applicant is subject to a Ministerial Prioritisation Directive. A key strategic objective, however, is to complete most prioritised cases within 5-6 weeks of application and a majority of other cases in under six months. Our business planning is focused on the achievement of this objective.

The other core statutory function of the Office is the investigation of applications from persons granted refugee status for certain family members to join them in Ireland or to be regularised if they are already here. Under the Refugee Act persons with refugee status may apply to the Department of Justice, Equality and Law Reform for Family Reunification. These cases are referred to ORAC for investigation, following which a detailed report is provided to the Minister, who then makes the final decision on the case.

As with the investigation of applications for asylum, the time frame for reporting to the Minister on these cases is influenced by a range of external factors including the number of applications received, as well as delays in receipt of correct documentation from the applicants. Notwithstanding these difficulties, we are conscious that applicants will be anxious to receive a decision on their case as soon as possible. Our objective is therefore, to complete our report for the Department in under two months of the case being referred to us.

Key Action Points

- Continue to carry out refugee status determination with professionalism and integrity, through ongoing development of training and with the assistance of case processing support services and a structured quality assurance system.
- Monitor processing times in respect of asylum and family reunification applications and seek to keep such times to the minimum consistent with available resources.

- Continue to provide customer service, telephone techniques and interculturalism awareness training on an ongoing basis. Fully integrate the principles and commitments contained in our Customer Charter and Customer Service Action Plan into all customer service training.
- Involve staff in the ongoing evaluation of our services and encourage everyone to take an active part in identifying and implementing means of improving our customer service delivery.
- Monitor customer satisfaction, by reference to standards of courtesy and timeliness set out in our Customer Charter, using direct customer survey and liaison with NGOs, and make available results of that feedback.
- Further develop existing correspondence tracking systems to facilitate the ongoing monitoring of response times to correspondence to ensure that they remain within the time commitments outlined in our Customer Charter.

6. Complaints

'Maintain a well publicised, accessible, transparent and simple-to-use system of dealing with complaints about the quality of service provided.'

While we make every effort to deliver high quality service, we recognise that from time to time individual customers may nonetheless be unhappy with the service received. We have developed and published, in consultation with staff and our Customer Liaison Panel, a transparent and easy to use Customer Complaints Procedure. This complaints procedure is summarised in our Customer Charter (provided to all applicants) and is set out in full at **Appendix 2** to this Plan as well as being available to view on our website.

The complaint procedure contains an appeals mechanism for those customers who are unhappy with the decision on their complaint.

Key Action Points

- Conduct a comprehensive review of the Customer Complaints Procedure and guidelines to staff during 2005 in consultation with the Customer Service Liaison Panel and our staff.
- Keep the customer complaints procedure under ongoing review during the life of this Plan, in light of experience gained in dealing with complaints.
- Review on an ongoing basis our guidelines for staff involved in handling complaints.
- Ensure all staff are aware of the complaints process and have an opportunity to input into its ongoing review.
- Evaluate feedback received in the form of complaints and incorporate into review of service delivery.

7. Appeals

'Maintain a formalised, well publicised, accessible, transparent and simple-to-use system of appeal/review for customers who are dissatisfied with decisions in relation to services.'

The Refugee Appeals Tribunal was established as a statutory independent authority under the terms of the Refugee Act to consider appeals against negative recommendations made by the ORAC relating to asylum applications.

It is important to distinguish between this statutory appeals procedure, which deals with the substance of the recommendations made in respect of asylum applications, and our customer complaints mechanism which deals with dissatisfaction regarding the quality of service received.

Key Action Point

- Ensure that applicants for a declaration as a refugee continue to be advised of their rights in relation to appeal to the Refugee Appeals Tribunal.

8. Consultation and Evaluation

'Provide a structured approach to meaningful consultation with, and participation by, the customer in relation to the development, delivery and review of services. Ensure meaningful evaluation of service delivery.'

We recognise that consultation is the key to understanding the needs and expectations of both external customers and our staff. Consultation is also a mechanism through which we can monitor and evaluate the effectiveness of our customer service delivery and ensure that the service continues to meet the needs of our customers into the future. Our Customer Charter includes commitments in relation to consultation, specifically through a Customer Liaison Panel for NGOs as well as by means of direct customer survey. Similarly, internal consultation is an essential component of successful service delivery and will continue to be enhanced, in accordance with our Internal Communications Strategy.

