

THE SUNDAY TIMES

Al Porter
Cocaine, money, naivety...
and an inability to say no



A warm welcome at Rory McIlroy's childhood home



Asylum shake-up to decide claims in three months

Justice minister plans landmark overhaul of immigration

John Mooney
Investigations Editor

Jim O’Callaghan, the justice minister, is planning to open a network of designated reception centres to process asylum applications from certain countries within three months of people lodging their claim, as part of the most significant overhaul of the immigration system in the history of the state.

Under the proposed system, asylum seekers may be required to reside in specific locations and regularly report to authorities to prevent them from living in makeshift encampments or tents on the street in Dublin and the provinces.

A preliminary cost model prepared by the Department of Justice estimates O’Callaghan’s plan will require €875 million in capital to set up, plus annual running costs of €725 million once fully operational by 2026. The figures are based on the government’s plan to process between 10,000 and 18,000 applications annually and to deliver 14,000 state-owned accommodation beds by 2028.

Assuming an annual caseload of 15,000 applicants, additional staff costs in the first year are projected to be €32 million, according to the briefing documents, bringing the total staffing cost to about €117 million.

Under the plan, all screening processes will be completed within seven days and there will be four application streams to process asylum seekers’ claims, to speed up the decision-making process.

The state is planning to open 14,000 beds by 2028 spread across state-owned and privately run

McGREGOR AND MAGA MEET-UP
US RIGHT VISITS DUBLIN
PAGE 10

accommodation centres all over the country. This aims to cut the number of hotels and buildings leased by the International Protection Accommodation Services to house asylum seekers, which is costing almost €1 billion a year.

The use of hotels to house asylum seekers has also inspired protests and arson attacks.

Officials are already planning to scale back plans for accommodation centres on the basis that a more streamlined service coupled with increased deportations will reduce demand for beds.

Tackling illegal immigration is a priority issue for the government as anti-migrant sentiments have led to a surge in far-right extremism, violent disorder and protests across the country.

The move is part of a sweeping overhaul of Ireland’s immigration system by O’Callaghan, who is preparing to publish the General Scheme of an International Protection Bill, to enable the enforcement of the EU’s new Pact on Migration and Asylum.

It will ensure individuals arriving at Irish ports or airports who claim asylum will undergo initial security and identity checks before being registered on enhanced European systems that track all asylum applications.

The new bill will also lower the

age for fingerprinting those making asylum applications to protect children, say justice officials.

The International Protection Office, which processes asylum applications, is to be replaced by a new institution responsible for an efficient first-instance decision covering refugee status, subsidiary protection and return permissions. Appeals will also be handled by a new structure, replacing the International Protection Appeals Tribunal.

There has already been a dramatic increase in the number of applications being refused, with more than 81 per cent of claims being rejected this year. The figure was 28 per cent in 2022.

The reforms will require significant investment in new digital systems to create a fully integrated, end-to-end international protection process, including accommodation management. However, the cost of the new IT systems is expected to be offset by up to €25 million in European Commission funding linked to the implementation of the EU Pact on Migration and Asylum.

The Department of Justice expects the costs of running the system to rise in the short term but that it will ultimately result in substantial long-term savings due to faster decision-making and shorter stays in state-run accommodation.

The average wait time for asylum application appeals is up to 14 months, though some have been delayed for years through appeals.

It is O’Callaghan’s intention to have applications submitted by people from 17 safe countries

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EASTER TRUCE CALLED IN UKRAINE

MARKO DJURICA/REUTERS



Children light candles in a blessing of Easter food baskets on Holy Saturday in the Holy Ascension Church in Kharkiv, Ukraine, as President Putin calls a unilateral ceasefire. Full coverage, pages 2 & 11

Backlash on ‘Grace’ poses threat to all commissions

Jennifer Bray Political Editor

Ministers will seek to rule out future commissions of investigation as a blame game has erupted over the “Grace” report.

At a cabinet meeting last week, concerns were raised about the structure and findings of the report, as well as the fact it took eight years to complete.

The report by the Farrelly commission concerns the treatment of a young woman with profound intellectual disabilities who spent almost 20 years in the care of a foster family, despite concerns having been raised about alleged abuse. While the 2,000-page report found evidence of neglect and financial mismanagement, it found no evidence of physical or sexual abuse.

Amid mounting anger, questions have been raised over a commitment in the programme for government to set up a commission of investigation into historical sexual abuse claims in schools run by religious orders.

There are fears within the coalition that the establishment of this inquiry will be hampered by criticism of the “Grace” report and previous criticism of the mother and baby homes report.

A source in the Department of Education insisted that plans to set up the school abuse inquiry had not changed. Ministers have said privately, however, that future commissions of investigation will be heavily resisted.

