



An Roinn Dlí agus Cirt
Department of Justice

End to end review of International Protection Processes

IPO Staff Workshop report

Prepared by the Service Design & Customer Insight team
April 2021



1. Context

- 1.1 A series of workshops were held with staff from the International Protection Office (IPO) on 18 and 19 February 2021. These workshops were conducted as part of the end to end review of the International Protection Process under Action 3.18 of the Catherine Day report. The workshops were designed and facilitated by the Service Design & Customer Insights (SDCI) team: Sarah Kennelly, Aisling Brennan, Julie-Anne Dunne and Céin Sookram.

2. Approach

- 2.1 The SDCI Team carried out 2 workshops with IPO staff in February 2021, each one taking around 1.5 hours. Open invites to attend the workshops were issued to all IPO staff at CO, EO and HEO grades. Overall, 21 people attended these sessions to share their views and experiences of working in the IPO.
- 2.2 A survey was completed by IPO staff in January 2021. The key themes which emerged from the survey were chosen as focus areas for the workshops, namely:
 - Understanding of the Catherine Day report,
 - Communications within the IPO, and
 - Issues with the current process from staff perspectives.
- 2.3 Due to ongoing Covid-19 restrictions, the workshops were conducted over Zoom and a digital whiteboard tool (Miro). The workshops used a mix of digital post it notes and facilitated open discussion to capture people's thoughts at each stage of the workshop. This ensured that all attendees had a chance to contribute to the workshop.
- 2.4 The ideas and views in this report reflect the things people shared at the workshops, it is therefore an amalgamation of the different views, perceptions and opinions of the people who attended the workshops. If there are factual inaccuracies in what people shared at the workshop, then they have been recorded here without correction in order to accurately convey people's understanding and experience.
- 2.5 After the workshops, the SDCI team extracted all content into Excel as a record of the session, and then reviewed and categorised each piece of information from the session. That review and categorisation is the basis

and reference point for the analysis presented here. The workshop extracts and analysis are the primary data source for this report.

3. General Insights

- 3.1 Below represents a **high level analysis** and synthesis of the material from the workshops. A highlevel snapshot of the workshop flow can be seen in Appendix 1.
- 3.2 Issues with IT systems in use in IPO came up as a repeated theme during the workshops. The key issues are:
 - 1. Poor ability to draw statistical information from IT systems and to generate meaningful reporting,
 - 2. Not all details get recorded on the systems,
 - 3. It is easy to make errors if systems not used correctly, and
 - 4. Insufficient training on IT systems for all staff.

4. Key insights on perceptions of the Catherine Day Report

- 4.1 A group **SWOT analysis** was carried out to examine the Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats presented by the Catherine Day (CD) report in respect of the IPO and its staff.
- 4.2 There is a clear perception from the workshop that the main **strength** of the CD report is that it will **help improve processing times** and all the benefits that accompany that (efficiency, better experience for staff and applicants, reduced waiting times).
- 4.3 The other strengths discussed include that it has a clear direction and vision, that it represents an opportunity to restructure how the legal panel operates and is managed, and that it would lead to more resourcing.
- 4.4 The perceived **weaknesses** of the CD report include that the objectives were potentially unrealistic in many cases and that it did not grasp the complexity of the system and of specific cases. There was some sense that the recommendations might push processing towards speedier processing but at the expense of quality. Other weaknesses identified include lack of detail on how to address backlogs, that the legislation was not adequately addressed and that it didn't make recommendations on LGBTQI and gender issues, amongst some others.
- 4.5 Potential threats raised in relation to the CD report include:

- Independence of decision in the process needs to continue to be independent
- Resourcing and staff turnover impacting on knowledge retention
- Protection process can be used inappropriately by people, and the CD report might increase pull factors
- Potential reputational damage if the recommendations are not implemented properly
- Potential knock on effects in other parts of the system – if PTR grants rise, this may impact on Residence areas.

4.6 In general, people felt that the main opportunity presented by the report was in the chance to improve processes, the efficiency of the system, to create a system that was efficient and that staff and the Department could feel proud of.

“It represents a chance to regain some positive media and faith from the general public who currently have a very dim view of the asylum system. A chance to become more transparent and honest about the process”

5. Key insights on Communications

- 5.1 Communications on a team level appears to be working quite well. People felt positive about the channels available to them (Zoom, verbal, emails etc.) and that people shared knowledge on teams quite well. However communication between teams and from management to staff seemed to be an area that people felt was not working optimally.