A list of our main contact organisations can be seen at **Appendix 1**.

Key Action Points

- Continue to develop and enhance existing structures for consultation and external evaluation during the life of the Plan.
- Arrange at least two meetings each year of the Customer Liaison Panel for NGOs at which issues relating to service delivery can be discussed.
- Liaise bilaterally or otherwise with particular NGOs on issues of mutual interest.
- Raise awareness within the Office of the role played by NGOs and the contribution they can make to our understanding of customer needs and the impact of our actions on customers.

- Involve the Customer Liaison Panel in monitoring of achievement of our Customer Service standards.
- Continue to ensure regular bilateral meetings with other government bodies on matters of common interest.
- Conduct at least two customer surveys each year to facilitate the evaluation of our service delivery. Vary themes addressed in surveys, as well as methods employed, in order to obtain a broad insight into impact on customers.
- Continue to develop internal consultation mechanisms (see section 12 below on *Internal Customer*).



9. Choice

'Provide choice, where feasible in service delivery, including payment methods, location of contact points, opening hours and delivery times. Use available and emerging technologies to ensure maximum access and choice, and quality of delivery.'

Our Office in Mount Street is open to the public from 8.45 a.m. to 4.00 p.m. (including lunch time) from Monday to Friday, excluding public holidays. A Lo-call telephone number is also available as a means of making enquiries with the Office, other than by attending in person, and prepaid envelopes are provided to applicants in order to return completed application questionnaires. In addition, our website enables applicants and others to

access a wide range of information about our services and to give us feedback without having to contact us in person.

Key Action Points

- Continue to use our website as a mechanism to provide information on services and further develop our on-line feedback and query facility for customers.
- Ensure that our Customer Service Centre is adequately resourced and that staff have customer service and telephone techniques training and that they are aware of, or have ready access to, the most up to date information relating to our activities and the customer service commitments of the Office.
- Continue to arrange work patterns in our Reception Unit so that there is sufficient staff cover from 8.45 a.m. to 4.00 p.m. (including lunchtime), from Monday to Friday, excluding public holidays.

10. Official Languages Equality

'Provide quality services through Irish and/or bilingually and inform customers of their right to choose to be dealt with through one or other of the official languages.'

We will continue to make every effort to ensure that those customers wishing to conduct their business with us through Irish can do so.

Key Action Points

- Ensure that we fully meet our obligations under the Official Languages Act.
- Monitor demand for Irish languages services, with a view to ensuring that satisfactory resources and other arrangements are in place to meet that demand.

- Continue to provide key publications (Annual Reports, Strategy Statement, Customer Charter etc.) in both official languages and enhance Irish language information available on our website.
- Continue to promote Irish language use to all staff, including by making available opportunities to acquire and enhance Irish language skills.

11. Better Co-ordination

'Foster a more co-ordinated and integrated approach to delivery of public services.'

There is a need for ongoing liaison between all of the agencies involved in the asylum process, while recognising that each has a separate and in some cases a statutorily independent role to play in that process. Increasingly, both customers and the public rightly expect Government agencies to operate in a 'joined up' fashion and, in so doing, make the best use of available resources.

We have in place a number of formal liaison structures with relevant State agencies and are represented on a variety of national and EU fora which address issues relating to the asylum process. We also meet bilaterally with individual agencies as the need arises in order to ensure a co-ordinated approach, where appropriate.

We are also, of course, part of a broader public service which extends beyond the asylum process and are fully committed to participation in the Public Service Modernisation Programme, as reflected in the *Sustaining Progress* agreement and elsewhere.

Key Action Points

- Continue to participate in national and EU fora on asylum-related issues.

- Ensure broad dissemination of information regarding our policies and procedures to other relevant Government agencies.
- Liaise with other agencies as necessary in order to address co-ordination issues and to pool expertise as appropriate.
- Through our Internal Communications Strategy, keep staff aware of significant developments in other asylum/immigration agencies and of possible implications for our work.
- Continue our participation in the Civil Service wide *Quality Customer Service Network* to ensure our approach to service delivery is consistent with best practice.
- Publicise within ORAC developments in the broader public sector and aim to ensure that Civil Service wide schemes and initiatives are made available to staff in line with best practice, organisational needs permitting.

