

Public Accounts Committee
Opening Statement by Mark Griffin, Accounting Officer
Department of the Environment, Climate and Communications
14th October 2021

I am here today to discuss the 2020 audited Appropriation Account for Vote 29, the Department of the Environment, Climate and Communications. I understand that the Committee also wishes to address Chapter 9 of the C&AG Report on the Accounts of the Public Services 2019, dealing with the Remediation of Landfill Sites.

As the Committee will be aware, the Department of the Environment, Climate and Communications was established following the reconfiguration of a number of Departments by Government in June 2020 and a transfer of functions order was made in September 2020 formally assigning the broadcasting and media functions to the Department of Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media. 2020 income and expenditure relating to those functions are included in the Appropriation Account for that Department, Vote 33.

Total gross expenditure under the Vote in 2020 amounted to €428 million, some 21% or €113 million below the budgetary allocation of €541 million which includes capital carryover. The Covid-19 pandemic impacted expenditure across all programme areas of the Department in 2020 and in particular the Communications and Energy Programmes which had savings of €69 million and €14 million respectively. The impact of the pandemic is also reflected in reduced output and spend across these programmes in 2021.

The Department and its agencies played an important role throughout the pandemic by ensuring the continuity of critical infrastructure and by putting measures in place to mitigate the impact of Covid-19 on businesses and individuals. Staff in the Department continued to deliver on major business priorities during 2020 some of which are set out in the briefing note provided to the Committee with a more comprehensive list of activity and outputs contained in the Department's Annual Report for 2020 which has been published.

Our agencies also played a key role in supporting businesses and citizens. For example, An Post kept its network of over 900 post offices open, fulfilling an important commercial and societal role to communities. ComReg worked closely with telecoms operators to ensure that the necessary measures and plans were put in place by networks to manage and handle the surge in voice and data traffic with offices, schools and third level institutions shut and these activities taking place in the home. The Commission for the Regulation of Utilities put temporary measures in place to strengthen the protections in place for energy consumers.

The Department secured additional funding in 2020 for the Trading Online Voucher Scheme, as part of the Government's Covid-19 Business Supports Package for small businesses, to meet the increased demand from businesses who found themselves unable to trade physically and had to move their businesses online. In 2020, €21 million was spent on the Scheme, of which €18.46 million can be directly attributed as Covid-19 related spend. Approximately 13,000 vouchers, ten times the number approved in 2019, were awarded and over 28,000 small businesses benefitted from the training, advice and support provided by Local Enterprise Offices as part of the Scheme. Usage of Eircodes, which had already been trending significantly upwards in recent years, saw a huge jump in 2020 to almost 28 million lookups compared to 19 million in 2019. A significant part of this increase is a result of the shift to online shopping last year. We have seen a further significant increase of 24% over the first 8 months of 2021.

2020, which was the first year of the NBP contract, saw a significant level of mobilisation activity by NBI, including recruitment of personnel, procurement of materials and contractors, installation of equipment in exchanges and building IT systems to support the network. Surveys and designs were progressed to inform the build programme, resulting in the first homes being connected to the new fibre network in January of this year in County Cork.

The rollout of the national broadband plan network has, however, been impacted by the Covid-19 pandemic. While telecommunications activity was deemed essential work under Covid-19, activities relating to network build generally involve multiple-person crews and the onset of significant Covid-19 case numbers and the implications for 'close contacts'

severely impacted NBI's ability to have crews operating during certain periods in 2020 and 2021.

The Department has worked closely with NBI to put a remedial plan in place to address delays experienced to the NBP rollout. Under this plan, NBI are implementing a number of measures to help lessen the impact including increasing the level of throughput in the eir "make-ready" programme and bringing in additional resources into NBI and its sub-contractors.

As of 1 October this year over 257,000 premises have been surveyed and build works involving over 108,000 premises are ongoing across the country. There are now over 250 staff employed directly by NBI, along with more than 850 contractors across the country working on the network rollout. In addition, 379 Broadband Connection Points have been installed by NBI including 141 primary schools. By the end of this year, NBI has forecast that almost 60,000 homes will have been passed and will be able to connect to the network.

Works under the SEAI energy schemes were also impacted by Covid-19 restrictions particularly between March and June 2020 when activity paused in line with public health and Government guidelines. Almost €79 million was spent on energy efficiency measures through grants to over 17,600 homes, 39 community based projects and 1,615 households at risk of energy poverty.

The first auctions under the Renewable Electricity Support Scheme took place in July 2020 and 68 new renewable energy projects, equating to almost 1,100 MW of new electricity generation, received letters of offer.

The Department opened a call for applications to the Just Transition Fund in June 2020 and provisional funding offers were announced in November 2020. While spend in 2020 was low, funding of €30 million has been allocated to over 60 projects throughout the region for projects from the private sector, local authorities and communities.

€48 million was provided to the Environmental Protection Agency and €23 million to Local Authorities for waste management programmes including €10 million provided through the

Environment Fund. A Waste Action Plan for a Circular Economy was launched in September 2020 as Ireland's new roadmap for waste planning and management. The Plan shifts focus away from waste disposal and looks instead to how we can preserve resources by creating a circular economy.

€12 million was provided in 2020 for landfill remediation. As set out in the C&AG's Chapter, the Landfill Remediation programme was set up in 2006 to address the findings of the 2005 European Court of Justice Judgment (ECJ) against Ireland. 15 years on from that judgment we are now in a very different context in terms of our waste management performance.

The ECJ case itself was closed in 2015 as Ireland was considered to have made sufficient progress in implementing a Programme of Measures agreed with the European Commission - there are now just 3 active landfills in Ireland which accept municipal waste, down from 126 at the time the proceedings were first brought by the Commission; our recycling rate was less than 5% in 1998 but now stands at around 40%, and 92% of municipal waste was sent to landfill whereas only 14% was landfilled in 2018.

Having been found to be in breach of our core EU obligations under the Waste Framework Directive, we are now meeting or are on course to meet all of our EU objectives in this area.

Since the 2019 C&AG Chapter, important structural and administrative changes have been applied to the management and governance of the landfill remediation programme and these will deliver results in a more streamlined and accountable manner in the coming years. In 2020, for the first time, expenditure under the Scheme exceeded the budget allocated. The C&AG made three recommendations in his report and implementing measures to address the recommendations are being incorporated into the management of the programme

I look forward to assisting the Committee members with any questions they may have today.

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