



An Roinn Gnóthai Eachtracha
Department of Foreign Affairs

Ireland's Consular Strategy



Foreword



The Department of Foreign Affairs has a long and proud track record of providing high quality consular services to Irish citizens abroad. *This is a vital public service and a key priority of my Department.*

To this end, I am pleased to present an updated Consular Strategy. This Strategy has been developed within the framework of the Statement of Strategy of the Department of Foreign Affairs 2023-2025 and the Global Ireland 2025 Strategy. It sets out a detailed vision for how consular services will be delivered in the period ahead, building on and updating our first Consular Strategy published in 2019. This vision is based on an analysis of the long-term trends in the consular domain and learning from the implementation of the last Strategy.

The overarching aim of our consular engagement has not changed. We want to help citizens to be safe when they are abroad. We will provide up to date and accessible travel advice that allows citizens to make informed choices when travelling internationally. Yet, we know, of course, that even with careful planning citizens can encounter difficulty. Where this happens, we will provide the best possible consular assistance service - including for example, in cases of arrest, imprisonment, serious injury or the death of a loved one abroad. We will also be prepared to respond rapidly and at scale to major consular crises abroad, as was the case over recent years in Afghanistan, Ukraine and, more recently, Sudan. We also want to continue to provide an excellent quality of consular services, facilitating Irish citizens and businesses operating abroad.

We must take account of the current context for our work and the changes since the launch of the last Strategy. Patterns of international travel today are similar to those seen before the pandemic. It is now the case that Irish citizens are, once again, travelling, working and living abroad in large numbers. Consular cases, including complex cases requiring specific cultural knowledge or other skills, are consequently at a high level. We are also seeing the increasing incidence of major consular crises driven by geopolitical turbulence, climate change and public health emergencies.

In response, my Department has already restructured and reinforced how we deliver consular services. Dedicated teams with responsibility for overseeing the Department's approach to international travel and consular crisis planning are now in place, and the staffing levels across our Consular Directorate have been increased and our network of Embassies and Consulates General expanded. I will ensure that we continue to assign the resources necessary to deliver effective 24/7 consular services to Irish citizens.

Finally, I want to thank the Department's partners from across Government, from civil society and the voluntary sector, as well as our EU and other international partners for their excellent ongoing partnership in providing consular assistance to citizens abroad.

Micheál Martin TD,
Tánaiste and Minister for Foreign Affairs

OUR COMMITMENT

“We will promote an informed approach to international travel and support citizens when they require consular assistance abroad, including during large-scale consular crises.”

To meet this commitment, we will advance our work in five interlinked areas:

- 1. Travel Advice:** facilitate citizens in taking an informed approach to international travel.
- 2. Consular Assistance:** provide consular assistance to Irish citizens in difficulty abroad, in line with our Consular Assistance Charter.
- 3. Crisis Response:** maintain the capability to respond quickly and at scale to crises, including with our EU and international partners.
- 4. Consular Services:** provide an efficient and effective service to those seeking document authentication services and Certificates of Freedom to Marry abroad.
- 5. Strengthening How We Work:** enable our teams to deliver consistent, accessible and effective services and supports to citizens across our global network.

Travel Advice

The Department of Foreign Affairs provides information and advice to prepare citizens before travelling abroad, and offers an objective assessment of the risks they could face.

Our Travel Advice offers guidance to citizens on how to deal with incidents that may arise while travelling overseas. We publish clear, accessible and up-to-date Travel Advice for around 200 countries and territories, so that citizens can make informed choices about international travel on the basis of accurate and impartial information. Travel Advice is one of the Department's most consulted services. It provides country-specific information both in English and in Irish on safety and security, entry requirements, health, local laws and customs, and useful contact details in the event that consular assistance should be required.

The Department has also developed the 'TravelWise' brand for public communications relating to international travel. Through TravelWise, the Department seeks to amplify our advice relating to international travel, with regular public communications campaigns and engagement with travel stakeholders.