12. Internal Customers

'Ensure staff are recognised as internal customers and that they are properly supported and consulted with regard to service delivery issues.'

In Chapter 3, we set out our broad commitments to staff as internal customers. Many of the headings above touch on actions we will be taking over the life of this Plan in order to meet those commitments. A number of additional actions dealing specifically with the internal customer are listed below.

Since our establishment, we have worked to provide a positive working environment for staff and have devoted particular attention to training and support services as well as to consultation. In 2003 we established an ORAC Partnership Committee, following presentations to all staff on the partnership model. Since

then Partnership has already played a key role in organisational planning, notably in the development of an Internal Communications Strategy and in the preparation of our Equality Policy and Programme.



Key Action Points

- Integrate internal customer service issues into the business plan of each Unit, in particular by identifying how best to interact with other Units and staff members.
- Continue to hold regular meetings of the Partnership Committee and refer significant organisational issues for its consideration. Encourage staff ideas, contributions and participation, including through membership of working groups assigned to examine specific issues.
- Ensure that the Organisation's Internal Communication Strategy is implemented and enhanced over time and that each Unit's business plan includes arrangements for regular meetings and meaningful two way communication between staff and managers.
- Design and then ensure the full and effective implementation of an overall Human Resource Strategy for the Office.

- Incorporate a training strategy into the Human Resource Strategy, involving a training needs analysis driven by the PMDS and business planning process, together with annual training plans and evaluation of outcomes.
- Identify issues relevant to the provision of quality internal customer service through consultation with staff including by means of climate survey and PMDS upward feedback.

5

Procedure for Monitoring and Reporting on Progress

We will put in place a range of mechanisms to measure our success in meeting the customer service commitments set out in this Plan. These mechanisms will provide us with valuable guidance on how we are performing as well as an indication as to where we need to adjust or enhance our efforts. New developments in our operating environment will also require us to be flexible and to take account of changed circumstances.

Information on the progress we are making in respect of our customer service commitments will be disseminated and discussed with external customers and staff on a regular basis.

ORAC's Business Planning and Reporting Process

The head of each of our Units is required to ensure that the customer service commitments outlined in this Action Plan and in the Customer Charter are reflected in their Unit's annual business plan. The steps to be taken and the persons responsible within the Unit are clearly set out in each Business Plan, along with a specified timeframe. Staff in each Unit are involved in the preparation of these Business Plans and the progress made is discussed at Unit meetings. Each Unit's progress is subject to monthly reporting as well as quarterly and annual review by the Refugee Applications Commissioner and senior

management. Where these reviews indicate that progress is not being made as planned or where new circumstances require an adjustment to the Plan, appropriate measures will be agreed and implemented.

Monitoring of Service Targets

Our Customer Charter sets out a range of commitments in terms of timeliness in responding to all types of correspondence. At least once a year, we will analyse our success in reaching these targets, using data from our correspondence tracking systems.

We will also sample waiting and processing times in our public areas and monitor the time it takes us to process applications (for asylum and for family reunification) from start to finish, in order to benchmark our progress in this regard.

Customer Surveys

Our Customer Charter commits us to surveying our external customers at least twice a year. Our intention is to seek opinions on a number of key issues (courtesy, clarity of information, etc.) on an ongoing basis but to also identify specific aspects of our service delivery for survey on a less frequent basis. Our first two surveys were conducted by direct surveying of customers through questionnaires, the results of which were collated by our Customer

Service Centre. Over the life of this Plan we will examine other means of surveying customer opinion, including through third parties. The results of these surveys will be made public and where issues requiring attention are identified, we will address them, to the extent that they are within our control.

Customer Liaison Panel for NGOs

ORAC has a Customer Liaison Panel, on which several of the main Non-Governmental organisations which promote the interests of asylum and family reunification applicants are represented. This forum has always worked well as a means of obtaining feedback on customer service issues but, from the end of 2004 and as part of our *Sustaining Progress Action Plan*, the Panel will have a formal role in the evaluation of our customer service delivery. Essentially, each of the NGOs will be asked to complete a questionnaire, based on their interaction with the persons and groups they represent, as to how we performed in respect of each of the commitments in our Customer Charter.

Views of Staff as Internal Customers

As described in Chapter 4, a range of mechanisms are in place to obtain feedback from staff on how their needs as internal customers are being met. In particular, the Partnership Committee provides a forum for these issues to be raised, as do the regular Unit meetings. In addition, feedback will be received over the life of this Plan through climate survey and other staff survey and input mechanisms as appropriate.

