

Opening Statement, Public Accounts Committee on Vote 24
Oonagh McPhillips, Secretary General, Dept of Justice
15 February 2024

I thank the Committee for the invitation to meet this morning in relation to the 2022 Appropriation Accounts for Vote 24, the Department of Justice, and Vote 21, the Irish Prison Service. I am also grateful to the Comptroller and Auditor General for the work of his Office. I will share my time with the Director General of the Irish Prison Service, Ms. McCaffrey.

As the committee is aware, the Justice Vote is one of six votes in the sector and funds a wide range of public services in the Department itself, and in a number of statutory agencies and bodies, with over 3,500 people working to serve Government and the public.

The organisation is growing in numbers – increasing from 3,149 staff in 2022 to 3,533 in 2023 - and in diversity. The Department comprised 58% women in 2023, with an average gender pay gap of 5.3%, and on other diversity markers I'm pleased to note an increasing number of colleagues with disabilities, of more varied ethnicity, and from the LGBT+ community. We have a purpose that connects people across a very wide variety of roles, all of them supporting our mission of working for a safe, fair, inclusive Ireland.

The Department's net expenditure for 2022, the year under examination, was €398m. This included Capital Expenditure of €33.1m on the new world class laboratory for Forensic Science Ireland which was substantially completed last year. Current expenditure is under two distinct programmes of work across 46 subheads in the Justice Vote: Programme A is Criminal Justice and B is Civil Justice, which includes immigration.

In the year leading to April 2022, the CSO recorded that almost 90,000 people moved to Ireland. 22,000 were returning Irish citizens, with 25,000 arrivals from UK and EU countries, 10,000 from India and 5,000 from Brazil. These figures illustrate that the overwhelming majority of the people who move to Ireland do so to work or study – and make vital contributions to our economy and society. Sectors like health care, home care, home construction, technology, retail, hospitality and transport are hugely dependent on the very positive contributions that migrants make.

Of course 2022 saw the invasion of Ukraine which posed an unprecedented humanitarian challenge and, following the triggering of the Temporary Protection Directive in early March that year, the Department moved quickly to establish our Ukraine Response Team.

Within a few days, with support from the DAA and working closely with the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth and Department of Social Protection, the team had put in place a dedicated operation – in a building at Dublin airport, with supplies of food, hygiene necessities, and toys sourced for the many traumatised children. Over 20-hour days in those initial months, dozens of colleagues at all levels across the Department and wider civil service volunteered for shifts and worked collaboratively and compassionately to welcome and register people fleeing the war, so they could access necessary supports as quickly as possible.

Our data and CTI teams innovated and worked across Government to create a joined-up paperless operation. The team moved to more suitable office accommodation in City West and a more sustainable work pattern in May 2022.

68,774 beneficiaries of temporary protection were registered in 2022, 32,573 in 2023. To date in region of 104,000 people have been granted temporary protection under the Directive.

Parallel to this, there was a return to international travel following the lifting of Covid restrictions. Our Border Management Unit at Dublin airport processed 13.9m arrivals (increased to 16.6m in 2023) and the number of applicants for international protection increased significantly with 13,647 applications in 2022 (which reduced slightly to 13,276 last year).

Managing this increase has involved adaptability and skill by colleagues at all levels. We do not claim to be perfect but significant progress is being made across the International Protection system to meet the scale of demand. This has involved unparalleled investment in staff and panel members, reengineered processes, and technology. The outcome of this can be seen in the number of monthly determinations made by the IPO, up from 281 in November 2022 to just over 1,000 in November 2023.

The Minister introduced an accelerated process for applicants from safe countries in November 2022 and these applicants now typically receive first instance decisions in less than 10 weeks. The number of applications from safe countries has fallen by 38% in the first year of this accelerated process. The IPO made 2,482 first instance determinations in 2021, 4323 in 2022, 9,000 in 2023 and we are confident of delivering over 14,000 decisions this year.

There is also significant investment in the independent International Protection Appeals Tribunal and timescales for appeals have been reduced from 13.5 months to 5.5 months in 2023. Every element of the protection system is being reviewed and re-engineered to deliver fair, fast outcomes for applicants and we are also implementing a major modernisation programme across the entire immigration function. The programme will replace legacy IT systems to introduce an integrated single view of all applicants and restructure immigration operations around more efficient, common processes which will serve the public better.

We have previously discussed here the priority of tackling Domestic, Sexual and Gender Based Violence (DSGBV), a key objective in the Department's Strategy, and the Zero Tolerance Strategy published in June 2022. The Department has worked closely with partners to draft the necessary legislation and to co-design and establish Cuan, the new statutory agency responsible for leading the whole of Government strategy implementation, including delivery of support services and refuge accommodation, and the equally important task of education, awareness and prevention.

Collaboration and partnership between communities and state agencies also underpins the Policing, Security and Community Safety Act signed into law last week.

This new legal framework gives effect to the recommendations of the Commission on the Future of Policing, placing in statute the shared ownership of community safety and reforming all aspects of policing including the functions of An Garda Síochána, and the landscape of oversight, governance and accountability arrangements.