Our key messages are:

- » Know Before You Go. Consult our Travel Advice before travelling overseas
- » Take out comprehensive travel insurance to cover all activities while abroad
- » Check the validity of your passport
- » Order a passport card when renewing your passport book, but remember it can only be used for travel in the EU, EEA, Switzerland and the UK
- » Travel with a European Health Insurance card (EHIC) when travelling in Europe
- » Know the nearest Irish Embassy or Consulate in case consular assistance is required
- » Register on the Department's Citizens Registration platform during your time abroad, especially if in high-risk locations

We will continue to work closely stakeholders in the travel industry to ensure that their perspectives are taken into account and to amplify our messaging relating to international travel.



Consular Assistance

Consular assistance entails the provision of guidance and support to citizens in difficulty or distress abroad. The Department of Foreign Affairs provides support in a high number of consular assistance cases each year. In a typical year, the Department handles over 1,500 new consular cases, in addition to consular assistance that is provided on a number of more long-running cases. Cases include deaths, arrests, imprisonments, serious injuries, missing persons, citizens with mental health difficulties, and other emergencies abroad.

We provide consular assistance through our network of Embassies and Consulates, as well as through our Honorary Consuls, supported by a specialised consular assistance team in Ireland. The Department provides consular assistance on a 24/7 basis worldwide. Requests are normally dealt with by the staff based nearest the citizen, who have the necessary local knowledge and contacts.

We will always help citizens where it is possible and appropriate for us to do so. There may be legal or other limits to the extent to which we can help or intervene in certain matters. As part of this Strategy update, we have revised our Consular Assistance Charter. The Charter explains in a clear, transparent and accessible manner how the Department can assist citizens abroad, and the extent of that assistance. We will continue our efforts to enhance the public's understanding of the Department's consular role. This will include maintaining accurate and up-to-date information on our website to provide citizens with access to the information they need on issues of relevance.

The Department manages a significant number of complex consular cases. These can often be protracted and difficult for the citizens affected, and their families. Some of these complex cases, for example, relate to persons detained abroad, travel bans, parental child abduction, forced marriage and mental health issues. The Department will monitor and analyse trends in consular assistance cases, including complex cases, to ensure a proactive policy response with updated guidance and outreach.



We will continue to work closely with our EU partners to strengthen our collective consular network and cooperation, including on complex case types. In countries where Ireland does not have an Embassy or Consulate, Irish citizens can ask the Embassy or Consulate of another EU Member State for assistance. Similarly, we will support unrepresented EU citizens in countries where Ireland has a presence. We will also cooperate closely with the UK and other international partners.

We work closely with partners both in Ireland and abroad to complement the consular assistance we provide. We will continue to maintain strong levels of cooperation with those stakeholders, which include other Government Departments, State Agencies, the Defence Forces, An Garda Síochána, NGOs, Irish diaspora organisations and individual members of the diaspora. The Department supports diaspora organisations, which are often an important network for citizens abroad, through the Emigrant Support Programme.

We will continue to prioritise training and supports for our staff so they are in a position to provide a professional and responsive service to citizens. We are committed to equipping our staff with the necessary skills and tools to provide consular assistance in a consistent, professional, and effective manner. This will include the replacement of the consular case management system so that we can work more effectively.

Crisis Response

An unfortunate fact is that Irish citizens may be affected whenever there is a major incident such as a natural disaster, pandemic, terrorist incident, large accident or conflict abroad. As we have for many years, the Department of Foreign Affairs will ensure we are ready to respond rapidly and at scale to consular crises abroad.

In recent years, we have been called upon to respond to consular crises of very significant scale and complexity – for example, to support citizens impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic, the Afghanistan crisis, Russia's invasion of Ukraine, and the Sudan crisis. The assistance that the Department provided to the many thousands of citizens affected by these crises was very material and impactful. We know that it can be during a major crisis that citizens need us most and that we can make the greatest difference.