Update on Customer Service Progress in Our Annual Report

Under the Refugee Act, the Refugee Applications Commissioner is required to submit an annual report on her Office's activities to the Minister for Justice, Equality and Law Reform. This report is published and made available on our website (www.orac.ie).

Over the life of this Plan, each Annual Report will include an update on significant customer service developments during the year in question, together with information on the results of all of the feedback and monitoring mechanisms described under the above headings.

Review of the Customer Service Action Plan 2005-2008

In the last quarter of 2006 we will conduct a mid term review of progress made against the commitments to customers outlined in our Customer Service Action Plan 2005-2008. This review will be carried out in consultation with our main customer groups; staff, other Government bodies involved in the asylum process and the members of our Customer Liaison Panel for Non-Governmental Organisations.

Appendix 1

Our Main Contact Organisations

Statutory and Legal Bodies

Department of Justice, Equality and Law Reform

Reception and Integration Agency (RIA)

Refugee Appeals Tribunal

Garda Síochána

Legal Aid Board (including the Refugee Legal Service)

Department of Social and Family Affairs

Health Boards

Office of the Chief State Solicitor

United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees

EURASIL

Intergovernmental Consultations on Asylum Matters

Office of the Attorney General

Office of Public Works

Customer Liaison Panel for NGO Sector

Vincentian Refugee Centre

Irish Refugee Council

NASC – Irish Immigrant Support Centre

Spiratan Asylum Services Initiatives (SPIRASI)

African Refugee Network

Integrating Ireland Network

Doras Luimní

Appendix 2

Complaints Procedure

Our Commitment

The Office of the Refugee Applications Commissioner is committed to promoting quality, openness and transparency in the delivery of services to our customers. The Office aims to meet these standards at all times. However, if you are not satisfied with the standard of service you received it is open to you to make a written complaint and we undertake to deal with all complaints received promptly, thoroughly and fairly.

An acknowledgement will issue within 5 working days and a full reply within 20 working days of the complaint being received. Where this is not possible, you will be advised accordingly and issued with regular updates regarding the progress of your complaint.

We also undertake to ensure, where necessary, that the causes of complaints are rectified and not repeated in the future.

What issues are covered?

This complaints procedure concerns complaints relating to the level and standard of service provided by this Office:

- delays
- mistakes
- poor customer service – instances where

you did not receive the level of service to which this Office is committed to providing in its Customer Service Action Plan.

What issues are not covered?

Issues not covered by this procedure include:

- Complaints that are on hands at the date this procedure came into effect.
- Complaints against the determination process leading to decisions made by this Office in relation to applications for a declaration for refugee status for which there is a statutory independent appeals authority (Refugee Appeals Tribunal).
- Complaints against matters which are, or have been, before the Courts.

How do I make a complaint?

The first step is to contact the Customer Liaison Officer by any of the following means to request a complaints form:

- by fax – **(01) 638 8385**
- in writing –
**Customer Liaison Officer,
Office of the Refugee
Applications Commissioner,
79-83 Lr. Mount Street,
Dublin 2.**

- by e-mail – **oracmail@orac.ie**
- by completing a request for a complaints form on our website – **www.orac.ie**

The second step is to ensure that the form you receive is correctly completed and signed before it is returned to this Office in the **FREEPOST** envelope provided. It is important to note that (i) any forms received which are incomplete or unsigned will be returned for completion and signature, and (ii) individuals calling in person to make complaints will be given a complaints form to complete and return.

While complaints received in writing other than on the official complaints form will be processed, providing they are signed by the complainant and contain all the information necessary to process the complaint, the Office would encourage use of the official complaints form to ensure that all relevant information is provided.

Complaints made by legal representatives on behalf of clients or by legal guardians acting on behalf of minors will be accepted.

Generally speaking it will not be possible to investigate complaints relating to events which occurred more than six months prior to the date of a complaint being lodged.

Complaints made in Irish or other languages

The Office of the Refugee Applications Commissioner undertakes to make every effort to deal with any complaint through Irish, if requested. Having regard to our diverse customer base, it is also open to complainants to complete the complaint form in whichever language is most convenient for them.

What we will do on receipt of your complaint?

