

Report on the Review of the Special Passport Facility for Oireachtas Members

Background

1. In response to a series of Parliamentary Questions earlier this year, regarding the existing provision of a special passport facility for Members of the Oireachtas, the then Minister for Foreign Affairs, Mr. Dermot Ahern, TD, indicated that he had asked the Secretary General of his Department, Mr. Dermot Gallagher, to review all aspects of the arrangement, including whether it should be continued.
2. The Minister also indicated that the views of Members of the Oireachtas should be sought on the issue during the course of the review.

The Present System

3. The Department of Foreign Affairs has always over the years sought to be of assistance to Members of the Oireachtas, given their role as elected representatives, in relation to facilitating passport applications. This assistance was put on a more structured basis in the mid 1990s, with the introduction of a special facility in Leinster House allowing for applications to be forwarded through TDs' and Senators' offices.
4. Under this system, passport applications are collected in Leinster House by a Service Officer from the Department. The applications are then processed by a small unit of the Passport Office in Molesworth Street. Completed passports are returned to Leinster House by the Departmental Service Officer, or on occasion they may be posted directly to the applicant, if so requested.
5. The applications are examined for entitlement in precisely the same manner as all other applications. They are also subject to exactly the same fees, including the payment of an additional fee where a passport is required within 48 hours. Likewise, proof of travel is required for applications routed through the special facility where the passport is requested for issue in less than 5 days.
6. Precise levels of usage of the passport facility prior to 2008 are difficult to provide. The primary focus of the unit processing these applications was, understandably, on ensuring the entitlement of applicants to passports. Details of submitting Members and/or their Offices were at the time a secondary consideration. The unit retained manual records of applications received, primarily to permit follow-up in the event of any queries. However, the content of these records is rather poor, with the applications often recorded under the names of contact points in Members' offices.
7. Under a revised system introduced on 18 February 2008, details of all applications received through the facility are recorded electronically. This permits a more precise monitoring of usage of the facility. An analysis of our records show that in a four month period from February to June 2008, applications routed through the facility accounted for less than one per cent of all applications.

8. In addition to the applications which are forwarded by TDs and Senators, the unit processes applications forwarded by some offices of the Health Service Executive. The majority of these applications concern children in care. Included at times over the years also have been applications from the Health Boards, An Garda Síochána, the Defence Forces, and NGOs working in developing countries.

Review Process

9. In pursuit of the mandate given to him, Secretary General Gallagher established a Departmental Committee consisting of officials with particular knowledge and experience in the passport area and good administrative practice. A list of the Committee members is at Appendix 1.
10. At the beginning of the process, Minister Ahern had written to all Members of the Oireachtas seeking their views on the issue and inviting them to respond directly to the Committee. Sixty two written replies were received, all of which were in favour of retaining the facility.
11. In addition, the former Minister had written to the Leaders of political parties in the Oireachtas inviting them to nominate a contact person or persons to discuss the issue with a sub-group of the Committee. The Leaders of Fianna Fáil, Fine Gael and the Labour Party responded and nominated representatives. At subsequent (separate) discussions, the representatives of the three Leaders conveyed a clear desire for the continuation of the facility.
12. The Committee also sought to ascertain if analogous facilities were provided for Parliamentarians in some other countries. As a result, the Committee ascertained that, in Britain for example, the Passport Service provides a dedicated MP hotline number, which MPs can use to contact the passport office on behalf of constituents with immediate passport problems, or to request priority appointments if they themselves are travelling on parliamentary business. In Washington, the Committee ascertained that there is a Special Issuance Agency, which is a separate office within the passport system, whose mandate is to serve the travel needs of officials, including expediting the issuing of passports.

Overview and Recommendation

13. In the experience of the Department, requests to elected representatives usually arise because a passport is required at short notice or because an applicant has encountered some difficulty with the application process. The Department, as said, has always sought to be of assistance to Members in this regard.
14. From an operational perspective, the Department believes that it is more efficient for such applications and queries to be routed through a special facility and a specific unit. This ensures a prompt response and avoids any disruption to the processing of applications by other sections of the Passport Office. It ensures also that the need for formal political representations, including parliamentary questions, on individual applications is all but eliminated, thereby saving on the time of staff.

15. From the Department, the Passport Office and Oireachtas Members' viewpoints, the system is clearly working efficiently and satisfactorily, and the Committee attaches particular importance to this.
16. Inevitably, cases arise where a citizen requires a passport urgently or needs assistance with his or her application. The Passport Office staff is very pleased to assist such applicants. Some applicants will however, as is their right, seek assistance from their elected representatives and it is appropriate that, within agreed parameters, there is provision for dealing with such requests. Channelling requests and applications through a specific unit ensures that they can be processed quickly and efficiently and avoids any disruption to the passport service generally. As stated above, all applications are also subject to the same rigorous process of assessment for entitlement and accuracy.
17. While accepting that the present system was working satisfactory, the Committee were of the view that an additional requirement should be introduced which would see the Oireachtas Member, or a designated member of his/her staff, certifying the need for an application to be routed through the special facility. The Committee would envisage this being implemented through the completion of a short form which would accompany each application. The envisaged form is attached at Appendix 2. This process would also facilitate the keeping of records by the Passport Office, both in terms of follow-up to queries and in compiling and tracking levels of usage.
18. The Committee would wish to note that both the Oireachtas Members who responded to it, and also the representatives of those Party Leaders who met the Sub-Committee, were supportive of this additional measure. On this basis, and in the light of the Department's respect for the role of Oireachtas Members, and the fact that the system to date has been operating efficiently and to the satisfaction of all involved, the Committee recommends that the special facility for passport applications forwarded by Members of the Oireachtas should be retained, with the introduction of the certificate mentioned in paragraph 17.

16 July 2008

Appendix 1

Membership of Review Committee

Dermot Gallagher, Secretary General (chair)
Ray Bassett, Assistant Secretary General
Adrian O'Neill, Assistant Secretary General
John McCullagh, Counsellor
Joe Hackett, Counsellor
Gerry Staunton, Assistant Principal
Deirdre Fannin, Assistant Principal
Lavina Collins, Assistant Principal

Appendix 2

Special Passport Facility for Members of the Oireachtas

Certificate to accompany Passport Application

A copy of this form should be attached to each passport application forwarded by Members of the Oireachtas. The form should clearly indicate the name of the TD or Senator; it may, if necessary, be signed on a Member's behalf by a designated member of his/her staff.

Details of Passport Applicant

Surname

First name

Date of birth

I wish to request that the passport application forwarded in respect of this person be processed through the Special Passport facility for Oireachtas Members because.....
.....

Details of TD/Senator forwarding application

Name

Date

Signature