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An Coiste um Fhormhaoirsiú Buiséid
Tuarascáil Eatramhach ar Phróiseas na Meastachán
Samhain 2023

Committee on Budgetary Oversight
Interim Report on the Estimates Process
November 2023

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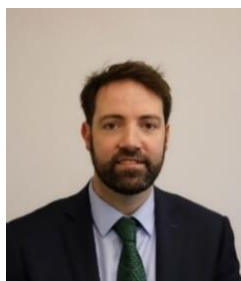
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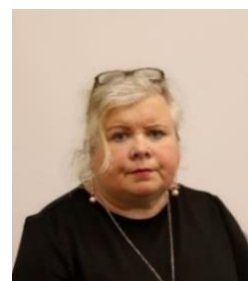
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Introduction

The Committee on Budgetary Oversight (“the Committee”) published its [Final report on the framework for parliamentary engagement throughout the course of the budgetary cycle](#)’ (“Framework Report”) in February 2021. The Framework Report was undertaken following an instruction from Dáil Eireann, requesting that the Committee consider the overall framework for parliamentary engagement throughout the course of the budgetary cycle, and make recommendations thereon to the sub-Committee on Dáil Reform. The Committee engaged with a number of stakeholders, sectoral Committees and Ministers and made a number of recommendations regarding the Estimates process.

Since the publication of the Framework Report, a number of changes to Standing Orders and other initiatives have been progressed. In this interim report the Committee examines the Revised Estimates 2023 process, in the context of the recommendations made in the Framework Report, and makes a number of observations and recommendations intended to build on its previous report and improve the scrutiny process.

Committees engaged in the scrutiny process within the provisions of Standing Order 215A regarding the timeframe for consideration of the Estimate and the publication of Committee reports. As part of the preparation for scrutiny Committee’s also issued letters to the relevant Departments seeking briefing notes within specified timeframes.

The Committee intends to publish a final report, including an examination of the Supplementary Estimates process.

Summary of Observations and Recommendations

1. The Committee notes that progress has been made with regard to Revised Estimates being considered earlier in the year, as previously recommended by the Committee.

2. The Committee acknowledges that difficulties have become evident with the timeframe for consideration of the Revised Estimates set out in Standing Orders, with half of Committees requiring an extension to the current 60-day limit for consideration.
3. The Committee recommends that Dáil Standing Order 215A(1) be amended to allow 80 days for consideration of the Revised Estimates after referral.
4. The Committee reiterates its previous recommendation that Committees should report any observations, comments or objections they may have in relation to the proposed Estimate, and provide a copy of the report to the Minister.
5. The Committee notes that Committees struggled to meet the 14-day deadline and acknowledges that it is too tight a timeframe to allow for the preparation, circulation and agreement of a substantial Committee report.
6. The Committee recommends that Dáil Standing Order 215A(2) be amended to require that reports on the Estimates be completed within 30 days of the Committee's meeting to consider the Estimate.
7. The Committee recommends that Committees request that Ministers provide a substantive response to any issues raised in Committee reports on the Estimates, and that Committees publish these responses.
8. The Committee recommends that all Departments use the guidance provided to ensure consistency across briefing notes.
9. The Committee recommends that the Department of Public Expenditure, NDP Delivery and Reform, together with line Departments, provide feedback on the guidance to the Committee.
10. The Committee welcomes the overall improvement in the timeframe for the provision of briefing documents compared to 2019.
11. The Committee notes the wide variation in the length of time briefings were received before the relevant meeting and emphasises the importance of briefings being received sufficiently in advance to allow Committees prepare for the consideration of the Estimates.
12. The Committee is of the view that given these difficulties, the provision of briefing documents should be linked to the publication/referral of the Estimate, and not the date of the Committee's public hearing.
13. The Committee recommends that all Departmental Briefings be provided to the relevant Committee within 30 days of the publication of the Revised Estimate, and as previously recommended, at least 14 days in advance of any public hearing with the Minister.

Sectoral Committee Engagements and Reports

Timing for Consideration of the Revised Estimate

In its Framework Report, the Committee noted that Ireland was an outlier in the length of time it took for the Estimates to be considered/approved by the legislature and recommended that:

the Revised Estimates should be published by the 1st December and referred to the relevant Committees before the year-end. Committees should consider the estimates no later than the 31st January in the budget year.

