

The Office of Public Works

Vote 13

Minister O'Donovan T.D.

30th March 2021

I am pleased to be before the committee to present the 2021 Revised Estimate for the Office of Public Works (the OPW).

The 2021 Revised Estimate provides a gross allocation of €514.775 million to support the ongoing and widely respected work of the OPW in the provision of vital services to our people in the areas of Flood Risk and Estate Management, including our much-valued Heritage Estate. Since being appointed to serve as Minister of State, I have been struck by the range of responsibilities and the diverse portfolio of services provided by the OPW. Today I will give you an indication of some of the funding priorities for the Office in 2021.

Before I do just to let you know that the OPW will shortly publish its 2021-2024 Statement of Strategy. In it the OPW has developed 4 themes with 4 principal objectives that outline the OPW's priorities for the next three years.

These themes will be reflected in the work programmes of staff at all levels of the organisation, providing direction and purpose:

- The OPW is committed to strengthening our client facing services;
- Sustainability will be embedded into all OPW decision making;
- The OPW will continue to mitigate and adapt to the impacts of Climate Change;
- And finally through its People and Processes, the OPW will further develop its Organisational Capability;

The OPW operates in a highly complex environment, providing a leadership role as an expert for a very diverse range of public services. It engages with a multiplicity of stakeholders, client organisations and customers across its heritage, flood management and estate portfolio remit.

In this context it is timely and appropriate to set out our vision of creating '*harmony between our built and natural environments*'.

In an overall context, the 2021 gross allocation represents a 2% increase on the 2020 gross allocation (€505.427m). The staff right across my Office has largely and successfully continued to implement the current strategy and programme of work during this most difficult year, and will continue to do so in 2021, despite this period of huge uncertainty.

Within the Heritage Estate, many of the visitor sites have had to close for a period. However, parks and outside areas have fulfilled a critical role in public society and has enjoyed an extraordinary increase in visitor numbers as the public have recognised the full value of these facilities over the past year.

The structure of Vote 13, the OPW Vote, remains unchanged in 2021. The two primary strategic programmes, Flood Risk Management and Estate Management are focused on the two high level goals - to minimise the extent of coastal and river flooding and its social, economic and environmental impacts and to deliver the management, design and sourcing services for the State Property and Heritage portfolios.

Under its Flood Risk Management brief, the OPW continues to coordinate Ireland's whole of Government approach to flood risk.

The OPW understands that flooding is a natural phenomenon, which can impose significant damage on people's homes, businesses, and communities. I have seen the damage flooding can cause at first hand. The cause, extent and impact of flooding are varied and complex and Ireland's flooding problem cannot be fully eliminated, but it can be managed or mitigated to reduce its likelihood, severity and ultimately its impact. The OPW's core objective is to reduce, to the greatest extent possible, the level of flood risk for people all across Ireland.

The OPW has undertaken assessments of the potential impacts of climate change, in line with the Climate Change Sectoral Adaptation Plan for Flood Risk Management 2019 – 2024. All OPW flood relief schemes are now designed and built to take account of future climate change scenarios and can be adapted to manage that risk as needed.

The OPW has tripled the number of major flood relief schemes at design and construction stage by the end of 2020. Further investment in this area will continue in future years as schemes enter the construction phase. With approximately 300 communities at significant risk from flooding this investment will provide protection to thousands of homes and deliver extensive benefits to our communities and businesses.

An allocation of €127 million has been provided within the 2021 Revised Estimate to deliver this essential service.

The second major OPW programme - Estate Management continues to fund the design, extend and modernise a significant number of properties within the State's property portfolio. This includes civil service office accommodation for all Government Departments, An Garda Síochána and many State Agencies.

In all, the OPW manages in excess of 2,500 properties on behalf of the State, which includes some of Ireland's most significant heritage properties, monuments, gardens and arboretum. This management role includes the curation and presentation of 30 major historical properties, as well as the State's Art collection, artefacts, plants and trees. This is work that makes a significant contribution to the health, enjoyment and well-being of the public and for which the OPW is widely recognised.

Having a modern, flexible, and energy efficient portfolio of office accommodation is now more important than ever to deliver work environments suitable for civil service employees to carry out their functions. The OPW are working diligently with Government

Departments to address these demands while also working to realise the benefits of blended working. The OPW is designing the workplace of the future for the civil service. It aims to deliver accommodation that allows more agile ways of working to meet our future needs. This work environment will be delivered within the 887,000m² of office accommodation, currently managed by the Office.

The issue of climate action is one of the highest priorities for Estate Management, where the design and provision of energy efficient buildings are required if we are to mitigate their carbon impact. Essential programmes of work include upgrading the building fabric, eliminating the use of fossil fuel heating and increasing the energy efficiency of the OPW's portfolio.

This will support the Government's climate action targets. The OPW will be a major contributor to the delivery of Europe's 2030 climate and energy objectives including the Public Sector target of a 50% reduction in CO₂ emissions and a 50% improvement in public sector energy efficiency. My Office will be a key delivery agent for Project Ireland 2040 in this sphere.

I am pleased to be able to confirm that my Office will provide two new Capital Grants in 2021. The sum of €3m has been included

in the 2021 Revised Estimate to Dublin Zoo (€2m) and Fota Wildlife Park (€1m) in 2021. It has been a challenging year for both Dublin Zoo and Fota Wildlife Park and this financial support is essential to allow them re-commence vital work on capital projects, including the construction of world class habitats for some of the world's most endangered species.

The OPW is a transformational contributor in the delivery of capital investment on behalf of Government. Its investment in heritage, both natural and cultural, plays a pivotal role in our tourism sector. And, like many other business activities this sector has been sorely affected by the current pandemic. In 2020, the OPW had the opportunity to engage new audiences and present our heritage sites to their best advantage when visitor charges were waived at the OPW-managed visitor sites. This was an incentive to maximise domestic tourism in late summer to encourage staycations for Irish citizens. I would hope that the OPW may be able to contribute to this effort again in 2021, especially across the widely dispersed regional network of heritage sites, where their economic role in attracting visitors is hugely valued.

A gross sum allocation of €387.412 million has being provided for Estate Management within the 2021 Revised Estimate. This is to ensure the OPW is well positioned to support the recovery

of the tourism sector as well as the wider economy and will allow us to maintain our efforts at contributing towards Europe's 2030 climate and energy objectives.

Finally, I have only referred to a small section of the work of the OPW, but it goes without saying that the scale and complexity of the OPW's responsibilities in the delivery of its two infrastructural programmes has considerable impact nationwide. This work impacts on communities across Ireland and it plays an especially vital role in protecting, promoting and sustaining rural Ireland.

In tandem with these programmes the OPW is also a major source and contributor of expertise to other public bodies, working in partnership and collaborating with about 80 such bodies. This multifaceted role of the OPW means that it carries within it a hugely diverse range of skills and expertise and positions it as the "go to" organisation for Government, providing assistance and advice on capital works.

I can say with confidence that I am enormously looking forward to supporting the further progression of the excellent work the OPW does, through the allocated sums in the 2021 Revised Estimate. I would be happy to take any questions on the OPW's Revised Estimate requirements for 2021.