

PAC Opening Statement

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Department of Communications, Energy and Natural Resources

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I am appearing here this morning in relation to two issues, the Emergency Call Answering Service (ECAS) and the 2013 audited accounts of the Department.

The ECAS is responsible for answering all 112 and 999 calls to the Emergency Services in the State.

Following a tender process, BT Ireland was appointed as operator of the ECAS and the concession agreement with BT commenced operation in July 2010. Emergency calls are free of charge to the caller on all telecommunications networks. The ECAS system is funded through the call handling fee payable by the presenting telephone operators.

To ensure the highest level of availability and adequate contingency arrangements, fully replicated data centres are located in Navan and Dublin and three operator centres have been deployed in Navan, Dublin and Ballyshannon. The ECAS is performing to a consistently high standard and exceeding all of the performance levels set out in the Concession Agreement. Under the Concession Agreement, BT are required to ensure 99.999% availability of the service each year; in other words, the service cannot be unavailable for more than a total of 5 minutes per annum. It has handled a total of over 10 million calls since it launched in July 2010. Of that total, it has filtered out over 6.2 million, thus ensuring the emergency services can deal with genuine emergency calls. The average speed of answer for a caller to ECAS is 0.6 seconds which is one of the fastest in Europe. Ireland is one of the first countries in Europe to provide an emergency SMS service.

Insofar as the 2013 appropriation account is concerned, total gross spend under the Vote in 2013 was just over €393 million, some €33m below the budget allocation of €426m. The underspend is primarily due to slower than expected expenditure on

the postcodes project, energy research programmes, and broadcasting expenditure due to lower than forecast TV licence receipts.

I would like to briefly set out some of the key projects supported from the Vote in 2013.

There was expenditure in 2013 of nearly €23 million on communications, multimedia developments and the information society. This expenditure was primarily on the National Broadband Scheme and the second level schools broadband programme. Some 234 second level schools were provided with a 100Mbps broadband connection in 2013, in Counties Dublin, Kildare and Meath, thus bringing high speed connectivity to 516 schools under the first two phases of the national rollout programme. The programme was completed in 2014.

Some €75m was spent in the energy sector in 2013. €57m of this was by the Sustainable Energy Authority of Ireland on the delivery of energy efficiency upgrades. The schemes funded include residential grants, grants to low income energy consumers through the warmer homes scheme and group community projects. During the year over 26,000 homes benefitted from an energy efficiency upgrade, supporting around 3,000 jobs, and highlighting again the importance of the State's involvement in this area.

Expenditure in 2013 in the Broadcasting area amounted to €242 million. Of this €181.5 million was paid in grant aid to RTE in respect of the revenue from the sale of television licences. A total of €24.4 million of exchequer funding and licence fee funding of €9.2 million was provided to TG4 to deliver on programme commitments. €14.4 million in grants from the Broadcasting Fund was provided to the audio and audio-visual media sector, supporting about 300 projects. During the year, the procurement process was completed for the National Postcode System.

Almost €32 million was paid to meet the administration and operational costs of Inland Fisheries Ireland and the Loughs Agency. This funding enabled IFI to undertake almost 140,000 patrol hours and nearly 6,000 habitat inspections.

€5.4 million was spent on various geoscience projects, including mapping over 3,000 square kilometres of the national seabed under INFOMAR, the national seabed survey project.

The Department's administrative budget has been significantly reduced from €40 million in 2007 to just over €21.5m in 2013. Notwithstanding this, the Department has continued to oversee and implement a wide range of new and existing programmes, undertake regulatory functions and provide policy advice across its wide brief.

I have separately provided the Committee with the Vote outturn figures for 2014. These indicate gross expenditure of €424.7m in 2014 compared to €393.6m in the 2013 outturn. A breakdown of the 2014 outturn by subhead has also been provided.

I look forward to assisting the Committee with questions it has in relation to the issues under consideration today.