Consequently, changes were made to Standing Orders requiring that the Estimates be considered within 60 days of referral to the Committee. Under Dáil Standing Order (DSO) 215A(1), consideration by a sectoral Committee must be completed (i.e., public meeting(s) with the appropriate Minister(s) scheduled, held, and returned to the Dáil) within **60 days** of the Revised Estimate(s) or Further Revised Estimate(s) being presented to the Dáil and circulated to members.

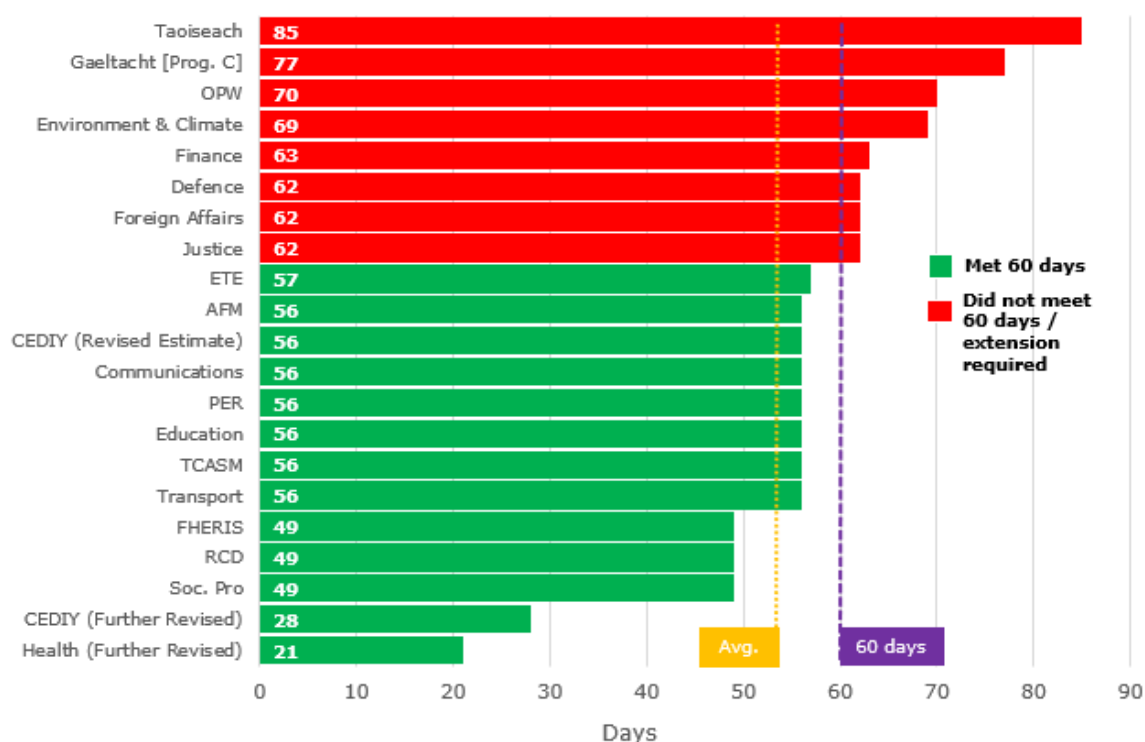
In 2023, of the 14 Sectoral/Departmental Committees, 7 (50%) required an extension beyond the stipulated 60 days to facilitate their consideration. Several issues arose relevant to the timing of the publication of the Revised Estimates Volume for the Public Service (REV), which were published immediately prior to the Christmas recess period on 14 December 2022. There were also some Further Revised Estimates which resulted in delays to their consideration¹.

Extensions to the consideration period were sought by the following Select Committees and approved by the Dáil on the following dates:

¹ Further Revised Estimates were considered by three Committees (1) Health, (2) Housing, Local Government and Heritage and (3) Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth. In respect of (1) and (2), the Revised Estimates were not considered by the Committee as the Revised Estimate was superseded by a Further Revised Estimate once the Further Revised Estimate was considered by the Committee, taken back to the Dáil and approved. In the case of (3), the Committee opted to consider both the original Revised Estimate and the Further Revised Estimate.

