

Examination of Revised Estimates Volume 2024
Select Committee on Children, Disability, Equality, Integration and Youth

Opening Statement by Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth

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Introduction

I welcome the opportunity to discuss the Revised Estimates for my Department for 2024, 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 €7.293 billion on current expenditure and €135 million on capital expenditure during 2024. This represents an increase of €244 million or 3% over the 2023 Supplementary Estimate.

The 2024 allocation covers financial provision for a range of key services in respect of children and young people, such as Tusla, Early Learning and Childcare and Youth services. The allocation also covers funding for Disability Services in 2024, responsibility for this budget area having transferred to my Department from the Department of Health in 2023. There are also allocations in other key work streams, which include provision of accommodation for international protection seekers and refugee re-settlement and services for Ukrainians Beneficiaries of Temporary Protection orders (BOTPs) and international protection applicants respectively. Legacy issues in relation to mother and baby institutions, are also funded. In addition, there are allocations towards the areas of equality, integration and inclusion. This includes funding towards gender equality, human rights, LGBTI+ issues, Traveller and Roma issues, migrant integration and disability policy.

Vote 40

To outline my Department’s Vote in more detail, I have provided the Select Committee with details of the funding allocations across the different programme areas, along with a summary

by main subhead and programme area, including details of changes over the 2023 figures as allocated following the two Supplementary Estimates my Department received last year.

In terms of the Vote allocation in 2024, over 96 percent of the Department's funding is concentrated in six areas of the Vote, namely:

- Specialist Community based Disability Services (39%)
- Ukraine related spending (20%)
- Early Learning and Childcare (15%);
- Child and Family Agency (Tusla) (14%);
- International Protection Accommodation Services (IPAS) (6%), and;
- Response to Mother and Baby Institutions (3%)

Youth Affairs is the next largest area representing just over 1% of the overall allocation with the Administration Budget for the Vote also accounting for just under 1% of the allocation. The balance of 2% of the allocation is spread across the remaining programmes and subheads on the Vote.

I will now briefly address these areas in turn.

Disability Services Budget

I would like to take this opportunity to reiterate how the transfer of disability services to the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth represents a unique opportunity for service improvement but also for better financial governance and oversight. I am committed to making the most of these opportunities.

This year my Department has secured approximately €2.9 billion for disability services, including once-off funding for measures related to the legacy of the COVID-19 response.

This funding will allow us to support service providers to continue to do their crucial work in what is a very challenging economic environment whilst also providing for service expansion

to help support the progressive realisation of the aims of the Action Plan for Disability Services and the Roadmap for Service Improvement in Children's Services.

Whilst there will undoubtedly be challenges in the year ahead, we have set out to be ambitious and make real tangible changes for those who use community disability supports and their families. My colleague Minister Rabbitte will speak in more detail about the disability budget and plan for the year ahead.

State Response to Ukraine Crisis

In early 2022, following the invasion of Ukraine by Russia, DCEDIY was tasked by Government with providing short-term accommodation and other supports for Ukrainians fleeing the conflict in receipt of temporary protection.

An allocation of €1.49 billion (20% of the Vote) is being provided in 2024 to meet the costs associated with the provision of accommodation for Beneficiaries of Temporary Protection orders arriving from Ukraine. The allocation represents a slight reduction of €30 million (2%) on the 2023 Supplementary Estimates allocation with capital spending on the Modular Housing Programme pilot reducing in 2024, as the original planned project is completed and changes to the rules for the newly arriving Ukrainians are issues impacting on the budget in 2024.

The largest cost element is in relation to accommodation, both through commercial sources but also through pledged accommodation. Funding has also been provided for the cost of modular housing as well as for expenditure in relation to Early Learning and Childcare, Tusla and Youth Affairs supports and services.

Early Learning and Childcare

Early Learning and Childcare at €1.109 billion accounts for 15% of the Vote's allocation. This represents an increase of €104m (10%) over the 2023 Supplementary Estimate allocation for subheads B03, B04 and B05.

This 2024 allocation provides for the continuation of the ECCE programme that will benefit more than 103,000 children this year. It provides for the continued delivery of AIM supports so children with a disability can access this programme. Crucially, it also provides for an extension of AIM supports beyond time spent in the ECCE programme - in term and out - delivering on one of my stated commitments for this year.

Another 2024 commitment was to reach the affordability target I set back in 2022 - to reduce out of pocket costs to families by 50%.

Since January 2023 - with the increase in the minimum NCS subsidy to €1.40 per hour – out of pocket costs to families have fallen by 25% on average. From this September, the minimum subsidy will increase again to €2.14 per hour – and the affordability target I set back in 2022 will be met.

Approximately 150,000 children are expected to benefit from this NCS measure this year. Among these beneficiaries will be an estimated 2,000 children in childminding settings, with the 2024 allocation providing for the initial cohort of childminders expected to come forward for registration later this year.

Also in 2024, I will deliver on other key commitments. Specifically:

- I will commence rollout of the Equal Participation Model (EPM) - providing services with a proportionate mix of universal and targeted supports for children and families accessing their services who are experiencing disadvantage;
- I will increase the allocation for Core Funding in Year 3 of the Scheme by 15% to €331 million – to support improved affordability and accessibility for families,

improved pay and conditions for the workforce and improved sustainability for providers; and

- I will also award funding under the Building Blocks Capacity Grant that will help address undersupply in areas of proven need.

