

Appropriation Account 2017
Vote 24: Justice and Equality
Committee of Public Accounts, 4 April, 2019

Opening Statement

CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY

Chairman,

The Departments vote is one of six votes which currently makes up the Justice Vote Group. The Justice and Equality Vote accounts for 18% of gross expenditure in the overall vote group; the Garda Vote accounts for 64% of gross expenditure; Prisons and Courts are 13% and 5% of gross expenditure respectively with the remaining votes for the Policing Authority and Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission accounting for less than 1%. However, our focus today is on Vote 24 the Justice and Equality Vote.

The Departments vote covers a wide remit, encompassing both the administrative divisions of the Department and a broad range of offices and agencies across the Justice sector. In all, there are approximately 60 individual subheads reflected across five expenditure programmes which are set out in your briefing material and which support the overall Department's vision of a safe, fair and inclusive Ireland. The remit of the Department is broad and diverse and includes subheads in relation to Commissions and Special Inquiries, Legal Aid (Civil and Criminal), Immigration and Asylum Accommodation, Probation Service, Equality, Integration and Disability, and a range of other services including offices and agencies such as the Data Protection Commission, Criminal Assets Bureau, Forensic Science and State Pathology Laboratories, Garda Ombudsman Commission, etc.

As there is no specific chapter relating to the Justice and Equality vote in the C&AG's Report for 2017 I propose to focus briefly on a few areas within the vote where there has been developments in the last year or so.

The Committee will be aware that the Department is undergoing a major transformation programme at present. This arises from the Government's acceptance of the first report of the Effectiveness and Renewal Group (ERG) in June 2018, following significant public and political debate. This programme aims to develop a future operating model that embraces the challenges and opportunities of the 21st century, which enhances organisational agility and responsiveness, and places the Department of Justice and Equality at the forefront of developments in the Irish Civil Service.

I am pleased to say that significant progress is being made. The Department has now been realigned under two executive pillars each headed up by a Deputy Secretary, with Oonagh Buckley heading up the Civil Justice & Equality pillar and Oonagh McPhillips heading up the Criminal Justice pillar. The two executive pillars will be supported by a central corporate pillar. A new corporate governance structure reflecting this realignment came into operation from January 2019.

The second phase involves the Department designing and implementing a new operating model and organisational structure in the two executive pillars; based on five core functions: policy, operations, transparency, governance and legislation.

The Transformation Programme is being overseen by a Programme Board chaired by myself and including the Secretary General to the Government, the Secretary General of Department of Business Enterprise and Innovation and the Vote Assistant Secretary for DPER which will ensure that the programme is conducted in accordance with good governance principles, that it is delivered on time, within budget and that the design solutions are appropriate. In addition the ERG continues

to provide its input and produces quarterly progress reports, which are published on the Department website.

The Department has completed the high level design of the new operating model and structure and has now moved to detailed design. The Programme is due for completion by early October this year. Funding for this programme has been provided in the Justice and Equality vote in 2019.

There is also a very significant policing reform programme ongoing in relation to the implementation of the recommendations of the Commission on the Future of Policing Report (COFPI). The Department is facilitating and supporting this programme including the provision of funding to An Garda Síochána to assist with certain work under the programme.

I would also like to mention the Data Protection Commission (DPC) which has received significant additional resourcing in recent years to build the organisation's capacity and capability in preparation for the DPC's enhanced regulatory powers and more prominent international role under GDPR. These increased resources have facilitated the recruitment of additional staff, including legal, technical, audit and investigations specialists as well as policy and administrative staff.

The budget allocation of the organisation increased from €1.9 million in 2014 to €7.2 million in 2017, and has increased further to €15.2 million in 2019. This resource level will enable the Data Protection Commission to continue to build the organisation's knowledge and capability in the performance of its expanded statutory role, as an EU-wide regulator and lead supervisory authority for the large multi-national technology companies, many of whom have their European headquarters in Ireland.

Committee members will be well aware of the pressures in our accommodation system for asylum seekers. Currently, the Department is managing a total of 6,497

international protection applicants, including 5,980 residing in our accommodation centres with a further 517 applicants in emergency hotel accommodation. At the end of 2016, the Department was accommodating 4,425. However, by the end of 2017, the number had risen to 5,096 persons (an increase of 15%) and at the end of 2018, there were 6,106 persons in accommodation. The increasing numbers to be accommodated is a significant part of the challenge facing the asylum system.

A process to support residents moving into mainstream housing is being finalised through the establishment of a dedicated unit working with centre managers, NGOs, and local authorities.

Another expanding area in the Department is the Irish Naturalisation and Immigration Service (INIS) which has grown considerably in scale and scope since it was established in 2005. INIS now comprises approximately one third of all staff in the Department of Justice and Equality, processing over 250,000 applications a year. The role of INIS has expanded over recent years to include areas such as Border Management at Dublin Airport, immigration registrations in the Dublin metropolitan area, and the newly established Irish Passenger Information Unit.

INIS has put a Service Improvement Plan in place for the period 2018 to 2020 which, while ambitious in scope, is also realistic – the actions can be delivered within the timeframes set out, and a strong Programme Board has been established to make sure that is the case.

Some early reforms have included the introduction of plain language in all INIS application forms; the launch of INIS online – a new customer portal which will allow all applications and payments to be submitted online by the end of March 2020 - and the establishment of a Change Management Unit within INIS to drive innovation and best practice in project and change management.

It is clear to all of us working in the Department that the demands we face in the Immigration area are likely to continue to grow over the coming years. Meeting those demands requires that we seek to deliver our services in different ways, and to increase our efficiency, while also improving customer experiences. These objectives are entirely compatible with the overall Departmental Transformation Programme also.

2017, the year under examination, was of course an important year in the development of a strategic approach to equality. Four major equality strategies were launched that year – the National Strategy for Women and Girls, the National Traveller and Roma Inclusion Strategy, the National Disability Inclusion Strategy and the Migrant Integration Strategy. These represent a whole-of-Government approach to addressing the needs of diverse groups and to ensuring their equal participation in Irish society. Each strategy was developed and is being implemented with the involvement of the groups that each is designed to serve. 2017 was also the year in which the Irish State formally recognised Travellers as an ethnic minority. This landmark recognition is a key step forward in fostering a society which respects and celebrates diverse identities. In that context, my Department is currently developing a National LGBTI Strategy which will be published later this year.

Finally, I would note that Brexit has been a significant area of work since the UK Referendum and this remains the case. The Department of Justice and Equality shares this agenda with all other Government Departments and is working within the highly coordinated whole-of-Government structures led by the Department of the Taoiseach and the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade.

I and my colleagues will be happy to go into further detail in any areas of the vote the members require.

Thank you Chairman.