- **Health** (1 February 2023 and 7 March 2023²)
- **Housing, Local Government and Heritage** (1 February 2023)
- **Environment and Climate Action** (1 February 2023)
- **Finance, Public Expenditure and Reform, and Taoiseach** (1 February 2023)³
- **Justice** (1 February 2023)
- **Foreign Affairs and Defence** (1 February 2023)
- **Gaeilge, na Gaeltachta agus Phobal Labhartha na Gaeilge** (8 February 2023)

Figure 1: Timeline reflecting publication of Estimate and Committee consideration, by Ministerial brief – number of calendar days⁴



Note: The two Revised Estimates in respect of Health (Vote 40) and Housing, Local Government and Heritage Group (Votes 16, 23 and 34) are omitted in Figure 1, above.

² The consideration period for the Select Committee on Health was extended by 30 days (to 14 March 2023) on [1 February 2023](#) and by a further 40 days (to 23 April 2023) on [7 March 2023](#).

³ It should be noted that the Committee on Finance, Public Expenditure and Reform, and Taoiseach covers Votes under the responsibility of four Ministers requiring multiple public engagements to consider the Votes under its remit.

⁴ Further information on timelines is included in Appendix 2.

Observations and Recommendations

1. The Committee notes that progress has been made with regard to Revised Estimates being considered earlier in the year, as previously recommended by the Committee.
2. The Committee acknowledges that difficulties have become evident with the timeframe for consideration of the Revised Estimates set out in Standing Orders, with half of Committees requiring an extension to the current 60-day limit for consideration.
3. The Committee recommends that Dáil Standing Order 215A(1) be amended to allow 80 days for consideration of the Revised Estimates after referral.

Sectoral Committee Reports

The Committee also recommended, in the 2021 Framework Report that each -

Sectoral Committee should be required to report any observations, comments or objections they may have in relation to the proposed Estimate to the Dáil not later than 14 days after considering the Estimate.

Dáil Standing Order 215A(2) was introduced stating that “any report that a Committee proposes to make arising from its consideration of an Estimate shall be made within a further period of 14 days”.

Committees were also encouraged to report to Dáil Éireann on their consideration of the relevant Vote(s) under DSO 215A. In all, 11 Committees of 14⁵ (79%) reported, as follows:

- Letter to the Minister (**6**, 55%)
- Report (**5**, 45%)

All reporting is publicly available on a new, dedicated Oireachtas *Financial Scrutiny* [website](#).

⁵ Three Committees did not report (1) Agriculture, Food and the Marine, (2) Health, and (3) Housing, Local Government and Heritage.

Reporting timeframes, measuring from the date the last Vote was considered by that Committee and referred back to the Dáil, ranged from 5 to 44 days, an average of **16 days**.

Observations and Recommendations

4. The Committee reiterates its previous recommendation that Committees should report any observations, comments or objections they may have in relation to the proposed Estimate, and provide a copy of the report to the Minister.
5. The Committee notes that Committees struggled to meet the 14-day deadline and acknowledges that it is too tight a timeframe to allow for the preparation, circulation and agreement of a substantial Committee report.
6. The Committee recommends that Dáil Standing Order 215A(2) be amended to require that reports on the Estimates be completed within 30 days of the Committee's meeting to consider the Estimate.
7. The Committee recommends that Committees request that Ministers provide a substantive response to any issues raised in Committee reports on the Estimates, and that Committees publish these responses.

Departmental Briefing Notes

A number of sectoral Committees have also published the briefing notes provided by Departments. Having examined these briefing notes, and the comments made in some sectoral Committee reports, the Committee notes that there are significant differences in the presentation and content across Department briefing notes.

The Committee recommended in its Framework Report:

a standard Estimates Questionnaire template should be designed by the PBO, working with the Committees Secretariat and DPER. This should be augmented with supplementary questions by individual committees.

The Committee Secretariat and Parliamentary Budget Office (PBO) have been collaborating on progressing guidance for drafters of Departmental briefings. A common approach across Departments and Committees would allow for briefings to:

- Be more consistent and streamlined with limited variation by Department/Committee;
- Be provided in a timely manner, well in advance of any public hearing, allowing sufficient time for Committee Members to examine them;
- Adhere to good practice, evidence-based criteria based on the experience of Committee staff in engaging with non-specialist Members with a technical topic.