Meetings

- 5.2 While some people were happy with the level and standards of meetings, several people felt that there is scope for improvement. Specific issues include **lack of agendas in advance** and lack of follow up with actions and minutes afterwards. Some felt that meetings were more akin to briefing sessions and did not facilitate or allow for discussion of issues.
- 5.3 There are some indications that there are gaps in communications – messaging not passed on from management to other grades. There is also a sense that people are not entirely happy with the way decisions are made at senior level and then passed down to the teams without their input being considered.
- 5.4 Some people have not had a meeting with their manager since the onset of the pandemic.

Communications between teams

- 5.5 It appears from the workshops that communication and **information sharing between teams** is not working effectively. Additionally it is apparent that different teams have quite different experiences in terms of communication generally.
- 5.6 The current working situation is obviously impacting on communications, with some things now taking longer to resolve.

Communication with wider Department

- 5.7 People felt this was working well overall, but perhaps there is an additional layer since Transformation. There was a sense that the IPO view the Department as quite removed from them.
- 5.8 Addresses – **no clear procedure for how to update applicant addresses and which source to use for addresses.** Different units do different things currently.

6. Key insights on Employee Experience

- 6.1 We carried out an employee experience mapping exercise during the workshops. The summarised output of that can be seen in [Figure 1](#). There are 6 main aspects of the map, of which we only looked at 4 in detail.
- 6.2 The aim of this exercise was to get a snapshot of what it is like to be a person at CO, EO or HEO grade working within the IPO. It captures a range of perspectives – there were differences of opinions on various topics, there were differences between different teams and areas and differences depending on when people joined the organisation.
- 6.3 The experience map reflects the things people shared at the workshops, it is therefore an amalgamation of the different views, perceptions and opinions of the people who attended the workshops. If there are factual inaccuracies in what people shared at the workshop, then it has been recorded here without correction in order to accurately **convey people’s understanding and experience.**
- 6.4 There were 3 particular frustrations of staff which strongly emerged in this section:
 - 1. The 2015 Act – people find parts of it inefficient, it is cumbersome to work within to get efficient processing, and people questioned whether it had actually benefitted applicants. Additionally the issues of the use of the words “shall” and “must” in various places were mentioned, and that this sometimes had negative implications for deportations.
 - 2. Judicial Reviews – the significant impact these have on timelines is a huge frustration, with people feeling they received insufficient direction on how to process affected cases.
 - 3. The current system with Panel Members – people feel this is not working well, that it adds significantly to timelines and that the training the members receive is not enough to have them fully operational from the day they start. People feel this system is a cause of a lot of inefficiency and delays in the process.

Purpose

- 6.5 This section asked people to describe what they felt the purpose of their role was. There is a strong and clear sense of purpose, which emerged quite quickly at the workshops.
- 6.6 They are clear that their purpose is to :
- Provide **International Protection** and Subsidiary Protection to those who need it,
 - **Support applicants** in a range of ways, and
 - To make **decisions** on cases in a robust, fair and timely way.
- 6.7 On the whole, people mentioned that the work was **meaningful, purposeful** and **rewarding**.

Employee Experience

What is it like to work in the IPO?

