

Office of Public Works Appearance before the Joint Committee on Arts, Heritage, Regional, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs

Wednesday 2nd November, 2016

Opening Statement by Mr Vincent Campbell, Acting Director, Engineering Services, OPW

I am very grateful to the Committee for inviting representatives of the Office of Public Works to address the Committee on the topic “*Provision of Emergency services, tackling flooding and maintaining adequate facilities in rural areas*”. I will say at the outset that the OPW does not have a role or responsibility for the provision of emergency services as this is a matter for the Principal Response Agencies – the Garda Síochána, the Health Service Executive and the Local Authorities. The maintenance of adequate facilities in rural areas is primarily a matter for local authorities also. My colleagues from the Department of Housing, Planning, Community and Local Government will address [have addressed] these matters for the members this morning. I will confine my remarks therefore to the matter of flooding and I and my colleagues from the OPW are glad to have the timely opportunity to bring the members up to date on recent developments in the area of flood risk management.

I am joined by:

Mr Mark Adamson, Assistant Chief Engineer and Director of the Catchment Flood Risk Assessment and Management (CFRAM) Programme

Mr John Murphy, Assistant Chief Engineer

Mr Brian Brogan, Principal Officer, Flood Risk Management Section

Mr Liam Basquille, Principal Officer, Flood Project Management Section

The exceptional flood events of last winter brought home to everyone the devastating impact that flooding can have on people's lives. I can assure the members that the OPW is working as hard as possible to address in an effective and sustainable way the most significant flood risk in the country. At the core of the OPW's work is the objective of reducing, to the greatest extent possible, the level of flood risk to people, property, infrastructure and the environment. In the context of its flood risk management role, the OPW delivers services through the following key areas:

- strategic planning to manage flood risk in future through the Catchment Flood Risk Assessment and Management (CFRAM) programme, which also ensures that Ireland is in compliance with the EU floods directive. The OPW also has a strategic role to co-ordinate, for consideration by Government, cross sectoral policies that can impact on flood risk.
- a programme of capital investment to address existing flood risk to

properties and infrastructure through major and minor flood relief projects, which are delivered largely in partnership with local authorities;

- programmed maintenance of 11,500km of river channels, including 800km of embankments of arterial drainage and urban flood relief schemes completed by the OPW under the Arterial Drainage Acts; and
- undertaking research and an advisory role in relation to preparation for and recover from flooding.

In carrying out these functions, the OPW works in close co-operation with other State bodies, principally the Local Authorities, which also have key responsibilities in the area of flood risk management in the country.

Catchment Flood Risk Assessment and Management (CFRAM) Programme

The central and overarching strategy for addressing the significant flood risks nationally is the OPW's Catchment Flood Risk Assessment and Management (CFRAM) Programme. In this Programme, 300 areas throughout the country were identified as being at potentially significant risk of flooding. These areas are known in the Programme as Areas for Further Assessment or AFAs. In line with government policy, the OPW is in the process of completing the CFRAM Programme to give a clear and comprehensive picture of flood risk in these areas and to set out how the risk can be prioritised and managed effectively and sustainably.

The CFRAM Programme is being undertaken, in partnership with the

OPW's consultants, Local Authorities and other stakeholders. This is a strategic approach that recognises the need, in line with international best practice, to move to a more sustainable, planned and risk-based approach to dealing with significant flooding risks.

The CFRAM programme is without precedent in its scale and complexity. It is the principal vehicle for implementing national policy on flood risk management and the EU Floods Directive (2007).

The CFRAM Programme has produced the most comprehensive set of flood risk maps ever available in this country on which there has been extensive public and stakeholder consultation.

Draft Flood Risk Management Plans have been made available for public consultation. These Plans will be finalised over the next number of weeks taking on board the comments received and will include a prioritised list of feasible measures, both structural and non-structural, to address flood risk in an environmentally sustainable and cost effective manner.

The focus of the CFRAM Plans is on AFAs in mainly urban areas rather than in rural areas. The next round of CFRAM which is due to commence in 2017 will be addressing the flooding risk in rural areas.

Capital Investment Programme

Since 1995 the OPW has invested some €480m in flood risk management measures including, in co-operation with the relevant Local Authorities, the construction of 37 major flood defence schemes throughout the country at a cost of €280m. Ten major flood defence schemes are currently under construction, two more are due to commence later this year and a further 23 schemes are in the pipeline at design or development stage.

In addition to the major schemes, OPW has invested approximately €30m since 2009 to support Local Authorities in the implementation of almost 600 minor works projects in every county in the country.

It is estimated that all of these major schemes and minor works projects provide protection to 12,000 properties and that up to €1.2 billion in benefit to the State has been derived from that investment to date in terms of flood damages and losses avoided. This is a major achievement and it is the Government's intention to continue to build on this and to prioritise investment in flood defence schemes. This commitment to continue support of flood relief is underlined in the provision of €430 million to Flood Risk Management in the Capital Investment Plan 2016 to 2021. Annually the allocation for flood defence works will more than double from €45m to €100m per annum.

