

Check against delivery

Opening Statement by Taoiseach, Leo Varadkar T.D.

**Meeting of the Select Committee on Finance, Public Expenditure
and Reform, and the Taoiseach**

Thursday 9th March, 10.30am

Consideration of 2023 Revised Estimates

Thank you for this opportunity to appear before the Select Committee as you consider the 2023 Estimates for Votes 1 to 6. A detailed briefing document for each of these Votes has been supplied to the Committee in advance of this meeting.

While I have certain responsibilities to the Oireachtas for administrative matters in some of these Offices, they operate independently of my Department. I will therefore mainly focus on the work of my Department in light of the proposed 2023 Estimate.

On Vote 1, the Estimate for the President's Establishment is €5.09 million. This includes just over €3.4 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 €26.8 million. €15.8 million of this relates to staff costs and €2.9 million is allocated to the Law Reform Commission. The consolidation and revision of planning legislation subhead has been allocated €4 million, down from €12 million in Estimate 2022.

The Central Statistics Office estimate is €72.4 million down from a budget of €103 million last year which included provision for Census 2022. This includes €3.9 million for the ongoing 2022 Census of Population project plus €1 million for the 2027 Census of Population project. Other areas funded are the Household Budget Survey, the Integrated Farm Statistics project, Improving Data Security, Accessibility and Protection and the development of an online platform for the 2027 Census.

The Estimate for Vote 5, the Office of the Director of Public Prosecutions is €56.1 million. This provides €23.7 million in Administration Pay, an increase of €4.9 million on 2022. €19 million has been allocated for fees to counsel and €8.4 million to fund the local State Solicitor service.

For Vote 6, the Chief State Solicitor's Office Estimate for 2023 is €49.5 million, the bulk of which relates to salaries and administration. A provision of just over €20.9 million is allocated for the payment of legal fees incurred.

Department of the Taoiseach Vote

The 2023 Estimate for the Department of the Taoiseach's Vote is €38.7 million. Two thirds of the estimate, €25.5 million, relates to staff and administration. The remaining €13.2 million provides funding for the Citizens' Assembly, the National Economic and Social Council, COVID-19 public communications, and several independent inquiries.

Priorities of the Department

The Department of the Taoiseach is currently developing its new statement of strategy for the period from 2023 to 2025. This will reflect the central role of the Department in advancing a number of whole-of-government priorities over the coming period.

Cost of living

The last 12 months have been difficult for many, with significant cost of living increases particularly related to energy and now groceries.

We face these challenges from a position of strength, thanks to prudent management of the public finances over recent years. Despite an uncertain international environment, our economy continues to grow, we have a record number of people in employment, and we are seeing the highest levels of labour market participation in over a decade.

Many of the measures announced as part of Budget 2023 are only now, or will shortly, come into effect.

This includes the payment of the fourth Electricity Credit of €200 to every household this month, the abolition of inpatient hospital charges in April, and the introduction of free schoolbooks and reduced costs for further and higher education from September.

Two weeks ago, we announced some additional steps to help families and businesses, including a lump sum child benefit payment of €100 per child to be paid in June, and a €200 lump sum to be paid in April to all long-term social welfare recipients.

The Government will continue to ensure businesses and families are assisted to manage rising energy costs.

Alongside these short-term responses, we are encouraging continued investment in sustainable energy and the national grid to ensure that we rapidly decarbonise our energy and reduce our dependence on imported fossil fuels.

We are investing heavily in economic and social infrastructure to secure our future competitiveness, as well as ensuring balanced regional development, through the national broadband plan, the regeneration of our rural communities and job creation outside of Dublin.

We are also promoting the digital transition across our economy and society, to the benefit of all.

Housing

On housing, we must do whatever it takes to solve this social crisis and reverse the trend of rising homelessness and falling home ownership. Housing for All is a comprehensive plan which will increase the supply of homes to our citizens and bring about fundamental reform of our housing system. Working with Minister O'Brien, we are driving its implementation with quarterly progress reports. 2022 saw the largest annual completion of new homes in over a decade. Commencement notices and planning permission approvals also increased in 2022. These are clear indicators that Housing for All is starting to work, however the results will take time given the scale of the challenge and the need for fundamental reform.

