

Opening Statement by the Taoiseach, Micheál Martin T.D.

Meeting of the Select Committee on Finance, Public Expenditure and Reform, and the Taoiseach Tuesday 27th April 2021, 3.15pm

Consideration of 2021 Revised Estimates

Thank you for this opportunity to appear before the Select Committee as you consider the 2021 Estimates for Votes 1 to 3 and Votes 5 and 6. You have been supplied with a detailed briefing document for each of these Votes in advance of this meeting.

I will outline the work of my Department in light of the proposed 2021 Estimate, and touch on the proposed 2021 Estimate allocations for the President's Establishment, the Office of the Attorney General, the Office of the Director of Public Prosecutions and the Office of the Chief State Solicitor. While I have certain responsibilities to the Oireachtas for administrative matters in some of these Offices, they operate independently of my Department.

On Vote 1, the Estimate for the President's Establishment is €4.51 million. This includes some €3 million for pay and administration, with the balance to fund the Centenarians' Bounty.

On Vote 3, the Estimate for the Office of the Attorney General is €17.46 million. Of this €12.26 million relates to staff costs and €2.46 million is allocated to the Law Reform Commission.

On Vote 5, the Estimate for the Office of the Director of Public Prosecutions is €44.70 million. This provides €16.5m for fees to counsel engaged by the Director to prosecute cases, €7.3m to fund the local State Solicitor service and costs awarded against the State arising out of legal proceedings.

On Vote 6, the Estimate for the Chief State Solicitor's Office is just under €37.69 million, the bulk of which relates to salaries and administration. A provision of just over €16.4 million is allocated for the payment of legal fees incurred.

The Estimate for my Department, Vote 2, is just over €50 million. Almost 47% of that relates to staff and administration. The remaining €26 million provides funding for COVID-19 public communications, the Citizens' Assembly, the National Economic and Social Council and several independent inquiries.

COVID-19

My Department will continue its central role in providing, co-ordinating and overseeing a whole-of-government focus on the response to COVID-19.

It is vital that we ensure that our overall approach to the management of the pandemic continues to be one that is prudent and sustainable over the immediate, medium and longer term.

It is essential that disease prevalence is brought to lower levels, hospital and critical care occupancy are reduced to low levels, and the most vulnerable are protected through vaccination before further easing of restrictions is considered.

Any easing of measures should be gradual with sufficient time between phases to assess impact and to respond if the situation was to deteriorate.

Subject to the prevailing public health situation, the areas under consideration for after 4 May are a full return of construction, reopening of cultural institutions, phased return of non-essential retail, and the recommencement of personal services and religious services on a staggered basis.

Vaccines

Ireland is working as part of the EU securing a stable supply of Covid-19 vaccinations. Vaccines continue to be administered very

quickly after their arrival here and Ireland is ahead of the European average for doses administered.

As of yesterday afternoon, a total of 1,407,184 vaccines have been administered including 1,007,003 first doses and 400,151 second doses. One in five of the population who can get the vaccine have received the first dose.

12,000 Vaccinators have also been trained in anticipation of the ramping up of vaccination corresponding with increased supply.

Public Awareness Campaign

From the outset of the COVID-19 pandemic it was recognised that providing clear and timely public information would play a vital role in the State's response to this public health emergency. There is a provision for €15m for COVID-19 Public Communications in this estimate.

The communications programme needed was of an unprecedented scale, comprising the majority of Government Departments and a large number of state agencies.

Platforms used include national and local print and radio, television and a variety of digital channels, depending on the specific audience being targeted.

There have been 45 campaigns completed to date covering multiple strands including public health, business supports, wellbeing supports, societal supports and communications on the various roadmaps to lift and level restrictions.

A Sustainable Economy

The impact of the pandemic on the domestic economy and the public finances has been severe. However, the enormous scale of Government intervention has prevented even larger declines in

economic activity, even higher rates of unemployment, and even more rapid rate of firm-exit, and we hope has laid the foundations for a swifter recovery, by ensuring businesses can survive, and jobs can be retained.

As the virus is effectively brought under control, there will be a need to move away from these extensive and wide-ranging emergency supports, with a move first to more targeted interventions for sectors which remain subject to restrictions, as well as towards investments which support recovery and opportunities for future growth.

We know that the pandemic has not impacted everyone equally, with a disproportionate impact on people who work in contact-intensive sectors, many of which are on lower pay and younger workers.

We must ensure that the recovery is inclusive and balanced, and recognise the unequal burdens, and the risk of increasing inequalities, stemming from the pandemic. We must also ensure sustainability is to the fore as we rebuild, and there will be challenges but also opportunities as we transition to more sustainable economic development.

To meet of these challenges, work is progressing on the development of the National Economic Recovery Plan, to support and reboot the economy. It will set out a roadmap for a resilient, innovative and productive Irish economy aligned with the Government's green and digital ambitions.

Like all sectors, housing and construction have been impacted by the pandemic. However, we are committed to working with the sector to deliver an increased supply of affordable, quality and accessible housing.

Climate Action

Tackling climate change and transitioning to a climate neutral economy remains a key focus of this Government.