Current Experience

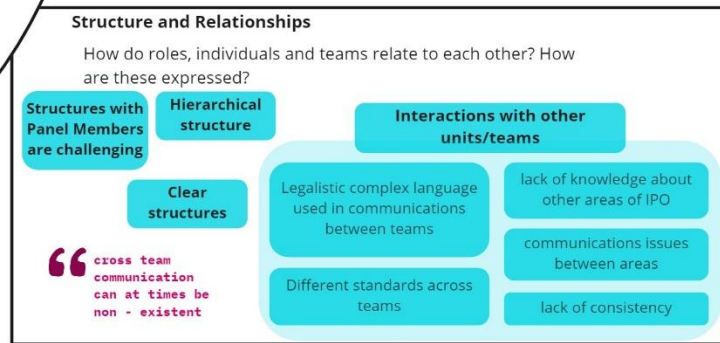
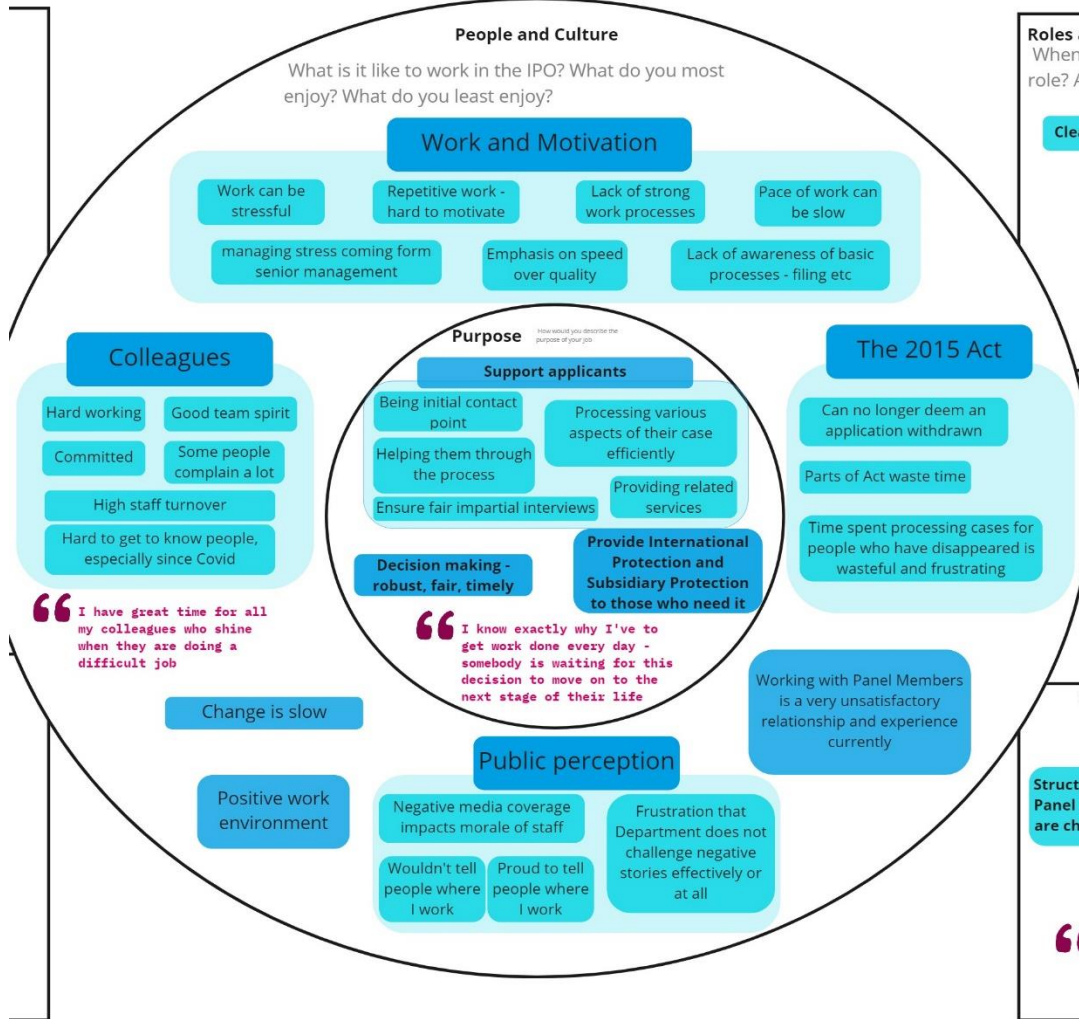


Figure 1 Employee Experience Map

People and Culture

- 6.8 This section asked people to reflect on what it is like to work in the IPO, what they enjoy most and least about the role and area.
- 6.9 4 broad themes emerged in this area which give an indication of the work and culture in the IPO. Further details about these can be seen on the experience map.
- Work and motivation
 - Colleagues
 - The 2015 Act and its impact
 - Public perceptions of the IPO
- 6.10 People spoke highly of their colleagues, commenting on their **dedication and professionalism**, as well as the esprit de corps that exists within teams in particular. On the whole people felt it is a **positive work environment**.
- 6.11 The rate of **staff turnover** was a particular issue raised, both in terms of its impact on corporate knowledge, but also in terms of how long it takes to get new staff up to speed.
- 6.12 Looking at **work and motivation**, people commented that the work can be quite **stressful**, some of it is **repetitive** which makes it hard to keep teams motivated, and also that in some areas work **processes are not clearly and strictly defined**.
- 6.13 The **2015 Act** was a particular source **of contention and frustration**, in particular that significant time needs to be spent on cases that would previously have been considered withdrawn. Fully processing cases from people who had effectively withdrawn from the process negatively impacts the morale of staff as it feels like wasted work.
- 6.14 The **public's perception** of the IPO came up frequently. The **negative media stories** about the IPO leaves people feeling demoralised. People felt that the Department does not do enough to respond to these negative stories and that it perhaps does not understand the very real impact these have on IPO staff. Some felt they would be afraid to say where they worked, but conversely others said they were happy to say where they worked.
- 6.15 Other topics that came up in this section is the current system with **Legal Panel Members**. Staff are very **dissatisfied and frustrated** with how this is currently working, in particular with the system of part time members. People variously expressed that it is difficult to manage work in this area and that it is not an enjoyable area to work in.