“Using commissions of inquiry is not the way forward,” one minister said. “They don’t provide closure, they drag on for years.”

What does this report do for anyone?, page 6



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Minister will ask media regulator to protect child influencers

Julianne Corr

Norma Foley, the minister for children, is set to consult with the media regulator on the possibility of introducing legislation to protect child influencers in Ireland.

Some parents are believed to be earning up to €15,000 per social media post featuring their child, prompting concerns over excessive working hours, financial compensation, the impact on education and violations of the child's right to privacy.

The Sunday Times has shone a light on the lack of legislation in the area with Francis Rees, a law lecturer at the University of Essex, who

is researching the impact of digital child labour on performers under the age of 13 across social media platforms such as TikTok, YouTube and Instagram.

Unlike child models or actors, child influencers fall outside any formal legislative or regulatory framework in Ireland.

Foley said she would engage with Coimisiún na Meán, the broadcasting and media regulator, on the issue.

The campaign is also being backed by Niall Muldoon, Ireland's ombudsman for children, and the Irish Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children.

"There is an onus on all of us to be vigilant in terms of

protecting child influencers," Foley said.

"We need to ensure that this activity does not interfere with their ability to have a happy family life, to spend time with their friends, to get a quality education and to protect their privacy.

"We do have Children First guidelines, which impose a legal duty on mandated professionals to report any suspected emotional, physical or sexual abuse of children. But on the wider issue of providing more protection for child influencers, I intend to engage with Coimisiún na Meán, who have a specific mandate in terms of online safety for children."



Norma Foley, the minister for children, wants to ensure that social media success does not affect children's personal lives

It comes as Chi Onwurah, a senior Labour MP, stated last week that new laws might be needed in the UK to crack down on the exploitation of child influencers.

France was the first country to implement legislation protecting child influencers in 2020, while several American states have since introduced similar laws.

Rees, who has established industry guidelines for child influencers, has warned that children as young as six months old are being posed as "micro-influencers" on behalf of their parents-turned-managers.

The Dublin academic launched the Child Influencer Project at South East

Technological University in Carlow last year and has found at least 1,200 active child influencers in Ireland, but believes there are more.

Foley said there was also an issue with the "lack of a clear and transparent labelling system" to alert children to the fact that they are watching advertisements.

She said: "Most children watching videos from child influencers do not realise that they may be watching a paid-for advertisement. This is because influencers are only required to include a small '#ad' label in the small text above or below their video.

"We need to bring in a requirement for influencers to display a standard ad

warning label on their video footage or image stating that it is an advertisement or a paid product placement. This would have to be in the form of an easy-to-read caption.

"This would allow children to instantly recognise that they are watching an ad. I intend to engage with the Competition and Consumer Protection Commission and the Advertising Standards Authority of Ireland about upgrading their current guidelines to reflect this."

This month Netflix released *Bad Influence: The Dark Side of Kidfluencing*, a documentary exposé of abuse and exploitation within the unregulated world of child influencers.

Pepper spray to halt surge in jail violence

Prison officers will be permitted to use the synthetic incapacitant in emergency situations for the first time

John Mooney
Investigations Editor

Prison officers are to be permitted to use synthetic pepper spray to deal with disorder and violence in the prison system for the first time.

The incapacitant sprays, which mimic the heat effect of chilli peppers, will be used by officers only in emergency situations when they feel there is a risk to their safety or the safety of other inmates.

Jim O'Callaghan, the justice minister, is due to make the announcement in the coming weeks. His department is preparing to amend the 1925 Firearms Act and the Prisons Act of 2007 to allow prison guards to use and carry the spray under the forthcoming General Scheme of Criminal Law and Civil Law (Miscellaneous Provisions) Bill 2025.

Under existing law, gardai are authorised to use pepper spray only to subdue people if they pose a threat.

The use of pepper spray to control dangerous inmates is viewed by O'Callaghan as a proportionate measure to provide protection to inmates and officers, who have been demanding action from the government after a rise in violence in jails across the country. Much of this violence has been fuelled by the use of drugs, especially cocaine and crack, leading to fights, intimidation and deaths.

Violence between inmates in Irish prisons rose by 31 per cent last year, despite a decline in assaults on prison staff and a marked reduction in the use of physical interventions by officers. The increase is attributed to overcrowding and the presence of organised crime gangs in the prison complex.

New figures compiled by the Irish Prison Service show there were 874 prisoner-on-prisoner assaults last year, up from 663 the previous year. The sharpest increases were at Cloverhill, Castlereagh, Cork and the Dochas Centre in Dublin. Cloverhill, which houses many remand prisoners, reported the most inmate-on-inmate attacks for the second year running, with incidents rising from 182 to 262, a 44 per cent jump.

