

Public Accounts Committee
Opening Statement by Mark Griffin, Accounting Officer
Department of the Environment, Climate and Communications
13th October 2022

I am here today to discuss the 2021 audited Appropriation Account for Vote 29, the Department of the Environment, Climate and Communications and Chapter 9 of the C&AG Report on the Accounts of the Public Services 2021, on the implementation of the National Broadband Plan.

Appropriation Account 2021 Performance

The total gross expenditure under the Vote in 2021 amounted to €664 million, some 14% or €105 million below the budgetary allocation of €769 million which includes capital carryover. The extensive COVID-19 related restrictions on construction activity between January and mid-April 2021 had a significant impact on activity on the National Broadband Plan, the Sustainable Energy programmes and the Landfill Remediation Programme and this is the main driver of the underspend last year.

National Broadband Plan

I outlined to the Committee when I was last here and in subsequent correspondence the unprecedented challenges faced in delivering the National Broadband Plan arising primarily from the Covid-19 pandemic. We are seeing evidence this year that the network build is gaining momentum and that this will continue into 2023 and subsequent years. As of 1 October this year, over 337,000 premises are design complete, 210,000 premises are under construction with 158,000 make-ready complete, 94,500 premises can order or pre-order a connection while over 85,000 premises are passed and are available for immediate connection. Over 20,500 premises are connected which is exceeding expectations for this stage of the project. By the end of next January (end contract year 3), the revised target of 102,000 premises to be passed will be achieved with a further 80,000-85,000 to be passed in

2023. There are now over 300 staff employed directly by NBI, along with over 1,100 indirect employees working with build/design contractors.

271 public Broadband Connection Points are live on the NBP network. There are 470 national schools within the Intervention Area that have been provided with a high speed broadband connection under the NBP and are either “live” or ready to “go live”. In 2022 rollout to the islands commenced with premises on 4 islands off County Donegal currently able to order/pre-order high-speed broadband. NBI is progressing fibre design and build activities in a further six islands off Counties Galway, Mayo & Cork while progressing surveys and designs for additional islands off Donegal, Galway, Mayo and Cork.

Energy Programme

In 2021, the Department provided €327 million under its Energy Programme, up 60% on 2020. €101.3 million was spent on the SEAI retrofitting schemes, with 15,500 home upgrades completed. This included nearly 4,100 Solar PV installations, 4,600 homes upgraded to a B2 standard, 2,000 heat pumps installations and almost 2,300 free upgrades to energy poor households under the Warmer Homes and Warmth & Wellbeing Scheme. In addition, approval was obtained to transfer €160 million from the Vote to the Energy Efficiency National Fund in order to fund the establishment of a new Residential Retrofit Loan Guarantee Scheme, as well as to support additional energy efficiency upgrades under the Warmer Homes Scheme and other SEAI residential and community retrofit schemes.

Other key achievements in the energy area in 2021 are the continued rollout of the Renewable Electricity Support Scheme with the first onshore RESS projects energised in Q4 last year. 530 MW of renewable energy is expected to energise by year end 2022 under the RESS with a further 300 MW in 2023. RESS 1 is expected to deliver an approximate 15% increase in Ireland’s current renewable energy generation capacity by the end of 2023.

Auctions were completed for onshore RESS 2 in June 2022, which is expected to deliver a further 20% increase in renewable energy capacity, and the design of RESS 3 is under development as is the design of the first Offshore Renewable Energy Scheme (ORESS1).

Environment and Waste Management Programme

Spending under the Environment and Waste Management Programme was €128 million, slightly ahead of its original allocation.

Over €20 million of the €128 million was spent by 21 Local Authorities to support the landfill risk assessment and remediation work on over 70 sites around the country - most being old municipal landfills that operated prior to regulation and require engineering measures to ensure protection of the environment, air, and water quality for local communities.

Over €13 million was spent on other waste management initiatives. The majority of the spend was on enforcement related activities. Funding was also provided for once off litter initiatives in 2021 to support an outdoor summer and prevent littering in public areas.

By the end of 2021, 52 Just Transition Fund projects had entered into grant agreements and were commencing the rollout of their projects. The total value of projects in the delivery phase is €28 million, with €19 million in grant funding. These projects will bring €12 million in additional funding to the Midlands region and support about 150 direct jobs in the grantee organisations and about 890 indirect jobs, as self-reported by the projects.

National Cyber Security Centre

2021 was a significant year for the National Cyber Security Centre. Following completion of a Capacity Review early in the year the Government accepted the Capacity Review's recommendations and agreed a number of actions including the sanction of an additional 20 staff to be appointed by the end of 2022. In addition, in May 2021, the HSE was subjected to a serious criminal cyberattack, through the infiltration of IT systems using Conti Ransomware. The NCSC provided supports to the HSE in identifying the systems affected by the cyber-attack and to bring all systems back online.

Conclusion

The Department is tasked with delivering significant policy programmes to achieve a climate neutral, sustainable and digitally connected Ireland. The Appropriation Account 2021 sets

out where the Department has invested its resources in 2021 to progress the achievement of this outcome in the context of significant challenges.

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

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