Roles and Responsibilities

- 6.16 This section asked people to consider how they learned about their role when they first joined and if their roles and responsibilities are clearly defined.
- 6.17 People overwhelmingly agreed that their **roles are clear and well defined**, that the structures are good and that they **learn a lot from their colleagues** about their roles. Some felt that the improved use of business plans was helping to improve clarity.

- 6.18 People tend to learn about their role through **on the job training**, which appears to work well. This is supported by guidance and feedback from supervisors and managers, for the most part.
- 6.19 On the whole, people felt that training is good, with some room for improvements.
- 6.20 Some issues with training include that it can be **slow to get for new starters**, which means there is a delay in them being able to start into their roles. This situation appears to have been exacerbated by the pandemic. It should also be noted however that some people found they received training very quickly.
- 6.21 Training in areas such as use of **IT systems and databases, and administration and filing rules is an area that appears to need improvement**. People mentioned various issues throughout the workshop with people not using files and stickers correctly, not updating databases correctly, not updating AISIP with file movements, and of being unaware of how this affects work in other units.
- 6.22 A key point that came up is that the standards, timeliness and structure of training seems to differ quite a bit between units.
- 6.23 There was some discussion around the interview training which is provided by UNHCR in particular, which people overall felt was quite good. However some expressed an opinion that they would have liked if the staff from IPO who work in the area had been able to feed into it. Others at the session appeared to say that IPO staff HAD fed into it. This relates back to how information is shared and communicated across the IPO, which has been discussed elsewhere in this report.
- 6.24 The **legislative framework and the legal guidelines** under which people work came up in this section again. People felt that it can add a **layer of confusion** to their roles and procedures, which possibly could have been avoided if they had been include in the design of the legislation.

Structures and Relationships

- 6.25 In this section we looked at how roles, individuals and teams relate to each other, and how these relationships are expressed.
- 6.26 People **acknowledge the hierarchical structure** of the organisation, which is to be expected in the civil service. However there were some comments that some managers were particularly “grade conscious”. People indicted also that they had a lack of autonomy in their work.
- 6.27 The main theme that emerged in this section is that for the most part, **people felt they did not have a good understanding of what other teams in the IPO do**, nor was there good communication between the teams. Additionally it was felt that there were different standards applied to work outputs even from teams working in the same area.
- 6.28 Some felt there is an “us and them” mentality between the teams rather than a sense of cooperation and collaboration. People also mentioned lack of transparency, and that when teams’ work practices change, this isn’t communicated to other teams.

- 6.29 The **legalistic** nature of the work was mentioned here again, with people saying that **communication between teams** was often in very legalistic terms, which can lead to confusion, especially for newer people.
- 6.30 The relationships with Legal Panel Members was described as “strained”. It was also felt that Panel Members are considered ready to take on cases from their first day, but that in reality they need to build up experience before their work is of the appropriate standard.

Physical environment, tools and technology

- 6.31 This section was not covered in detail at the workshop, but a snapshot of the few comments received are included on the experience map.

7. Key Insights on process improvements and pain points

- 7.1 This part of the session was broken into 2 breakout sessions on 18 February due to the size of the group to allow for an open discussion on pain points and process improvements. The outputs from both sessions were then combined with the outputs from the 19 February session and analysed together.
- 7.2 This section was structured so as to look at **4 high level phases of the process**, examining staff’s particular pain points as well as any ideas they had for improvements.
- 7.3 It is worth noting that throughout all of this section, **a strong sense of frustration with the Permission To Remain (PTR) process was expressed**. In very simple terms, the people who assess PTR felt they did not have enough information available to them very often to grant PTR, even in cases where they suspected it would be a viable option. They felt their hands were further tied by the fact that they cannot reach out to the applicant or legal rep to clarify points or seek further information.

Registration phase

Pain points

- 7.4 Misspellings or other issues with a person’s details when registering an application can cause them issues when applying for other services (e.g. social welfare). This can also cause issues for the registration team as it is a long process to change details.
- 7.5 Fingerprinting machines are unreliable and it can be quite slow to get issues fixed. This impacts on initial processing times, but in particular in determining if a person’s case is inadmissible. Inadmissibility relies on quick turnaround times so this is a cause for concern.
- 7.6 Identity documents are not always given to IPO.

Registration phase

Opportunities

- 7.7 Registration section are told to keep the initial interviews to a minimum by managers in that area. However, this negatively impacts case processing at later stages, particularly PTR. **An agreed process and questions could be established to improve this.**
- 7.8 Improving file handling and file movements, with standard agreed procedures would help everyone.

