

Public Accounts Committee

Financial Statements 2017- Environmental Protection Agency

Opening Statement by Laura Burke, Director General

18 April 2019

Chairman, Members, I am pleased to be here this morning as Director General, to assist the Committee in its examination of the Financial Statements 2017 of the Environmental Protection Agency.

I am joined by Gerard O’Leary, Deputy Director General, Tom Ryan, Director of the Office of Environmental Enforcement and Dan Harney, Finance Officer.

As requested, I have provided a Briefing Statement in advance of this meeting and I will, therefore, keep these comments short.

The Environmental Protection Agency is an independent public body under the aegis of the Department of Communications, Climate Action & Environment established under the Environmental Protection Agency Act, 1992. The Agency also has a close working relationship with the Department of Housing, Planning and Local Government due to their role in protecting and improving water resources in Ireland.

The Agency’s role operates across a number of key strategic priorities for Ireland. We have a wide range of functions, under the broad headings of Regulation, Knowledge and Advocacy. We perform a diverse range of activities including environmental and radiological regulation, the regulation of greenhouse gases through the EU Emissions Trading Scheme, the provision of national Greenhouse Gas inventories and projections to the EU and the UN, environmental research, environmental monitoring and supporting the circular economy. The Agency’s scientific expertise is recognised as a significant resource, both nationally and internationally. Our work provides the scientific evidence that enables informed decision making, better policy and better information to the public.

Myself and the Directors of the EPA take our responsibilities with regard to Corporate Governance very seriously and I can confirm that the EPA is in compliance with the Code of Practice for the Governance of State Bodies. We have developed and use a framework of assurances that includes an audit and risk committee, internal audits and an executive risk committee.

Since the EPA's internal audit structures were first established, in 2003, thirty-eight audits and value for money reviews across a broad range of operational areas have been undertaken.

On an annual basis, I receive a report from the Chair of the Audit and Risk Committee, (who is external to the EPA), which is also presented to the Board. I take significant assurance from this report, and the role of the Committee in providing assurance that the EPA's risk management processes and its system of internal controls are operating effectively, that the major business risks are being managed, and that the governance processes are working well.

As Director General, I also take significant value and assurance from the unqualified audit opinion from the Comptroller and Auditor General on the EPA's 2017 Accounts, and in fact for each year's Annual Financial Statements since the EPA came into existence in 1993.

As you can see from the EPA Annual Report the total budget available to the Agency in 2017 was €71.2 million. The funding for the Agency comes from a number of sources, including Exchequer Funding, the Environment Fund, the Water Services Programme and Earned and Other Income.

Chairman, using the funds and resources available to us the EPA had significant achievements in 2017 in delivering on our mandate. I will comment briefly on a number of these.

Regulation

During 2017, the environmental licensing programme issued 108 decisions on environmental licensing and over 70 technical amendments covering, for example, large industry, waste facilities, dumping at sea and waste water discharges. In addition, the team dealt with over 600 statutory consultations. In 2017, EPA was named European leader in providing online access to licence and permit information which is an acknowledgment of the importance that we attach to public participation in our decision making. With regard to radiation protection, the EPA issued 284 licences.

Over 1,500 visits to industrial and waste facilities took place in 2017 and 320 inspections of urban waste water sites, 57 drinking water site inspections. In addition, 29 prosecutions were heard during the year, resulting in fines and costs totalling over €390,000.

Knowledge

The EPA continued to deliver on our key roles in supporting the implementation, monitoring and assessment of climate action through collating national greenhouse gas emissions and projections for the EU and UN, regulating emissions, providing the secretariat to the Climate Change Advisory Council and through Climate Research. In 2017 the EPA funded €11.2m in new environmental research projects, including many on Climate issues. In 2017, the EPA continued the very successful public Climate lecture series, while more recently we have taken on a key facilitation role in the National Dialogue on Climate Action.

In 2017 the EPA issued a number of reports on water quality, including a national assessment of Water Quality and reports on Bathing Water quality, Private Drinking Water supplies, Urban Wastewater Treatment, the national inspection plan for Domestic Wastewater treatment systems, and Drinking Water Quality.

The EPA issued a report on Air Quality and developed a National Ambient Air Quality Monitoring Programme with the ambition of significantly increasing the availability of localised real time air quality information.

Advocacy

The EPA plays an important role in raising levels of awareness and supporting initiatives that increase citizen engagement with environmental issues. The Global Learning and Observations to Benefit the Environment (GLOBE) Programme is an international science and education programme that provides school students with the opportunity to participate in data collection and to contribute meaningfully to our understanding of the earth system and global environment. GLOBE was re-launched in Ireland in 2017 and this two-year pilot programme is managed by An Taisce in partnership with the EPA.

The National Waste Prevention Programme, led by the EPA, works to foster a circular economy in Ireland including advocating for waste prevention and using resources more efficiently. During 2017 initiatives were promoted to homeowners, businesses and other sectors which included the EPA's Stop Food Waste programme and the Food Waste Charter. The Food Waste Charter is a collective commitment to reduce food waste along the entire supply chain and five major Irish retailers signed the Food Waste Charter in 2017.

Conclusion

To conclude, Chairman, the matters I have referred to illustrate well the broad range of programmes and activities for which my Agency had responsibility in 2017.

Ireland has a precious and unique resource in our natural environment and it is something we are rightly proud of. Our environment however faces significant threats and we in the EPA will continue to prioritise valuable resources to address these threats.

I and my colleagues will be happy to respond to questions or issues that emerge during the Committee's further work today. Thank you.