

Vote 40: Department of Children and Youth Affairs

Opening Statement to Committee of Public Accounts, 13 June 2019

Fergal Lynch, Accounting Officer

Thank you for the opportunity to meet the Committee, and to present on the 2017 Appropriation Account Vote 40 – Department of Children and Youth Affairs.

My opening statement will give a brief overview of the main features of the Vote, and I hope that the more detailed briefing material supplied in advance of this meeting will be of assistance to the Committee in providing a fuller picture of the work of the Department and its expenditure.

The total gross provision for the Vote in 2017 was €1.311 billion, representing an increase of €173 million, or 15%, over the previous year. Nearly all of the Department's expenditure is related to current funding for programmes and services. Capital funding makes up just under 2% of the total Vote.

Our central mission as a Department is to work to achieve better outcomes and brighter futures for all children and young people in Ireland. Among our key objectives are to ensure:

- An effective child welfare and protection system;
- A high quality childcare system that is affordable and accessible; and
- An evidence-based approach to policy that helps children and young people participate in decisions effecting their lives.

We support both preventive and early intervention services, as well as direct involvement in the lives of children, young people and families where necessary. We aim to collaborate with Government Departments, agencies and sectors to place children and young people at heart of what we do.

We place a great emphasis on consulting widely and on using available evidence to inform the development of policy. This involves the participation and collaboration of children, young people and other stakeholders. We also

stress value for money and evaluation from the early stages of planning projects.

Increasingly, our work involves dealing with significant legacy issues spanning over many decades, while also trying to strengthen services for the children of today and planning for services of the future.

In terms of the overall composition of the Vote, 54% of gross expenditure in 2017 was allocated to the work and services of Tusla, the Child and Family Agency, and 35% was accounted for by childcare supports, which we now describe as Early Learning and Care, and School Age Childcare. The remaining 11% of the Vote encompassed a variety of other programmes, including three other agencies – the Adoption Authority of Ireland, Oberstown Children Detention Campus and the Office of the Ombudsman for Children. The Vote also includes the funding for the Commission of Investigation into Mother and Baby Homes.

The Department has had an extensive agenda of work. In 2017, the major actions included:

- commencing mandatory reporting as a legal requirement under the Children First Act;
- implementing significant improvements to child care supports in advance of the statutory National Childcare Scheme, which is due to commence later this year;
- ending the detention of children in adult prisons;
- commencing the Adoption (Amendment) Act 2017 which gave effect to the Constitutional amendment in relation to children;
- publishing legislative proposals on the reform of the Guardian *ad Litem* system, the Bill for which will be published soon;
- introducing a new bail supervision scheme which has helped to reduce the number of children being detained; and

- working closely with Tusla on a range of child protection and welfare measures.

We have continued this work into 2018 and to the present day. Among the major actions have been:

- building on our work with Tusla on child welfare and protection measures, including a co-ordinated response to the special HIQA report commissioned by the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs, and supporting the full roll-out of the National Child Care Information System;
- working closely with other Departments on child protection issues, and particularly on policy and operations involving An Garda Síochána and Tusla;
- sponsoring the enactment of the Childcare Support Act 2018 and continuing a major programme of work for the forthcoming National Childcare Scheme;
- continuing the implementation of the Access and Inclusion Model (AIM) to help children with special needs to take part in the ECCE programme;
- increasing the ECCE scheme to two years, doubling the number of children accessing subsidies, and doubling the number of childcare places across all the age ranges;
- publishing a major strategy for early childhood, *First 5 - a Whole of Government Strategy for Babies, Young Children and their Families*;
- publishing the first ever LGBTI+ Youth Strategy;
- completing the transition of the ABC Programme to Tusla's Prevention, Partnership and Family Support Services (PPFS);
- developing a programme of action to deal sensitively with the burial of human remains at the site of the former Mother and Baby Home in Tuam;

- working to deal with the emergence of evidence of illegal registration of births; and
- continuing a programme of streamlining the system of funding for youth services.

These actions are just some of the major programme of work that the Department engaged in during 2017 and since then.

We are very aware that we face a number of serious challenges which we have been working to address in conjunction with relevant agencies. In the case of Tusla, we are engaging closely on issues such as recruitment of sufficient social workers and addressing unallocated cases. We have also taken a close involvement in the Expert Advisory Group to support implementation of recent HIQA recommendations.

In relation to child care schemes, we have been working intensively with Pobal on a major reform of governance and compliance procedures to ensure that they meet the requirements of today. This is part of a major task to make early learning and care and school age childcare services affordable, accessible and of high quality.

The Department continues to work on a number of other important issues including reform of our youth funding schemes, which are underway. We are in the process of replacing the current set of targeted schemes, which are the product of history over many years, with a single scheme aimed at best meeting the needs of disadvantaged and vulnerable young people.

I believe that the Department of Children and Youth Affairs has made a positive impact since its establishment in 2011, particularly in the areas of child welfare and protection, affordable and quality child care supports, and collaboration across sectors to advance the well-being of children and young people, but of course much more remains to be done.

I and my colleagues will be happy to answer the Committee's questions.

Thank you.