Such an approach should result in benefits for all those involved in Committee's scrutiny of the Estimates, such as:

- Providing Members with clear, concise briefing that are presented similarly across all Committees.
- Assisting Departments by providing a standard, rationalised briefing template and ensures that a mutually beneficial feedback mechanism is established and enhanced between Departments (Finance Officers) and the Oireachtas (Coordination Unit, Sectoral Committees and BOC) to respond to and address any issues arising with Estimates process in general and budgetary engagements more broadly.
- Avoiding duplication of effort by Committee Staff removing the need for staff to 'translate' Departmental briefings into more accessible, concise formats.

The proposed guidance is set out in [Appendix 1](#). It provides a structure for Departmental briefings but is not intended to act as a questionnaire.

The guidance also specifies a maximum of 20 pages per Vote, and while the Committee acknowledges that the size of votes, both in terms of allocation and the number of programmes varies significantly, the Committee believes it is important that briefing notes be kept to this length in the majority of cases.

Observations and Recommendations

8. The Committee recommends that all Departments use the guidance provided to ensure consistency across briefing notes.

9. The Committee recommends that the Department of Public Expenditure, NDP Delivery and Reform, together with line Departments, provide feedback on the guidance to the Committee.

Timeframe for Departmental Briefing Notes

Timeframes for receipt of briefing notes were explored by the Committee in its 2021 'Framework Report wherein it recommended the following Action:

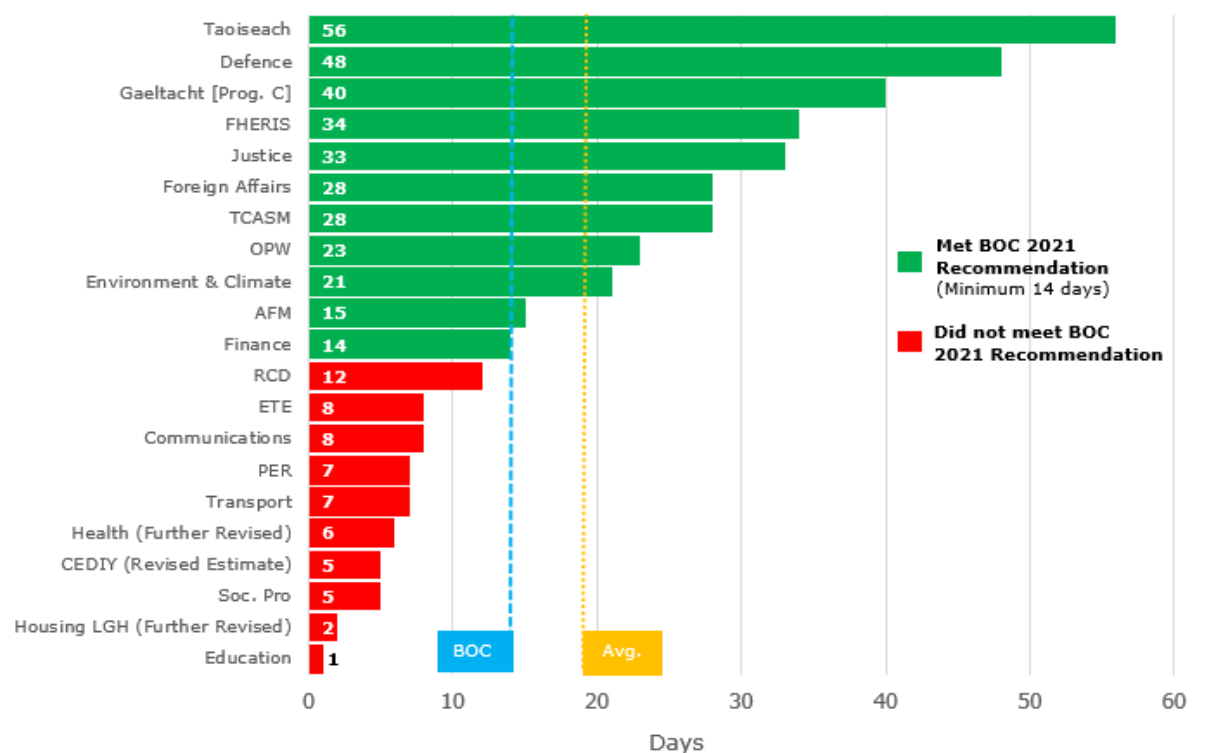
In advance of any meeting on matters relating to financial or performance scrutiny, briefing material should be supplied to committees by departments at a minimum of 14 days in advance. This will allow secretariats to revert with any additional questions or requests for supplementary information.