Ukraine

In the year since Russia's brutal invasion, Ukraine has seen immense suffering and destruction, and a wide-scale displacement of its people.

To date, Ireland is accommodating more than 78,000 people who have fled here from Ukraine and people in international protection IPAS accommodation. We have also enrolled almost 15,000 Ukrainian pupils in our schools. This is absolutely unprecedented in the history of our State.

The recently established Cabinet Committee on the Humanitarian Response to Ukraine, which I chair, oversees the whole of Government humanitarian response for people from Ukraine who have sought temporary protection here.

Given the continuing volume of people arriving, sourcing suitable accommodation at scale and at speed is extremely challenging. The State has a moral and legal obligation to provide accommodation for people seeking international protection here and for people from Ukraine seeking temporary protection.

This crisis began as an emergency, but we are now developing a more long term sustainable response. We want services and assistance to be adequate, consistent and equitable.

We're also developing a more agile response to provide accommodation beyond the use of hotels and tourist accommodation. We are accelerating the refurbished buildings programme, continuing the unoccupied homes campaign, as well as providing pledged accommodation and rapid-build homes on suitable sites.

A €50 million Community Recognition Fund is being provided to ensure that access to public services and community centre facilities for local communities are maintained and expanded.

The Government recently approved the participation of up to 30 Defence Forces' personnel in the newly established European Union Military Assistance Mission for Ukraine.

All of Ireland's assistance to Ukraine, whether through the European Peace Facility, in the form of bilateral aid or through Ireland's participation in EUMAM is done consistent with the principle of military neutrality and in full recognition that, after a year of war, Ireland is not and has not at any stage over that year been politically neutral.

Climate Action

Climate change is the most pressing long-term global challenge of our time and Ireland is facing up to that challenge.

The Cabinet Committee on the Environment and Climate Change oversees the ambitious Programme for Government commitments in this area.

The updated Climate Action Plan, published last December sets out the actions that are required to respond to the climate crisis and meet EU and national commitments to significantly reduce emissions. It puts climate solutions at the centre of Ireland's social and economic development.

The Climate Action Unit in the Department of the Taoiseach drives implementation of our ambitious climate agenda, including by co-chairing the Climate Action Delivery Board and reporting on the implementation of the Climate Action Plan.

We have set the ambition to halve our emissions by 2030 and to become climate neutral by 2050. The changes required will be transformative and will require the involvement of all sectors of the economy and all parts of our society. We will continue to provide leadership and pursue much more effective environmental and climate protection across our policies and programmes.

Shared Island

We are continuing our Shared Island initiative, to benefit the whole island and work with all communities for a shared future, underpinned by the Good Friday Agreement.

The initiative is driven and coordinated through the Shared Island unit in the Department of the Taoiseach.

Over the last two years, Government has allocated €191m from the Shared Island Fund to move ahead with long-standing commitments, like the Ulster Canal and Narrow Water Bridge.

New initiatives this year include a €3m Shared Island Civic Society funding scheme and a €15m Electric Vehicle charging scheme network of publicly accessible, community-focused, EV charging points, at sports clubs across the island of Ireland.

Over the past 24 months more than 2,500 citizens and civic representatives from all regions, sectors and communities on the island of Ireland have participated in the Shared Island Dialogue series.

A comprehensive research programme is also underway - working with the ESRI, National Economic and Social Council, Irish Research Council and other partners. A stream of high-quality work has been published to inform discussions and engagement by all communities and traditions on the island on the opportunities of our shared future.

The continuing absence of the Executive and inability of the North South Ministerial Council to meet does impact what is possible and there is an urgent need to get all of the political institutions of the Agreement operating again.

The breakthrough deal achieved between the EU and the UK provides the necessary certainty for trade in Northern Ireland. It also provides a firm platform for the future of relations between the EU and the UK to move onto a more positive and productive footing and, paves the way for restoration of the institutions under the Good Friday Agreement.

Health

Through the work of the Cabinet Committee on Health we will continue to invest in our health service to improve outcomes for all.

