

**National Directorate for Fire and Emergency Services before the
Joint Committee on Regional Development, Rural Affairs, Arts and the Gaeltacht**

Wednesday, 2 November 2016

Opening Statement by Mr Seán Hogan,

National Director for Fire and Emergency Management

Introduction

Good afternoon. I am happy to respond to your invitation to address this committee today on your topic of the 'Provision of emergency services, tackling flooding and maintaining facilities in rural areas'.

I am joined by my colleague Conor O'Sullivan, Assistant Principal Officer, with the National Directorate.

The National Directorate

The National Directorate for Fire and Emergency Management was established within the Department of Environment, Heritage and Local Government in 2009 to deal with two significant areas – fire safety and emergency management.

In relation to fire services, the mandate of the National Directorate has been to create a model of leadership, support and oversight by central government of local authority's provision of consistent, effective, safe and quality fire and emergency services in Ireland.

In relation to emergency management, the National Directorate has been to the fore in developing arrangements for co-ordination of emergency response across government services and using its expertise to anticipate and manage risk scenarios. The National Directorate has been mandated with leading national level response when required, most

recently in managing the extensive and extended flooding of last winter, but also episodes of severe weather that have occurred since 2009.

In advance of appearing here today, we provided the Committee with a briefing document setting out, I hope comprehensively, the varied work undertaken by the Directorate, so I do not propose to go into detail on these issues here now. I would like to focus on three key areas which highlight the work being undertaken to progress the provision of fire and emergency services in Ireland as set out in the reports which were attached to the briefing note supplied.

External Validation Group

Fire services in Ireland are provided by the principal local authorities, with 218 fire stations, some 600 fire engines and 3,400 staff. In undertaking their various statutory roles, they are supported directly by the National Directorate as described in the briefing. However, I want to highlight our work on developing national standards against which local fire services are benchmarked and our approach to overseeing the delivery of quality services by the Fire Authorities. In February 2013, the “Keeping Communities Safe” (KCS) document was published as national policy. This builds on good practice which has emerged and is the blueprint for the direction of fire safety and fire services, aimed at delivering those consistent, effective and quality fire services in Ireland.

Keeping Communities Safe provided for the establishment of an External Validation Group (EVG) to assist the Directorate in its mandate. As this was an important new process in the relationship between central and local government, the Directorate’s Management Board set down a number of guiding principles to underpin the process. The Board’s international expert, Mr Brian Sweeney, former Chief Officer of Strathclyde Fire and Rescue, and myself in my role as National Director were mandated by the Board to undertake an initial round of External Validation visits to fire services, starting early in 2014. The first round of EVG visits, taking in each of the 27 fire services, was completed at the end of Q1 2015.

The information and knowledge obtained during this first round of visits resulted in the publication in April this year of a report titled Fire Services in Ireland “Local Delivery –

National Consistency". The full report was supplied with our briefing and provides details of local authority fire services.

The report examines and reports conclusions on four specific areas of enquiry, one of which I want to highlight here. This is the Area Risk Categorisation process whereby fire services appraised fire risk in their communities using three years of actual fire data relating to each of their 217 fire station areas or 'station grounds'.

While each death from fire is one too many, the report highlights that Ireland is in the league of safest countries in respect of fatalities caused by fire, with a three year average rate of 6.4 fire deaths per million of population in the years under consideration. However, while everybody will welcome the lowest fatality statistics for forty years which occurred in 2013, there is no room for complacency as the Carrickmines fire tragedy of 10 October 2015 brought home to us.

Moving on, the Report finds that local authority Fire Services are applying and refining internationally-recognised risk management approaches to reduce the fire risk and the annual toll of life and property loss caused by fire. Further, local authorities are matching the assessed fire risk in the individual fire station areas with services based on either the full-time or retained fire service models as appropriate. Local authorities have built a comprehensive support infrastructure for fire services, which they have prioritised and maintained through the difficult years.

As requested, individual local authorities have benchmarked their fire services against national standards and national norms published for the first time in Keeping Communities Safe, and a strong degree of consistency, linked to area risk categorisation, now exists in fire service provision; all local authorities are using, or are working towards, national norms as minimum standards.

I am highlighting a few aspects of this report for you Chairman as I think it is the best way of giving an overview of where fire services are at in Ireland. The report characterises Ireland's fire services as being in transition from a self-contained, individual focus to one where collaboration with each other and partnerships with other branches of local government

and other statutory and voluntary sectors are seen as key to achieving the objective of safe communities.