When consular crises occur, we are ready to respond because we have invested significantly in our crisis planning and crisis response capabilities. We will continue to prioritise planning for consular crises, and staff training and exercising to refresh and test our capacity. We will maintain a Crisis Centre in a state of ongoing readiness, and ensure that our staffing structures and systems can be scaled up where needed. We will do everything possible to proactively identify and manage emerging consular risks, including by cooperating and sharing information with our EU and other international partners. We will ensure that we capture the lessons of responding to past crises so that they are addressed and that we can continuously improve our capacity to respond.

We will continue to work to embed a culture of crisis preparedness across the Department, and respond in a coordinated and coherent way to complex crises that may include security, political or humanitarian dimensions.

We will continue to cooperate with the Department of Defence and with the Defence Forces, and will work together where an Emergency Civilian Assistance Team Mission may be required.

While we will never be able to predict with certainty where the next consular crisis will occur, we will prepare on the basis that fragility will remain high in many places, and that Irish citizens will continue to travel and reside abroad in high numbers.

Citizens can assist us in our planning by ensuring that they register their presence on the Citizens Registration platform during their time abroad, particularly in high risk locations.

Consular Services

The Department and our Mission network play important roles in providing a range of other consular services to facilitate citizens and businesses operating abroad.

Each year the Department, through its offices in Dublin and Cork, issues around 55,000 authentication and Apostille stamps on documents used for business or personal reasons abroad. A walk-in service is available at our public offices, as well as postal and drop-off services.

An update of policies and procedures is well underway and will provide a framework for training, modernisation and a more professional, streamlined service.

We also play an important role in facilitating citizens seeking to marry abroad. Each year, the Department issues around 2,700 Certificates of Freedom to Marry. These certificates are issued through our offices in Ireland or by the Mission closest to the citizen. We will continue to update policies and procedures regarding foreign marriages and divorces.

We continue to work with Tusla and the Adoption Authority of Ireland, as the lead agencies, in providing historical information in line with our obligations under the Birth Information and Tracing Act 2022.



Strengthening How We Work

As part of the Government's Global Ireland 2025 strategy, we opened 19 new diplomatic Missions between 2018 and 2022, bringing the total to 99. These new Missions have broadened and deepened our capacity to provide consular assistance to citizens abroad. For example, our Embassy in Kyiv, which opened in August 2021, played a significant role in responding to consular aspects of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, together with our other Embassies in the region.

Our Missions in regions around the world will continue to cooperate through established regional structures to address shared consular challenges in line with the Government's regional strategies.

In places where we do not have a diplomatic Mission, or where we need to supplement coverage in a defined geographic area, Honorary Consuls may be appointed. Ireland currently has almost 90 Honorary Consuls operating in more than 50 countries. Honorary Consuls provide consular assistance to citizens in difficulty as well as other services, such as responding to enquiries relating to passports and visas and travel to Ireland. Our Honorary Consul network also plays an important role in promoting the broader interests of the State overseas. It supports Irish diplomatic missions and the relevant state agencies in establishing connections to key local stakeholders, in areas such as business, politics, culture and education. We will continue to strengthen and professionalise the Honorary Consul network.

New Honorary Consuls are appointed by the Minister for Foreign Affairs, subject to consultation with the host country, on the basis of an open, competitive selection process. The position of Honorary Consul is unsalaried and non-pensionable.

The Department's staff are our most important resource and critical to delivering effectively on our consular mandate. We will continue to make sure that our staff are regularly and appropriately trained to deal consistently with the types of cases we regularly see, and that our global network of Missions is ready to respond to the next consular crisis wherever it may occur.

We will continue to invest in the technology and systems that facilitate our work and will ensure that the Department meets its statutory obligations in respect of the protection of personal data.

We will monitor and respond appropriately to any additional policy priorities that may emerge over the lifetime of the updated strategy. During the last strategy cycle, the Department restructured and reinforced the staffing in place in our Consular Directorate at headquarters to respond to demands created by the COVID-19 pandemic and to maintain a high quality of service that is responsive to the needs of citizens. We will continue to monitor demand for our services to ensure they remain responsive to citizens and their needs.



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