Castlereagh prison in Co Roscommon recorded more than a threefold increase,

“Officers welcome this move

Pepper spray will be permitted for use only in emergency situations



from 20 to 72 incidents, while the Dochas Centre, the state's main facility for women, also posted a big increase in assaults, from 17 to 44.

By contrast, the number of assaults by prisoners on staff fell slightly, from 110 in 2023 to 107 last year, a drop of 3 per cent. Reports of aggressive or threatening behaviour towards staff declined by 8 per cent. The use of physical interventions by prison officers dropped by a quarter.

Despite these improvements, several facilities continue to struggle with staff safety. Mountjoy prison recorded the highest number of prisoner-on-staff assaults last year, with incidents rising from 22 to 27. Cork prison and the Dochas Centre also reported increases.

The number of prison officers taking time off due to injuries sustained in the workplace has also risen. The year 2023 marked the highest levels since records began in 2016. In 2023, 172 incidents were recorded for which officers took occupational injury days (OIDs) – double the figure for 2022, when just 86 cases were logged. These incidents led to 6,150 work days being lost, with an average of 36 days missed per affected officer.

While not all OID incidents relate to direct assaults – figures include any workplace injury – the increase did come amid a rise in prisoner-on-staff assaults at several facilities. The highest number of days lost to injuries was recorded in 2018, when 6,884 days were claimed across 142 incidents. The average number of days lost per officer has fluctuated over the years, peaking at 49 in 2022.

"We have been calling on the government to introduce this for a long time so we very much welcome this move," Karl Dalton, general secretary of the Prison Officers Association, said.

"Pepper spray is crucial to protecting our members and inmates. Our members will have to be trained in how to use pepper spray and risk assessments will have to be carried out but this is long overdue and we very much welcome it," he added. The association expects O'Callaghan to announce the move formally at its forthcoming annual conference.

Alison O'Connor, page 17

VANCE IN THE VATICAN



JD Vance, left, the US vice-president, met Cardinal Pietro Parolin, the Vatican's secretary of state, yesterday at the Apostolic Palace in Rome. The Vatican said there had been "an exchange of opinions" over international conflicts, migrants and prisoners. Vance, who became a Catholic in 2019, also had a "quick and private" meeting with Pope Francis. *Vatican needs a miracle, World News, page 12*

Putin calls 'truce' but air raid sirens blare in Ukraine

Marc Bennetts Kyiv

President Putin announced an Easter truce in Ukraine yesterday, in a move that was met with scepticism in Kyiv amid reports of continuing attacks on the battlefield.

The Russian president said the ceasefire was guided by "humanitarian considerations" and would last for 30 hours, from 6pm Moscow time [4pm in Ireland] yesterday until midnight today.

"I order all military actions to cease for this period,"

Putin said during a televised meeting in the Kremlin with Valery Gerasimov, Russia's top general. His comments came after President Trump threatened to walk away from peace talks unless there were immediate signs of progress.

"We assume that the Ukrainian side will follow our example," Putin said.

President Zelensky accused Putin of "playing with human lives". Shortly before the ceasefire was due to begin, an air raid alert rang out across Kyiv. "Shaheds [attack drones] in our sky are

“Attack drones in our sky are Putin's true attitude to Easter

Putin's true attitude to Easter," Zelensky said.

Lisa Yasko, a member of the Ukrainian parliament, said the capital endured an hour-long attack from the drones after Putin's announcement. "A ceasefire for one day, even if it happens, is like a joke," she told the BBC. "We need a real ceasefire, with real conditions met by Putin."

Oleksandr Merezhko, head of the parliament's foreign affairs committee, told the broadcaster: "On the battleground the situation

hasn't changed. Russians have hit residential areas in Kherson. [On Friday night] there were around 100 missiles and drones, as a result of which dozens of people have been injured. So Putin continues his brutal war of aggression against Ukraine and I don't see any signs of a ceasefire."

Russia rejected a US proposal for a full 30-day truce in Ukraine after talks in Saudi Arabia last month.

A peace deal could be the kind no one wants, page 11

International protection costs slashed in shake-up

→ Continued from page 1

such as Georgia fast-tracked so their initial decision and appeal are heard within three months. Once a denial is finalised, applicants will be forced to leave the state. At present the first decision must be taken within three months, but an appeal can take 15 months or more to be completed. Two thirds of those refused in the first instance lodge an appeal.

O'Callaghan's plan also seeks to reduce the cost of providing an efficient immigration and asylum service to people who need it. Under the current system, an individual seeking international protection usually waits up to 18 months for their application to be processed, and when an appeal is sought this may take a further 14 months.