Questionnaire phase

Pain points

- 7.9 **Questions are often left blank**, which causes issues but particularly for the PTR assessment where key information is missing.
- 7.10 People in IPO feel the **questionnaire is too long and too difficult** to understand, and that 3 weeks is too short a timeframe to return it in. It means people don't have time to meet with their legal rep, leading to poorly completed questionnaires. Even with legal representation, the PTR sections are often not completed correctly.
- 7.11 Some felt that additional questions that would help to support a PTR case could be included, particularly around a person's employment details.
- 7.12 **Translations** of returns can take time. There used to be a **Quality Assurance (QA)** process whereby a certain number of translations were checked by another translation company, but this appears to no longer be in place. People are aware of a number of cases with material not being correctly or accurately translated.

Questionnaire phase

Opportunities

- 7.13 Simplifying the language used would help things for applicants and staff.

Interview phase

Pain points

- 7.14 Questions relevant to PTR do not form part of the interview. PTR decisions can only be based off what was said in interview and questionnaire, and so the right questions not being asked severely impacts the ability to grant PTR.
- 7.15 There were some concerns with interpreters for interviews – that they may not be doing remote interpreting from sufficiently private locations and that some interpreters are going through the protection process themselves. Issues arising with interpreters seem difficult to manage and resolve.
- 7.16 The interview process is made extra difficult for applicants due to only being offered one particular day on which to travel.

Interview phase

Opportunities

- 7.17 Opportunity now to make better use of remote interviewing to help clear backlogs.
- 7.18 Ask more questions at interview to support PTR – about family members already here, about employment in the State, Irish partners etc.

Case processing and decision phase

Pain points

- 7.19 There are **delays when applicants having applications in other areas of ISD**, for example Irish Citizen Child. A decision cannot be made on the IP application until the other case is finalised.
- 7.20 The **processes here are heavily paper based**. This leads to related issues such as the quality and efficiency of photocopiers for copying and scanning files, motivation for staff spending hours photocopying difficult, file movements on AISIP (which are also inefficient). The lack of electronic signatures was also seen as an issue.
- 7.21 People felt the system of Legal Panel Members here again causes issues, with concerns raised including that they are paid per case, that they can take a long time to respond to queries/emails, they can be difficult to schedule availability. Timelines are dependent on panel members, which staff feel they have no control over but ultimately take the blame for. It was specifically mentioned that if there was a need for a second interview due to something being missed, some panel members were reluctant to do this as there is no financial incentive.
- 7.22 Staffing and resourcing came up as an issue for case processing also.
- 7.23 Some people cited a concern with being publicly named, especially in relation to high profile cases.
- 7.24 A common frustration in this section was when children are born to people during and after their application process, or when they have a Stamp 4 FRU. This appears to be a gap in either the current legislation or processes, which leaves staff trying to find the most suitable workaround to get these children registered in some way.

Case processing and decision phase

Opportunities

- 7.25 Introduce triaging of cases, which would allow an opportunity to streamline claim by nationality, political, gender, etc. Creating experts on domestic violence, political situations could be an opportunity for streamlining process. Create experts in specific area.
- 7.26 Improving digital solutions would greatly help across the board.

- 7.27 Set time limits on how long to wait for information to be returned to IPO, and follow this up with reminders. Reminders are not currently sent, one reason being that the requests for further info could be in the legal panel member's report, which may not be returned for some time.
- 7.28 Panel members could have a set list of questions that they MUST ask, which would ensure information available for all types of decisions along the process.
- 7.29 People felt there was also a good opportunity to improve how the work of the IPO is communicated with the public.

8. Conclusion and next steps

- 8.1. This workshop report was shared with all attendees of the workshop for their feedback and observations, prior to its completion and sharing with the Programme Board of the Catherine Day Implementation Working Group.
- 8.2. This series of workshops took place following the completion of user perspective and experience surveys by IPO staff, IPAT staff, IPO Legal Panel Members and IPAT Tribunal members. Overall there are 8 individual reports analysing each of these pieces of work.
- 8.3. These 8 reports have been looked at as a whole, and the insights within them used to develop one overall set of recommendations for improvements. In many cases, recommendations are based directly on or lead from ideas that people shared throughout the work. These recommendations will be based on what people shared about their experiences and their roles within the International Protection process, and so for the most part focus on what will improve the experience of working in the International Protection process.
- 8.4. These recommendations have then been cross-referenced with the overall recommendations arising from the overall body of work reviewing the end to end process review of the International Protection Process. Ultimately, this will result in one overall set of recommendations, supported by multiple strands of analysis and research. These recommendations will then be submitted to the Programme Board for consideration, approval and decisions on how to implement.

