

Opening Statement by the Minister for Education

Select Committee on Education, Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and
Science

29 November 2023

Vote 26 – Supplementary Estimate 2023

CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY

A Chathaoirligh agus a Bhaill den Choiste,

At the outset I know the Committee join with me in extending our sympathy's and support to the children and their carer impacted by the horrific violence on Thursday last in an area in proximity to a school in Parnell Square, Dublin. In particular we are thinking of the young child and her carer who remain in hospital.

I would like to thank you Cathaoirleach for your personal engagement with me over the last few days on this matter and indeed, members of the Committee who have also engaged with me, all of you offering your full support to the school community. It is appreciated.

I am pleased to be here this evening together with officials from my Department. I would like to thank you for the opportunity to speak to you and for the Committee's consideration of my Department's Supplementary Estimate for 2023.

Following approval by the Government, my Department is seeking a net Supplementary Estimate of €795 million for 2023.

This Supplementary Estimate includes additional funding to provide for:

- Delivery of required school accommodation, including mainstream classes, special class and special school places, and the effect of construction inflation on programme costs;
- Services and accommodation needed for the additional Ukrainian students in the school system;

- Cost of Living measures that were agreed during year that will be paid out in 2023;
- Certain COVID-19 supports in our schools at the start of this year; and
- Other costs in the demand-led service areas of school payrolls, pensions and transport.

I will briefly outline the key elements for the information of the Committee.

Current Expenditure Funding

Additional grant funding of €106 million. This is to provide for:

- Further financial supports to schools given general inflation and increasing energy prices that are to be paid to recognised schools in the free education scheme,

- COVID-19 grants paid for:
 - Term 2 of the 2022/23 school year to cover the costs for PPE, hand sanitiser, and enhanced cleaning, and,
 - School attendance campaign in disadvantaged schools
- Extra capitation grant payments to schools for the arrival of Ukrainian pupils.

There were additional pay requirements in the school sector of €239 million. This includes resources for:

- Additional staff being allocated to schools due to increased school enrolments as a result of the ongoing crisis in Ukraine, including additional English as an Additional Language teachers, mainstream and special needs teachers and special needs assistants,
- Maintaining the Regional Education and Language Teams (REALTs) established in ETBs,
- Payment of pay deal costs agreed for school secretaries,

- A range of other payroll subhead pressures that were impacted by enrolments being greater than forecasted, and,
- Increased pension costs.

Some €99 million of additional school transport funding is required for a range of initiatives and additional services introduced during 2023. This includes a cost of living measure to reduce school transport fees and the provision of additional services due to an increased number of pupils seeking places on school buses. There were additional transport services and routes needed for the Ukrainian pupils, COVID-19 funding required to cover the costs of enhanced cleaning on school buses and other expenditure pressures across the existing school transport services.

Earlier in the year, the Government made a decision to again waive the entry fees for junior and senior cycle students sitting the 2023 state examinations.

The waiver of fees resulted in a loss of income and an additional €11 million of exchequer funding provision being required for the State Examination Commission.

Capital Expenditure Funding

A significant additional capital allocation of €405 million is provided for in this Supplementary Estimate. This is required to meet significant budgetary pressure which is primarily attributed to the continued delivery of an ambitious school building programme in 2023.

€330 million of funding is supporting the continued rollout of urgently needed school building projects. There are currently in excess of 300 school building projects under construction involving a total State investment of over €1.2 billion, which includes over 40 new school building projects, with extension/refurbishment projects at existing schools making up the balance.

This funding also provided for the accelerated delivery of accommodation through the modular accommodation programme, to provide 5,000 school places to meet mainstream demographic needs and for over 1,000 children with Special Education Needs.

While we are managing the bulk of Ukrainian provision within existing capacity wherever possible, our greatest pressure in terms of capacity is at post primary level, where we are still in a period of rising demographics and significant special needs capacity deficits. €75 million of funding was required to support the accelerated delivery of provision of school places for Ukrainian students

A combination of factors, including demographic growth, the need to align school place provision with housing developments, increased demand for Special Educational Needs (SEN) provision and the accommodation of children from Ukraine, means that significant levels of additional school accommodation are required within tight timeframes

This increased capital delivery has helped to ensure that children and young people have access to an appropriate school place in a timely fashion, as is their constitutional right.

Appropriations-in-Aid

An estimated additional €54 million in Appropriations-in-Aid income in excess of the amount provided for in the original REV allocations is included in Supplementary Estimate and will partly offset the expenditure pressures I have outlined above. The bulk of this additional income is represented by increased pension contributions due to additional numbers being employed in our schools with some other additional receipts due to refunds by schools of unspent 2022/2023 COVID-19 grants.

I am happy to discuss these issues in more detail, and I commend the Supplementary Estimate to the Committee.

Go raibh maith agaibh.