

Examination of Revised Estimates Volume 2021
Select Committee on Children, Disability, Equality and Integration

Opening Statement by Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth
Roderic O’Gorman T.D.
23 March 2021

Introduction

I welcome the opportunity to discuss the Revised Estimates for my Department for 2021, including that of the Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission.

As you will have seen from the briefing material provided to you last week, my Department is projected to spend €1.887 billion on current expenditure and €32 million in capital expenditure during 2021. This represents an increase of €82 million or 4% over the 2020 Further Revised Estimate. In addition my Department has a further €4.1 million allocation for capital carryover.

While my Department continues to have responsibility for policy, legislation and services in respect of children and young people, we have taken on a significantly expanded role since October last with the transfer of additional functions from the Department of Justice.

We continue our existing important functions in the areas of child protection and welfare, prevention and early intervention, adoption, family supports, early learning and childcare, youth services and youth justice. In addition, we now have the additional major areas of equality, integration, international protection and disability policy.

I very much welcome these added functions, and the opportunities they present to ensure a more blended, cohesive approach across the various areas of government policy affected. Further, very significant additional functions will be added during 2021 when responsibility for disability services transfers from the Department of Health.

Covid 19

Of course, the last year has been exceptional due to the challenge of Covid 19. I would like to acknowledge the significant impact that the pandemic has had on the work of my Department and its agencies. The Early Learning and Care Sector, Tusla, youth services and International Protection Accommodation have been particularly affected.

Tusla continues to deliver frontline services despite the need for Level 5 restrictions. The Early Learning and Childcare sector has worked hard, and I am pleased that we have been able to facilitate a phased reopening of the sector in recent weeks.

In the area of accommodation for international protection seekers, we have continued to adapt to ensure that users of facilities are properly protected.

This has involved identifying processes and resources including the provision of separate accommodation to prevent and deal with outbreaks of the virus; reallocating shared accommodation to reduce the number of residents sharing rooms; purchasing PPE; enabling older residents to cocoon; and deploying staffing resources to meet the increased workload.

I would like to acknowledge the tremendous efforts made across the whole of our sector in response to the pandemic. It has been an extremely challenging time and this year will require similar intensive efforts to combat the effects of Covid.

Vote 40

Turning to my Department's Vote, we have provided the Select Committee with details of the funding allocations across the different programme areas, along with a summary by subhead, including details of changes over the 2020 figures.

In terms of Vote spending, three areas on the vote represent some 89% of the Department's allocation – namely: Tusla accounting for 45%, Early Years Programmes and schemes accounting for 33%, and asylum accommodation accounting for 11% of the overall allocation.

I will now briefly address these areas in turn. My Department's Estimate contains provision of €858 million for Tusla, an increase of €19 million or 2% over the 2020 final allocation.

However, the increase in allocation as represented in the REV figures does not reflect the additional funding secured in the Further Revised Estimate (FRE) in 2020 (i.e. €21.5m additional), the transfer of Education Welfare Services out to Vote 26 (i.e. €35m out), or the movement of funding from subhead B7 to Subhead A3 for 2021 in respect of Prevention and Early Intervention (i.e. €9.5m in).

There is also an additional €5 million in the 2021 Estimate for unaccompanied minor refugees. When these elements are taken into account, the comparable year-on-year funding increase to Tusla amounts to some €66 million.

In recent years, Tusla has experienced an increased demand for its services, with significant budgetary pressures resulting. The 2021 budget addresses these challenges. It includes substantial increases to address deficits in a number of key areas, including private residential care.

It will allow Tusla to support partners in the Community and Voluntary sector in responding to Covid and service demands, particularly in the area of DSGBV Services. It includes €5 million to support the Agency to meet international commitments to transfer more unaccompanied minor refugees to Ireland.

Finally, it will provide Tusla with the resources required to meet existing and anticipated levels of demand for its services in 2021.

Another significant portion of my Department's spending is on Early Learning and Care, which has an overall allocation of €638 million and broadly in line with the original 2020 allocation.

Funding in 2021 allows my Department to continue to meet the cost of the two-year Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) programme and allow for additional funding of €3.6m under the Access and Inclusion Model (AIM) which supports children with additional needs to access the ECCE programme.

The allocation for the National Childcare Scheme (NCS) will meet the costs of delivering the Scheme and support the sustainability and operation of the Early Learning & Care (ELC) and School Age Childcare (SAC) sector in the current challenging environment.

The funding provided in 2021 will also provide for the full year cost of the increase to the standard and enhanced NCS hours, from 15 to 20 and 40 to 45 hours respectively, introduced in September 2020.

I have prioritised a number of initiatives to improve ELC and SAC quality, including additional funding for Early Years Inspectorate, the Better Start and the Childminding initiatives, and for the ongoing roll out of the *First 5* Strategy. I have provided additional funding of €5.7 million under subhead B5 for these and service delivery costs.

The area of accommodation under our International Protection Services has seen an increase of just over €17 million in 2021. In fact, when compared to the original 2020 allocation of €81 million under the Department of Justice Vote, the 2021 allocation of €218 million represents an increase of €137 million.

We have seen a significant increase in numbers applying for international protection in recent years - total capacity has increased by 19.6% from the end of 2018 to the end of 2020. Much of this increase in capacity has been met through the provision of emergency accommodation which has been contracted on rolling short term contracts and which has proven to be much more expensive than designated accommodation centres under long term contract.

The increased demand has stretched the capacity of existing dedicated centres and we had an unwelcome reliance on other premises such as hotels and guesthouses to provide accommodation on a short term basis. We want to cease the use of emergency facilities as soon as possible.

The Programme for Government commits to end the current system of Direct Provision. I was pleased to publish the Government's promised White Paper last month, setting out a new ambitious Government policy to replace Direct Provision. The 2021 allocation will fund planning for implementation of the new system of accommodation and supports envisaged in the White Paper.

I am determined to replace the current system with one that respects the dignity of those seeking international protection. In the meantime, the funding for 2021 will support the current system as we phase it out.

In relation to the rest of the Vote, there are a number of policy areas that will be progressed in 2021. My Department is urgently working on Information and Tracing legislation to allow access to birth information for adopted persons.

My Department is also working on the implementation of an Action Plan in response to the recommendations in the Final report of the Commission of Investigation into Mother and Baby Homes.

In this regard I have just launched a consultation process on the development of an ex-gratia Restorative Recognition Scheme for former residents of Mother and Baby Homes and County Homes. The Scheme will form part of the Government's comprehensive response to the Commission's Final Report.

The 2021 Estimate will allow my Department to continue to provide funding in the important areas of equality, disability and integration.

These are very important and challenging areas and the Vote contains funding streams for areas such as the National Disability Authority, Refugee and Migrant Integration, Gender Equality, LGBTI+ and Traveller and Roma initiatives.

The 2021 Estimate has seen an increase of €5 million for Youth Services to some €70 million. This level of funding will support the delivery of a range of youth work programmes and services for all young

people, including those from disadvantaged communities, by the voluntary youth work sector. The youth sector is essential to reach and address the most marginalised and vulnerable young people.

I believe that the significant increase in resources under my Department's Vote for 2021 allows for the continuation of vital services to some of our most disadvantaged communities and a number of important opportunities for a targeted development and improvement of services.

I will continue to work closely with all sectors and stakeholders as we strive to maximise outcomes from the resources being considered today.

Thank you Chair and Members for your attention and I will be pleased to answer your questions.

Ends.../