The 2024 allocation under B03, B04 and B05, I believe, is a clear demonstration of the value Government continue place on early learning and childcare given the benefits it confers to children and their families, society and the economy.

Tusla the Child and Family Agency

My Department's Estimate contains provision of €1.011 billion for Tusla, which is broadly in line with the 2023 Supplementary allocation, which was significantly increased during 2023. This funding will allow Tusla to improve support for foster carers through an increase in the weekly foster care allowance rate for the first time since 2009. Effective from 1st January 2024, payments under the Foster Care Allowance Scheme were increased by €25 per week per child, from €325 to €350 for a child aged under 12, and from €352 to €377 for a child aged over 12. As and from 1st November 2024, payments under the Scheme will further increase by €50 per week, from €350 to €400 for a child aged under 12, and by €48 per week, from €377 to €425 for a child over 12. These increases mean that foster carers will receive over €1,700 additional funding per child over the course of 2024 and in 2025 foster carers will receive an additional €3,900 over the course of the year. I am dedicated to achieving the best outcomes for children in care and see foster care as the central plank of the response for children at risk.

The funding will allow Tusla to continue to provide existing levels of care and support to children and families referred to Tusla for help. At the same time it will allow Tusla to begin to address some of the increasing demand in area of residential care through investing and increasing capacity in both State residential care provision in line with its Residential Care Strategy and in Tusla's residential care provided by private and NGO organisations. It will allow Tusla to support unaccompanied children arriving in Ireland who require care, housing

and international protection and additional funding for this is separately contained within the Subhead E04.

Accommodation for International Protection Seekers

The allocation for costs associated with the provision of accommodation for international protection seekers is €409 million in 2024, representing a decrease over the 2023 Supplementary Estimate Allocation. The allocation also includes funding towards implementing the recommendations of the White Paper to End Direct Provision and to establish a new International Protection Support Service.

International Protection Seekers' Accommodation is a demand-led service with requirements for accommodation and services increasing as numbers of new international protection applications increase. In recent times, there have been record increases in the number of new arrivals seeking international protection accommodation in Ireland, with total numbers accommodated increasing from 7,244 in December 2021 to 18,534 in December 2022 and reaching 26,000 by the end of December 2023.

This issue of immigration policy touches more than my Department, with the allocation recognising the need for a whole of Government approach in relation to application processing, housing of International protection seekers whilst their application is being progressed and supporting those with Status to move on from IPAS accommodation.

This is important in the context of a potential further additional 12,000 – 15,000 seeking international protection here in 2024. A shared approach between the relevant Departments is required such that the Department of Justice and Department of Housing and Local Government may be required to help address certain costs while maintaining the State's legal obligations to IP applicants. However, if supply constraints within the residential property market hamper movement out of IP accommodation, and if processing times and volumes in

respect of finalisation of cases for International Protection applications do not keep pace with application numbers, the expenditure in 2024 could be significantly higher than allocated.

I am continuing to progress the implementation of the White Paper through supporting the:

- Implementation of measures to address poverty among children under the age of 18 in International Protection.
- Continued rollout of integration teams at local authority level;
- Rollout of the International Protection Integration fund for 2024;
- Provision of increased supports for NGO's focusing on supports for IP applicants;
- Provision of accommodation for vulnerable applicants.

State Response to Legacy of Mother and Baby Institutions

In responding to the Final Report of the Mother and Baby Homes Commission of Investigation, the Government has approved a suite of 22 specific measures. Action 20 – the Mother and Baby Institutions Payment Scheme is a key element of the Government's response to the findings of the Commission.

This is a demand-led statutory scheme that is anticipated to provide a financial payment to 34,000 survivors and former residents, of whom approximately 19,000 will also receive an enhanced medical card. Of the €800 million allocation agreed by Government for the scheme, funding of €225 million is being made available in 2024, an increase of €215 million on the original allocation provided in 2023.

This allocation has been provided to meet the initial costs of opening the scheme and commencement of financial payments under the scheme, along with providing medical cards for survivors and former residents during 2024.

Rest of the Vote

In relation to the rest of the Vote, there are of course other policy areas that will be progressed in 2024.

Equality

The 2024 Estimate will allow me to continue to provide funding in the important areas of equality, disability, inclusion and integration. These are very significant 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. This funding will allow for a range of equality initiatives, including the finalisation of new strategies in relation to Travellers and Roma, women and girls and LGBTI+ people. As I mentioned earlier, these areas are in receipt of additional funding in 2024, compared to the final 2023 allocation following the Supplementary Estimate in 2023.

Youth

The 2024 Estimate has seen an increase of €5m million on current expenditure for Youth Services to just under €78 million. This level of funding will support the delivery by the voluntary youth work sector of a range of youth work programmes and services for all young people, including those from disadvantaged communities. €1million of this funding is allocated to the mainstreaming of the Targeted Youth Employability Scheme, which provides intensive supports to young people who are not in education, work or training, to help them to get into employment or education. In addition to this €78 million, a further €2million is being allocated to youth services to support the integration of young Ukrainians in our local communities.

Youth services are essential to the wellbeing of young people, providing spaces, supports and opportunities for young people of all backgrounds to develop their personal capacity, to connect with and positively shape their communities and wider society

In conclusion Chair, I want to say that the significant increase in resources under my Department's Vote for 2024 allows for the continuation of vital services to some of our most

disadvantaged communities while providing for a number of important opportunities for a targeted development and improvement of services. Deputies may be assured that 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 respond to your questions.

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