Sectoral Committees wrote, in a coordinated approach, to the relevant Minister(s) requesting briefing between 29 November 2022 and 10 January 2023, with reminders supplied in January 2023.

The turnaround times between the issuance of the request by Committees and receipt of the Departmental briefings ranged from **15 to 74 days** (average 42.5 days), and the time between receipt of briefings and the public hearings ranged from **1 to 56⁶ day(s)** (average 19.1 days) (see figure 2). It should be noted these are calendar days, not working days, and include Christmas recess.

⁶ The Department of Health supplied a 5-page briefing in respect of the Revised Estimate on 6 January but indicated at that point that a Further Revised Estimate would be forthcoming. Subsequently, the Select Committee on Health met to consider only the Further Revised Estimate on 19 April 2023 (the Revised Estimate had subsequently been withdrawn). A specific 56-page briefing on the Further Revised Estimate was provided on 13 April. For the purposes of accuracy, the turnaround time between the receipt of the original briefing has been included in the first column above and the turnaround time between the receipt of the FRE briefing included in the second column (as this one was relevant to that public hearing).

Figure 2: Timeline for receipt of Departmental briefings in advance of Committee meeting, by Ministerial brief – number of calendar days



Note: 'BOC' label above refers to the recommended 14-day minimum. The 'Avg.' label refers to the actual 2023 average (19.1 calendar days).

Similar information previously published by the Parliamentary Budget Office⁷ (see figures 3 and 4), shows a significant improvement in 2023 compared to 2019, with many more Departments providing the briefing sufficiently in advance of the meeting.

⁷ [An Oifig Buiséid Pharlaiminteach | Parliamentary Budget Office - Review of the Estimates Scrutiny Process - PBO Publication 32 of 2019 – Expenditure Analysis Series \(oireachtas.ie\)](#) (p.12)

Figure 3: Timeline for receipt of Departmental briefings in advance of Committee meeting, by Ministerial brief (2019) – number of calendar days