Although services are at different stages along the road to transition, and further improvement is required in a number of identified areas, we think the public in Ireland are served well by the evolved arrangements and can retain confidence in the integrity and professionalism of those with responsibility for managing and delivering fire safety and fire services in Ireland.

Fire Safety in Traveller Accommodation

I referred earlier to the Carrickmines tragedy Chairman. As is appropriate in the aftermath of such an appalling tragedy, the audit and improvement of fire safety in local authority provided Traveller Accommodation was a critical task undertaken by the Directorate this year and the publication of the concluding report in September past marked the completion of the first stage in this process.

While recognising broader issues related to Traveller accommodation, we set about working with Traveller Representative Groups to develop a culturally appropriate approach to the task. The review process focussed on life safety and on ensuring that practical and appropriate fire safety measures, which contribute to preventing loss of life and serious injury in local authority Traveller accommodation, have been applied systematically across the country. This involved appraising fire safety in Traveller Accommodation against standards set out in the Working Draft “Guide to Fire Safety in Existing Traveller Accommodation”, which was prepared by the Directorate to assist local authorities in conducting the review. It also involved running a series of community fire safety initiatives aimed at Traveller Organisations and the wider Traveller community so that awareness of fire risk and fire safety is developed and maintained over the longer term.

The concluding report titled “Programme to Review and Enhance Fire Safety in Local Authority Provided Traveller Accommodation” was published by the Directorate on the 21st of September. We have also included the full text of this report with the briefing document for the Committee. The report enumerates fire safety measures and actions implemented,

as well as proposing and recommending a series of further actions to sustain fire safety into the longer term.

Recognising that what has been done is a first stage in a process which needs to be mainstreamed into on-going work programmes, the report makes a number of recommendations which are now being given effect to and which will embed the issue of fire safety in Traveller accommodation into future work programmes.

Report on Response to Winter 2015/16 Flooding

Moving finally to emergency management, the Department of Housing, Planning, Community and Local Government is assigned the Lead Government Department role for the response to severe weather events. On behalf of the Department, the National Directorate is mandated to take on the task of convening and leading the National Emergency Coordination Group, which brings together the entire panoply of Government when severe weather, flooding or other such events occur.

Last winter the Directorate convened a National Emergency Co-ordination Group in anticipation of the arrival of storm Desmond on 3 December. The Group met on 43 occasions until the floodwaters began to recede in mid-January 2016 to provide a joined up, “Whole of Government” response to deal with the flooding crisis.

Next week, we intend bringing to Government a Review Report on the response to last winter’s flooding event. Although for reasons of timing we were not in a position to include this Report with our briefing for your Committee, I can tell you that the Report describes the meteorological and hydrological characteristics of last winter period and reviews the impact of the storms and subsequent flooding on the communities involved. The report describes the preparedness and the response of the State Agencies to the severe weather events. The report also details the measures that were put in place by Government to assist those worst affected in dealing with the aftermath of the flooding.

At the local level, arrangements for the response to emergency events have developed greatly in the last decade in Ireland, learning from each previous event. The 2006 document,

A Framework for Major Emergency Management, sets out arrangements whereby the three Principal Response Agencies, An Garda Síochána, the HSE and local authorities, work together and with the Defence Forces and the Voluntary and Community sectors in responding to emergencies. Severe weather response protocols are in place in all of the principal response agencies. While satisfied that our current system has solid strength, a number of aspects have been identified for improvement arising out of last winter's experience. One interesting theme is how we can further enhance arrangements for working with communities themselves in managing such crises and, in our view, the place of the community and voluntary sector in building resilience to emergencies needs to be developed.

Conclusion

Finally, I would like to welcome again this opportunity to meet your Committee and to present on the work of the National Directorate in our efforts to develop and improve fire and emergency management policy and service delivery in the interest of the people of Ireland.

I can assure the Committee that the National Directorate is committed to achieving continuous service improvement, and hope we will continue to provide the necessary balance of leadership, support and oversight required to ensure the provision of consistently effective, safe and quality fire and emergency services in Ireland.

I look forward to hearing the views and issues of Committee members, and hope we can endeavour to answer questions you may have in relation to our areas of work.

Thank you.