Minor Works

The OPW's Minor Works scheme has proven to be a very effective means of addressing localised flooding issues since it was introduced in 2009. It

is of particular relevance to rural communities where a major flood defence scheme would not be feasible. Under the Scheme the OPW can provide funding to local authorities to undertake minor works up to a value of €500,000 to address localised flooding and coastal protection problems within their administrative areas. To date, funding of almost €37m has been approved by the OPW to Local Authorities under the Scheme in respect of almost 600 local flood relief projects in every county protecting 5,000 properties.

Arterial Drainage Maintenance

The OPW has statutory responsibility for maintaining a total of 11,500km of river channel that form part of the Arterial Drainages Schemes that also include approximately 800km of embankments. The annual maintenance programme typically involves some clearance of vegetation and removal of silt build-up on a five-yearly cycle.

The purpose of the Arterial Drainage Schemes was primarily to improve the drainage of agricultural lands to enhance production. This typically involved lowering or widening river beds to facilitate the drainage and discharge of neighbouring lands and drainage channels. While not the primary purpose of the Schemes, they did also provide enhanced conveyance capacity where they passed through towns, villages and dispersed rural communities that in turn has reduced the flood risk to properties in these areas.

To minimise potential ecological impacts, the OPW undertakes these

statutory maintenance works in accordance with a series of Environmental Management Protocols and Standard Operating Procedures, which are published on the OPW website.

Shannon Flood Risk State Agency Co-ordination Working Group

Given its relevance to and impact on so many rural communities in Ireland, I would like to say a few words on flooding on the river Shannon.

Last Winter the Shannon Flood Risk State Agency Co-ordination Working Group was established to enhance on-going co-operation across all of the State agencies involved with the River Shannon, including ESB, Waterways Ireland, Bord na Móna, Inland Fisheries Ireland, the National Parks and Wildlife Service, OPW and the relevant local authorities.

The Work Programme of the Group is published on the OPW website and highlights the current proactive and co-ordinated approach by all state agencies to flood risk management on the Shannon catchment. The Working Group is:

- building on the existing work and commitment of all the State Agencies involved in flood risk
- is focussed on ensuring the best possible level of co-ordination between all statutory bodies involved in flood management on the Shannon
- and is solutions focussed, designed to deliver the highest level of

efficiencies to add value to the Catchment Flood Risk Assessment and Management (CFRAM) Programme.

The Group held three Open Days on its work programme to discuss the role and work of the Group with the public, and met with the Irish Farmers Association to discuss and explore the approach being adopted to address their issues of concern.

The Group met most recently on Tuesday 18th October, and discussed the benefits of possible measures to managing flood risk for Winter 2016/2017.

Arising from that meeting, a decision was taken by the Group to trial the lowering of the lake levels in Lough Allen to help mitigate potential flood risk for this Winter. From the analysis completed, this may have a small positive impact on the extent of certain flood events that might occur during a Winter. This action can only be done in specified conditions to avoid causing or exacerbating flooding downstream and this trial will need to be carefully monitored. While the impact of this initiative may be quite small, this demonstrates the continued commitment of the agencies to work in a coordinated way to explore all measures that may benefit the communities along the River Shannon.

The Group has also agreed to evaluate the benefits from any short and medium term programme of localised dredging and any future piloting to remove some pinch points along the Shannon. The Group will discuss both

this evaluation and progression with the lake levels trial at its next meeting at the end of November.

Whole of Government Approach to Flooding

The Minister for OPW and Flood Relief chairs an Inter-Departmental Flood Policy Co-ordination Group and a report of that Group will be brought to Government shortly. The Group is developing a range of policy initiatives to underpin the overall investment by OPW in managing national flood risk. It is also considering a number of other prevention and mitigation measures for providing flood relief which may include schemes for individual property protection and voluntary home and farmyard relocation. The Group has also looked at the current arrangements in relation to the Memorandum of Understanding with the insurance industry in relation to the provision of flood insurance and how these might be strengthened in the future.

As the designated lead agency for the co-ordination of overall policy on flooding, the OPW cooperation with Local Authorities and other State Agencies is vital in developing new and innovative responses to the threat of flooding. Examples of these would include Minor Works scheme, the pilot Individual Property Protection pilot programmes and indeed the development of the National Flood Forecasting and Warning Service. Similarly, OPW is cooperating with the Geological Survey of Ireland in order to tackle the challenges posed by Groundwater flooding, in particular turloughs.

Public Awareness

One important aspect of flood risk management in the future, in addition to the OPW flood defence solutions, will be to raise the awareness of flood risk and encourage people, businesses and communities to take action to protect themselves and their properties.

The Office of Emergency Planning (OEP) is responsible for managing the “Be Winter Ready” Government Information Campaign and is actively planning the launch of this year's campaign on 9th November 2016. In conjunction with the OPW, a specific “Be Winter Ready” public information leaflet on Flooding has been prepared, which brings together information already available from various sources, including OPW’s Flood Preparation Website www.flooding.ie that provides practical advice for homes, business and farms in the event of flooding occurring.

I would like to conclude by thanking the Committee again for the opportunity to address it on this very important matter and to reiterate that the OPW will continue to work tirelessly to ensure that the fullest possible range of measures to deal effectively with flooding will receive the highest priority and attention now and into the future. I and my colleagues are happy to take any questions you may have.