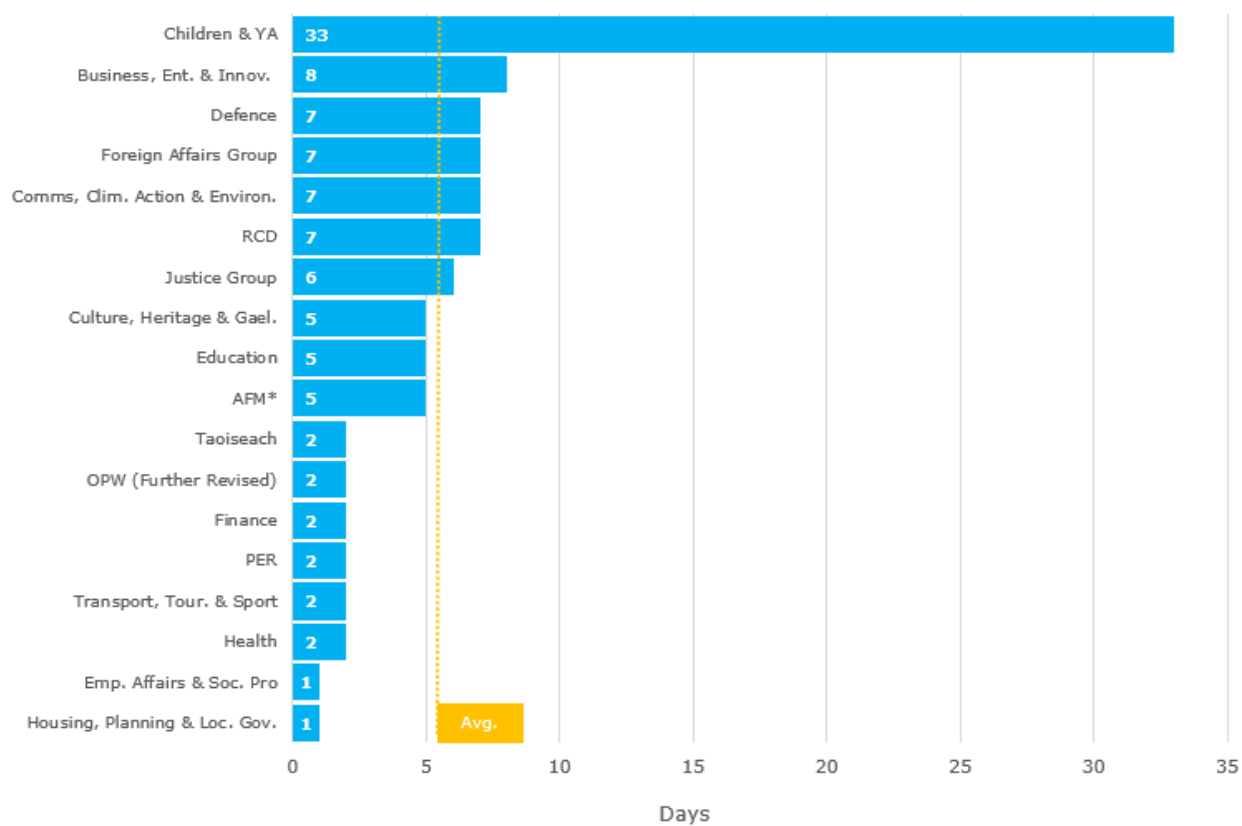


Figure 4: Comparing briefing timelines 2019 v 2023 – number of calendar days and relative ranking

REV 2019			REV 2023		
Days	Relative ranking (from longest to shortest supply times)	Ministerial Brief	Days	Relative ranking (from longest to shortest supply times)	Ministerial Brief
33	1st	Children & YA	56	1st	Taoiseach
8	2	Business, Ent. & Innov.	48	2	Defence
7		Defence	40	3	Gaeltacht [Prog. C]
7		Foreign Affairs Group	34	4	FHERIS
7		Comms, Clim. Action & Environ.	33	5	Justice Group
7		RCD	28	6	Foreign Affairs Group
6	7	Justice Group	28	6	TCASM
5	8	Culture, Heritage & Gael.	23	8	OPW
5		Education	21	9	Environment & Climate
5		AFM*	15	10	AFM
2	11	Taoiseach	14	11	Finance
2		OPW (Further Revised)	12	12	RCD
2		Finance	8	13	ETE
2		PER	8	13	Communications
2		Transport, T & S	7	15	PER
2		Health	7	15	Transport
1		Emp. Affairs & Soc. Pro	6	17	Health (Further Revised)
1	17th	Housing, P & Loc. Gov.	5	17	CEDIY (Revised Estimate)
5.8 (Avg.)			5	18	Soc. Pro
			2	20	Housing LGH (Further Revised)
			1	21st	Education
			19.1 (Avg.)		

Observations and Recommendations

10. The Committee welcomes the overall improvement in the timeframe for the provision of briefing documents compared to 2019.
11. The Committee notes the wide variation in the length of time briefings were received before the relevant meeting and emphasises the importance of

briefings being received sufficiently in advance to allow Committees prepare for the consideration of the Estimates.

12. The Committee is of the view that given these difficulties, the provision of briefing documents should be linked to the publication/referral of the Estimate, and not the date of the Committee's public hearing.
13. The Committee recommends that all Departmental Briefings be provided to the relevant Committee within 30 days of the publication of the Revised Estimate, and as previously recommended, at least 14 days in advance of any public hearing with the Minister.

Appendix 1: Proposed Guidance for Departmental Estimates Briefing

Revised Estimates Briefing for Select Committee

Committee Name	<insert name here>
Department Name	<Insert name here>
Vote(s)	<insert number(s) here>

Max. 20 pages per Vote

Section 1: Introduction and retrospective

- A very brief cover note⁸ covering the following:
 - Responsibility of Department
 - The allocation year 'at a glance' (incl. trends) for current, capital and Appropriations-in-Aid
 - Key achievements (by Vote) in the last year
 - High level priorities/outcomes (by Vote) for the allocation year

Matters to be addressed in the Departmental briefing (Section 1)

- a) What areas does the Department specifically have responsibility for?
- b) Looking back (year in review):
 - What policy achievements occurred in the year?
 - Did any unanticipated factors impact on expenditure?
 - Was virement sanction sought (re-allocation of expenditure between Programmes/sub-heads)?
 - What funds, if any, were surrendered to the Exchequer at year-end? (Current and Capital breakdown if possible)?
- c) Are there any trends the Department wishes to highlight?
- d) Are there any other matters relating to the Vote not described in the Estimates that you wish to bring to the Committee's attention?