The average cost of supporting an international protection applicant through the existing 29-month system is an estimated €122,867, which explains why the state regularly offers to pay the costs of flying people who agree to return home voluntarily.

Under the proposed model, which aims to reduce the processing time, the cost per applicant would fall to €49,692 – representing a 60 per cent reduction.

O'Callaghan is already moving to enhance radically the gardai's ability to deport people whose asylum applications have been refused. Since January, the justice minister has signed more than 1,000 deportation orders – a sharp acceleration compared with previous years.

If the pace continues, the number of deportation orders by the end of the year would exceed 4,000, representing a projected increase of nearly 70 per cent on the 2,403 signed last year.

A Department of Justice spokesman said: "Increased focus along with investments and system enhancements are yielding results."

Donohoe faces battle for third term as Eurogroup finance leader

Claire Scott

Paschal Donohoe remains "focused" as head of the Eurogroup, despite facing threats from European finance ministers who are planning to extinguish his ambitions for a third term as president.

The minister is aiming to retain his incumbency in the coveted role. However, competition is now building before a summer election that could result in Donohoe being ousted.

The Eurogroup is an informal body in which the finance and economic ministers from 20 EU member states discuss matters relating to their countries' shared responsibilities in strengthening the euro.

Its main task is to ensure close co-ordination of economic policies. In his current position, Donohoe has strong influence over the

other ministers who meet monthly as he prepares the agenda for each meeting and leads the discussions. He also gets to represent the group at international forums like the G7 summit.

When asked about the potential battle that lies ahead, the minister did not wish to comment on the speculation about his rivals, but said: "There is still some time to go before the end of my current term as president of the Eurogroup. I remain entirely focused on the job I have been entrusted to do by my European finance minister colleagues."

"As I said in February, I intend to put my name forward for a further term and I will be asking for the support of my Eurogroup colleagues when the time comes."

EU sources confirmed reports last week from Politico that both the Spanish and Lithuanian ministers,

Carlos Cuerdo and Rimantas Sadzius respectively, were canvassing for support among the group's members.

The election is expected to take place in July, when a president will be elected by members for a term of two and a half years by a simple majority of votes.

Losing the presidency would be considered a blow to the Irish government as it also prepares for the threats to Ireland's corporation tax revenue and the impact that President Trump's policies and EU counter-tariffs could have on the economy.

EU sources confirmed that Spanish leaders in particular were "spitting fire" after Donohoe first secured his position as Eurogroup chief in July 2020. He was then re-elected in December 2022.

MEPs across the political spectrum believe Donohoe can survive the vote. His party colleague Regina Doherty, a Dublin MEP, said:

"Paschal does excellent work for Ireland and Europe as Eurogroup president. He has strong levels of support not only from finance ministers but from EU leaders too."

Aodhán Ó Riordáin, Labour MEP for Dublin and member of the centre-left Progressive Alliance of Socialists and Democrats group, said: "There is an expectation EPP [European People's Party] governments will mostly rally to support Donohoe. The general sense is that he showed leadership through Covid and that his experience matters now going into a period of global uncertainty."

Maria Walsh, Fine Gael MEP for Midlands North-West, said: "Minister Donohoe has held this post since 2020, successfully working with other EU finance ministers through Brexit and Covid, stressing the point that continuity is key here."

Sinn Féin to review its gender policy

Jennifer Bray and Claire Scott

Sinn Féin is expected to hold a special conference on gender policy in the coming weeks amid internal anger over statements made by party TDs about a controversial UK court ruling.

A source said that David Cullinane, the Sinn Féin health spokesman, was "rapped on the knuckles" by the party leadership after he said on social media platform X that a Supreme Court ruling defining women by their biological sex was a "common sense judgement".

He also said the ruling should be examined in Ireland. Cullinane later deleted the message and apologised.

Judges in the UK Supreme Court last week unanimously ruled that a woman is defined by biological sex.

A Sinn Féin source said there was anger within the party in the wake of Cullinane's tweet as there had

already been efforts behind the scenes to formalise the Sinn Féin position on gender and trans issues.

An internal group is understood to be planning a special conference that will take place this summer and which will see members finalise a position on gender policies, including the party's stance on puberty blockers.

A Sinn Féin TD also told The Sunday Times yesterday that following the publication of the Cass report, a 2024 review of gender identity services for children and young people in the NHS, the party's ard comhairle had been reviewing its policy on this issue. The TD said that, in their view, "legislators are not doctors. You wouldn't go to your county councillor to have your tooth pulled. Any policy that is developed has to have those impacted at the centre of it and that's what we will have to focus on."

Brenda Power, page 16