My Department plays an important role in driving implementation of our ambitious climate agenda. This year the key architecture that will frame our approach to climate action for years to come is being put in place. This includes the Climate Bill, Ireland's first carbon budget and an updated Climate Action Plan all of which will reflect the step up in ambition committed to in the Programme for Government.

Europe and the World and Brexit

My Department played a key role to ensure a successful outcome in the finalisation of the EU-UK Trade and Cooperation Agreement which came into force on 1 January 2021.

This work together with the Withdrawal Agreement, including the Protocol on Ireland/Northern Ireland, secured Ireland's key objectives in the Brexit process.

These were protection of the Good Friday Agreement and avoiding a hard border on the island of Ireland; ensuring the best possible outcome for the economy and trade with the UK and protection of Ireland's place in the Single Market; maintenance of the Common Travel Area; and our continued commitment to our place at the heart of Europe.

My Department has been strongly engaged in national Brexit readiness work, in close collaboration with the Department of Foreign Affairs and across Government. This has included the development of primary legislation, the provision of financial, upskilling and advisory supports for business; extensive stakeholder outreach; and a multi-year public communications campaign to promote readiness.

Whole-of-Government readiness work must continue as we support businesses or individuals encountering difficulties with customs, checks or clearance; and as we prepare for the introduction of new UK import controls.

Right across Government, we will work to mitigate the impact of Brexit on our economy and citizens.

Covid-19 has also thrown into sharp relief how interconnected and interdependent our world is. As we work this year to overcome the pandemic and rebuild our economy, we will do so with the added strength and resilience of European Union membership, and through continued engagement with the wider international community.

At the beginning of January, Ireland took our seat on the UN Security Council. Our two years on the Security Council is an opportunity for Ireland to make a meaningful contribution to international peace and security. Three principles underpin our approach: Building Peace, Strengthening Prevention, and Ensuring Accountability. I plan to participate in a number of high-level debates in the Security Council during our term-in-office and attend the regular UNGA high level week in September, a month during which Ireland will hold the Presidency of the Council.

Northern Ireland

We marked the 23rd anniversary of the signing of the Good Friday Agreement on 10th April. The Agreement represented a new beginning for political and community relationships on the island, with a new ethos of tolerance, equality and mutual respect. We must continue to protect and nurture the potential of the Agreement.

I have established a Shared Island unit in my Department. which is funded from the Department's Vote, as a whole of Government priority, to invest in and look to our shared future on the island in an open, inclusive and constructive way, engaging with all communities and political traditions.

In Budget 2021 we established the Shared Island Fund, with a major commitment of €500m in capital funding over the next five years, ring-fenced for North/South investment to deliver projects that will enhance connectivity, sustainability and opportunity across the island.

To inform how we deepen our cooperation and connections on the island, the Unit is progressing a comprehensive research programme, working with the ESRI and other partners to enhance understanding across a range of policy areas.

Three Shared Island dialogue events have been held to date: engaging with young people; on climate and biodiversity issues; and on the pivotal role of civil society in our peace process. There have been really refreshing, practical and thoughtful contributions at the Dialogues, from a range of community and sectoral perspectives.

Improving Society

Through the work of the Cabinet Committee on Social Affairs and Equality, my Department will continue to support whole-of-government efforts to combat poverty and disadvantage, improve the position of vulnerable groups, including people with disabilities, promote diversity and inclusion, tackle inequality in all its forms and provide ongoing support to children and families.

The work of the Implementation Group on Policing Reform is supported by an implementation office in my Department I am encouraged to see the responsiveness and flexibility shown by An Garda Síochána in dealing with the demands of COVID-19. Its contribution, both at an organisational and individual level, has been immense.

My Department, together with the Department of Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media, provides the Secretariat to the Future of Media Commission, an independent expert body established by Government to examine how public service aims can be delivered and sustainably funded through broadcasting, print and online media in Ireland over the next decade.

Since it commenced its work last October, the Commission has held a public consultation process that received more than 800 submissions from the public and has run six online dialogues with experts, stakeholders and the general public. The Commission is working to a very tight timeline and I expect it will bring forth a set of recommendations to Government by July this year.

My Department continues to promote the deliberative democracy process by supporting the current Citizens' Assembly on Gender Equality. The Assembly published the results of its voting on 45 key recommendations last Saturday and I thanked the citizens involved for their commitment and hard work.

Their full report, which will set those recommendations in context, is expected to be submitted to the Houses for consideration in June. The Assembly's experience of operating on an online basis will inform the approach to be taken with regard to the other Citizens' Assemblies outlined in the Programme for Government.

Provision is also made in the estimate in 2021 for a number of independent inquiries, including the Moriarty Tribunal, the Cregan Commission and the Cooke Commission.

The estimate includes an allocation of just over €2 million for the National Economic and Social Council for its work in providing forward-looking, strategic advice on economic, social and sustainable development issues. The current NESC work programme includes a programme of research to support the Shared Island initiative and to contribute to policy response and analysis on COVID-19.

I welcome the opportunity to discuss the Revised Estimates with Deputies.

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