Section 2: Vote overview

- A short '**Budgetary Outlook**' where the Dept. can highlight areas of budgetary stress or uncertainty (where applicable)
- Breakdown of **funding allocation by Programme** (in € and % terms). for both current and capital spending
- A short **commentary on the allocation by Programme/Sub-Head**

Matters to be addressed in Departmental briefing (Section 2)

- a) Have any structural changes taken place (or are due to take place) under this Vote?
- b) In terms of the proposed allocation, what constitutes key spending on:
 - (a) New initiatives
 - (b) Funding changes for the expansion of existing initiatives, and
 - (c) Funding to respond to cost pressures.
- c) For new initiatives, what are the main objective behind these (social, environmental, etc)?

⁸ A model for this could be the Ministerial briefing / speaking note used at the REV public hearings and/or the Secretaries General overview provided in the 2022 Public Service Performance Report (PSPR).

- d) In relation to capital expenditure, how will this differ from previous years? Have any significant delays in the delivery of capital projects/investment occurred?
- e) What are the financial risks relating to this Vote? How will any financial risks that have been identified be monitored and managed?
- f) What are the plans to assess value for money from the proposed allocated funding, and how will the Department track relevant information that enables those assessment plans?

Section 3: Programme overview (within each Vote)

- A *Programme-level tabulation* to include:
 - Programme title
 - Programme High Level Goal
 - 2022 Supplementary Estimate
 - 2023 Revised Estimate
 - Difference (in percentage terms)
 - Short explanation for changes

	Programme Title	Programme High Level Goal	2022 Supp. Estimate, €m	2023 Revised Estimate, €m	Change, %	Explanation for change ⁹
Example	<i>A – Food Safety, Animal and Plant Health and Animal Welfare</i>	<i>To promote and safeguard public, animal and plant health and animal welfare for the benefit of consumers, producers, and wider society.</i>	350.5	389	+11%	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ <i>Ensure existing food safety and traceability systems (vital services) are funded adequately to maintain existing standards.</i> ■ <i>To eliminate TB infection from herds and reduce the risk of repeated breakdown (implementing the policy options outlined in the Bovine TB Eradication Strategy)</i> ■ <i>Need for the Department to address a number of areas including the costs associated with any potential outbreak of avian influenza and BAR funding for potential Meat and Bone Meal disposal projects.</i>

- For larger Votes, a *Sub-head level tabulation* may also be merited.
- Brief commentary on the Key High-Level Metrics under *Equality Budgeting & Performance Indicators*

Matters to be addressed in Departmental briefing (Section 3)

- a) Are all significant changes in the proposed allocation explained?
- b) For decreases, how will this impact on service provision by the Department and Agencies receiving / using the funds?
- c) Have changes to staff numbers (by Programme) been explained?
- d) Has the Department provided sufficient commentary on the Key High-Level Metrics under each Programme, particularly:
 - How have the Output Targets changed?

⁹ This often is included in the Minister's brief but should be supplied to the Select Committee ahead of the public hearing.

- What Output Targets are expected to be met in the allocation year e.g., published documents (strategies, legislation), policy actions, etc.?
- To achieve the outcomes, what changes are planned for the allocation year?