The community safety approach is being piloted through three local community partnerships in Longford, Waterford and Dublin's north inner city. These and other areas have also benefited from the Community Safety Innovation Fund established in 2022. A total of €1.623m was allocated to 22 organisations in 2022, this increased to €2.864m between 30 organisations in 2023. A total of €3.75m is being made available in 2024.

In this vein I would also mention the Youth Justice Strategy - expenditure under that subhead was €22.8m in 2022, and funding of €30m is provided this year, which supports youth diversion projects nationwide. These youth diversions and other measures provide both value for money and effective deterrents in preventing the destruction and trauma caused by crime.

The new Policing Act will also strengthen independent oversight of An Garda Síochána, including through the new Policing and Community Safety Authority which will combine the existing oversight functions of the Policing Authority with the inspection functions carried out by the Garda Inspectorate. A new Garda Board is designed to strengthen corporate governance and, as the Committee is aware, a new complaints body, Fiosrú, will be established to replace the existing GSOC. The Act sets out comprehensive reform of the processes for handling complaints and investigations into allegations of wrongdoing by Garda employees.

The Department works productively with all the agencies in the Sector. These relationships are governed by formal oversight and performance agreements designed to ensure accountability and clarity while upholding the independence appropriate to various bodies. We work with D/PENDR to secure funding and resource needs for each body through the annual estimates process.

The Department has engaged proactively with GSOC since its establishment and GSOC's funding has grown from €9.6m in 2016 to €19.6m this year while its staffing has also more than doubled in the same period. We recognise and support its challenging and vital role and the increased funding demonstrates Government's strong commitment to building the organisation. My team has worked closely with colleagues in GSOC in preparation for the establishment of Fiosrú and I look forward to engaging with the new CEO and Ombudsman who are currently being recruited by the Public Appointments Service for the new structure.

Thank you. We can go into further detail as members require. I'll hand over now to Ms. McCaffrey.

Opening Statement from DG Caron McCaffrey, Vote 21

PAC Appropriation Account 2022

15 February 2024

Thank you for the invitation to discuss Vote 21 with the Committee today, which had a total net expenditure of €401m in 2022.

Emerging from the Covid Pandemic in 2022, a significant amount of innovation was delivered such as the introduction of video visits. Since their introduction in 2021, 45% of all visits are now video visits which allows prisoners to see more people on a visit, affords more privacy, and saves families the expense and inconvenience of having to travel to a prison.

To further lessen the burden for families and reduce the risk of cash within the prison environment, the introduction in 2020 of electronic methods of sending money to prisoners has resulted in €16 million being electronically transferred into prisoner's accounts.

Subject to funding, the digitisation of prison services forms a key pillar in our 2023 – 2027 Strategic Plan. We will modernise our services and improve governance through digital developments that enable more transparent and tailored services, support innovation and improve efficiency and effectiveness in a cohesive and holistic manner.

As members will be aware, the Irish Prison Service does not have the option of refusing committals and must accept all people committed by the courts. We reported over 7,043 committals to prison in 2022, up 15% on 2019. The annual number of committals has risen further in 2023 to 7,946. We have worked effectively to free up spaces within the existing prison estate through the implementation of a Prison Population Management Plan. However, this has now reached its limit.

This trend of higher demands on the prison system is expected to increase into the future, contributed to by factors such as overall population growth, increasing Garda and Judicial resources, and more frequent Court sittings.

The Irish Prison Service has a strong record of accomplishment of modernisation and delivery of innovative projects. These include the completion of a new complex in Limerick Prison delivered in 2022 within its budget of €71.5m, which provides additional spaces for both women and men. The repurposing and re-opening of the Training Unit in 2022 to accommodate older male prisoners with additional needs allows us to offer a more tailored and highly effective healthcare service.

We are committed to continuing to invest in our prison estate to ensure that it is modern and fit for purpose and that it has the capacity to humanely accommodate those committed to prison by the courts. Following a review of the prison estate, a number of locations have been identified as the best options to yield capacity within the existing footprint of the estate to deliver additional accommodation. Planning has commenced for four capital projects at Castlerea Prison, Cloverhill Prison, the Midlands Prison and Mountjoy Prison which will deliver a maximum of 620 additional spaces, subject to the availability of the necessary capital resources.

Recruitment into the organisation continued during 2022 and 2023 with over 320 new prison officers recruited.

Continued innovation by our staff lead to the Irish Prison Service becoming the first public or private employer to be awarded the prestigious Amber Flag by Pieta House. This recognition highlighted the Service's unwavering commitment to fostering mental well-being and creating inclusive and supportive environments within its organisation.

These Chairman, are some of the successes and challenges of the Irish Prison Service since 2022. Successes and challenges that have been accomplished and faced by the staff of the Irish Prison Service with determination and innovation to create a better service for all.

Chairman, both the Secretary General and I will be happy to take any questions you and committee members may have on the 2022 Appropriation Accounts.