On receipt of your complaint we undertake to:

- acknowledge it within 5 working days and provide you with a copy of our complaints procedure
- investigate it thoroughly
- issue a full reply within 20 working days of your complaint being received, and where this is not possible, we will issue you with regular updates regarding the progress of your complaint
- where appropriate, provide an explanation for and/or an undertaking to address the issue raised in the complaint.

What if I'm not happy with the reply I receive?

If you are not happy with the reply you receive it is open to you to seek to have the matter reviewed within 10 working days from the date of the reply. Applications for review received outside of the 10 day time limit will not be considered.

How do I seek a review?

You can seek a review by writing to the Customer Liaison Officer quoting the relevant complaint reference number and outlining the reasons why you are dissatisfied with the decision you received.

How will my application for review be handled?

Your application for review will be:

- acknowledged within 5 working days of receipt
- considered and investigated by an official other than the official who considered your initial complaint
- responded to within 20 working days of receipt and, where this is not possible, we will issue you with regular updates regarding the progress of your application for review.

Appendix 3

Glossary of Terms

Refugee Appeals Tribunal

Statutory body established under the Refugee Act, 1996 to consider appeals from applicants for a declaration as a refugee against negative recommendations of the Refugee Applications Commissioner.

Business Plan

Document produced by an organisation stating its planned work outputs over a specific period of time, in the case of ORAC the period is 12 months.

Performance Management and Development System (PMDS)

PMDS is a civil service wide scheme, the goal of which is to contribute to continuous improvement in performance by aligning individual and team performance with the goals of the organisation.

Country of Origin Information (COI)

Country of Origin Information consists of many types of information such as legislation, news reports, maps, official documents e.g. passports, work permits. It is used as an aid to determine the substance of an application for a declaration for refugee status.

Declaration as a refugee

As referred to in section 17 of the Refugee Act, 1996, where the Minister for Justice, Equality and Law Reform gives to the applicant concerned, following a recommendation by the Refugee Applications Commissioner, or following a decision of the Refugee Appeals Tribunal to set aside the recommendation of the Commissioner, a statement in writing that s/he is a refugee.

Dublin Convention

The Dublin Convention provides a mechanism for determining the Convention country responsible for considering an application for asylum. The Convention was signed in Dublin on 15 June, 1990 by the member states of the European Community. All member states of the European Union have ratified the Dublin Convention. In addition, Iceland and Norway ratified the Dublin Convention in April, 2001.

Dublin II Regulation

The Dublin II Regulation which came into operation on 1 September, 2003 replaces the Dublin Convention. The Regulation provides a mechanism for determining which Dublin II Regulation country is responsible for examining an application for a declaration for refugee status. All EU member states are bound by the

Regulation with the exception of Denmark who will continue to operate the Dublin Convention with all member states. Iceland and Norway also operate the Regulation.

EURASIL

European Network for Asylum Practitioners/Reseau de l'UE pour les Practiciens de l'Asile. A forum for asylum practitioners in the EU to exchange information on asylum issues such as refugee status determination systems and country of origin information systems.

EURODAC

A system for the electronic exchange of fingerprints of persons over the age of 14 years between EU member states (with the exception of Denmark), together with Iceland and Norway. Fingerprints are transmitted daily to a central database in Luxembourg.

Refugee Legal Service

The Refugee Legal Service is a service offered by the Legal Aid Board which provides legal services to applicants seeking declarations of refugee status.

Temporary Residence Certificate

The Temporary Residence Certificate, provided for under section 9(3)(a) of the Refugee Act, 1996, is a card given to applicants which holds their photograph, name, fingerprint, and other identification data.

United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR)

The Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) was established on 1 January, 1951. The 1951 Convention specifically notes that the United

Nations High Commissioner for Refugees is charged with the task of supervising international conventions providing for the protection of refugees, and ensuring the effective co-ordination of measures taken to deal with the problem in co-operation with the various states.

Partnership Committee/Partnership Process

The national agreement, *Partnership 2000*, provided for the establishment of Partnership Committees in each Department and Office of the Civil Service. The purpose of Partnership Committees is to try to involve staff directly in change and modernisation through discussion and hopefully agreement on how to respond to challenges facing their organisation. Each Committee is representative of staff, management and trade union interests.

The Partnership Committee in ORAC comprises 12 members with 4 representatives from each of the three pillars (staff, management and trade union).



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