Appendix 2: Timeline for request and receipt of Departmental REV briefings

Department	Brief	Date letter sent requesting briefing	Date Briefing Received	Turnaround times	
				Between Committee letter and receipt of briefing	Between receipt of briefing and public hearing
AFM	AFM	6 December 2022	24 January 2023	49	15
CEDIY	CEDIY	10 January 2023	3 February 2023	24	5
Defence	Defence	8 December 2022	28 December 2022	20	48
Education	Education	14 December 2022	7 February 2023	55	1
ETE	ETE	7 December 2022	1 February 2023	56	8
ECC	Environment / Climate	6 December 2022	21 February 2023	56	21
	Communications	6 December 2022	31 January 2023	55	8
Finance	Finance	16 December 2022	1 February 2023	47	14
Foreign Affairs	Foreign Affairs	8 December 2022	17 January 2023	40	28
FHERIS	FHERIS	14 December 2022	29 December 2022	15	34
Health	Health	14 December 2022	13 April 2023	23	6
HLGH	HLGH	9 December 2022	23 February 2023	74	2
Justice	Justice	29 November 2022	12 January 2023	44	33
PER	PER	16 December 2022	1 February 2023	47	7
RCD	RCD	15 December 2022	20 January 2023	36	12
Soc. Pro	Soc. Pro	15 December 2022	27 January 2023	43	5
Taoiseach	Taoiseach	16 December 2022	12 January 2023	27	56
	OPW	16 December 2022	30 January 2023	45	23
TCAGSM	TCASM	7 December 2022	11 January 2023	35	28
	Gaeltacht	5 December 2022	20 January 2023	46	40
Transport	Transport	7 December 2022	1 February 2023	56	7
Average				42.5 days	19.1 days

	<Average
	>Average

Appendix 3: Orders of Reference

219. (1) There shall stand established as soon as may be, following the reassembly of the Dáil subsequent to a General Election, a Standing Committee, to be known as the Committee on Budgetary Oversight, to examine and, where it considers it appropriate, report to the Dáil on—

(a) the overall fiscal position, including—

- (i) the aggregated position on revenue and expenditure and the General Government Balance, including structural targets;
- (ii) medium-term projections for the public finances;
- (iii) macro-economic forecasts and developments;
- (iv) general fiscal governance including the application of fiscal rules and risks to the fiscal position; and
- (v) matters arising from the introduction of a supplementary Estimate or Estimates that, in its opinion, have or may have significant budgetary implications: Provided that the Committee shall advise the appropriate Committee or Committees of any decision on its part to undertake such consideration and the reason or reasons therefore;

(b) public expenditure policy, including—

- (i) the expenditure position having regard to the Government Expenditure Ceiling and the expenditure benchmark under the Stability and Growth Pact;
- (ii) Ministerial Expenditure Ceilings applying to individual Estimates or groups of Estimates for the Public Services where significant variations from the expenditure profile could potentially impact on the overall fiscal position; and

- (iii) the adequacy of planned and actual aggregate levels of capital expenditure and the policies and practices in relation to capital expenditure, including public procurement policy and public private partnership policy, intended to ensure the achievement of value for money.
- (c) Exchequer receipts policy.

(2) The Committee may consider a matter of public policy with significant impact on the budgetary position or on the overall fiscal position: Provided that prior to the commencement of such consideration, the Cathaoirleach of the Committee shall consult with the relevant sectoral Committee established pursuant to Standing Order 95.

(3) The Committee may also consider the overall framework for parliamentary engagement throughout the course of the budgetary cycle and may make recommendations thereon to the Committee on Standing Orders and Dáil Reform for that Committee's consideration under Standing Order 119(1)(b): Provided that, in so doing, the Committee shall consult with—

- (a) the Committees established pursuant to Standing Order 95 on any recommendations which, in the opinion of the Committee, impact on their role or remit; and
- (b) the relevant Minister or Ministers on any recommendations which, in the opinion of the Committee, impact on the role or remit of a Department or Departments, and shall notify the results of such consultations to Committee on Standing Orders and Dáil Reform.

(4) The Committee shall have the following powers:

- (a) power to send for persons, papers and records as defined in Standing Orders 96(3) and 99;

- (b) power to take oral and written evidence and submissions as defined in Standing Order 96(1) and (2);
- (c) power to appoint sub-Committees as defined in Standing Order 96(4);
- (d) power to engage consultants as defined in Standing Order 96(14);
- (e) power to travel as defined in Standing Order 96(15).

(5) Every report which the Committee proposes to make shall, on adoption by the Committee, be laid before the Dáil forthwith, whereupon the Committee shall be empowered to print and publish such report, together with such related documents it thinks fit.

(6) The Committee shall consist of fifteen members, none of whom shall be a member of the Government or a Minister of State, and four of whom shall constitute a quorum: Provided that—

- (a) the Committee and any sub-Committees which it may appoint shall be constituted so as to be impartially representative of the Dáil; and
- (b) the provisions of Standing Order 106 shall apply to the Committee

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