Our health service has its challenges. This was evident during the difficult winter period. But our health system has responded and expanded dramatically in recent years. We are treating more people with better outcomes than ever before. Waiting lists, using the Sláintecare targets, fell by 11% in 2022 and are down 25% from their peak. We are targeting a further 10% fall this year.

We are committed to expanding the core capacity of our acute hospitals – with more health professionals and more acute hospital beds. Over the past three years we have added nearly 1,000 hospital beds, with further additional beds planned for 2023. We also aim to increase our public health and social care workforce by an additional 6,000 this year.

On access, last year we removed in patient charges for under-16s and this year we will remove them for all patients. We are expanding free contraception and GP care and introducing state funded IVF. The Regional Health Areas are being developed and drive integration between community and hospital medicine and the new public only consultant contract is now a reality. Sláintecare is happening. It is the beginning of the end of private practice in public hospitals.

Child Poverty

Our vision is to make Ireland the best country in Europe to be a child. Poverty restricts a child's opportunity. The new Child Poverty and Wellbeing Unit in the Department of the Taoiseach will build on what has already been achieved by Government and give a greater focus on improving the lives of all children in Ireland.

We want to ensure that the Unit brings added value, as well as strategic leadership and enhanced accountability, to the Child Poverty agenda and makes a tangible difference to the lives of children and families. The aim is to have the unit established by the end of March.

The Cabinet Committee on Children and Education will oversee Programme for Government commitments with a specific focus on child poverty and well-being and dealing with local area disadvantage.

This year we have or will reduce childcare costs, increase the child dependant allowance and BSCFA, waive state exam fees, reduce the cost of school transport, introduce free school books for all primary schools and hot school meals in all DEIS primary schools and special schools.

Justice and policing reform

We will build stronger and safer communities through reforms in policing and community safety, including oversight roles in the implementation of A Policing Service for our Future and the Dublin North East Inner City Initiative. We will build on the work under way to reduce crime and antisocial behaviour. We will provide additional resources to An Garda Síochána, the Defence Forces, the Prison Service and the court system, as well as passing new laws to ensure we apprehend criminals and deal with them appropriately.

Last June, the Government launched a new strategy to combat domestic, sexual, gender-based violence. It is an ambitious five-year programme of reform aimed at achieving a society which does not accept domestic, sexual, gender-based violence or the attitudes which underpin it. The Cabinet Committee on Social Affairs and Public Services will oversee implementation of the strategy.

Gender equality

I want this Government to make Ireland a world leader on gender equality.

We have new gender pay gap legislation, additional parental leave and we are ensuring better gender balance on boards and increasing gender candidate quotas for Dáil elections.

2022 saw many public and private organisations publish their first Gender Pay Gap reports required under new legislation. This is bringing much needed visibility to the gap that still exists in pay levels between men and women. I will drive change and increase the promotion of it within organisations.

We have also agreed to introduce legislation to provide better gender balance on corporate boards.

For too long, women and girls have carried a disproportionate share of caring responsibilities, been discriminated against at home and in the workplace, overlooked, objectified or lived in fear of domestic or gender-based violence.

We committed to responding to the matters raised by the Citizens' Assembly and the Joint Oireachtas Committee on Gender Equality, and empowering women and girls.

As part of our response, earlier this week the Government agreed that referenda will be held in November 2023 to amend the Constitution as recommended by the Citizens' Assembly on Gender Equality and the Special Joint Oireachtas Committee on Gender Equality.

As a first step, we will convene an inter-departmental process to determine the policy scope of the referenda and to develop policy recommendations for consideration by Government. The group will be convened by the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, and include representatives of all Departments, the Office of the Attorney General and the Office of the Parliamentary Counsel. Other Agencies may be asked to contribute as the group's work progresses.

While the detail will emerge from the inter-departmental process, at this point it is expected that two separate constitutional amendments will be proposed - one amendment to focus on equality in general, and the scope of the second amendment will be determined by what is possible in relation to care.

Citizens' Assembly

Ireland is widely regarded as a world leader in deliberative democracy. Citizens' assemblies have become an important part of the Irish democratic process, and the recommendations of previous citizens' assemblies have influenced significant changes in how we live our lives, including through constitutional change, legislative change and changes in the design and implementation of policy.

Most recently the Dublin Citizens' Assembly submitted its final report and recommendations to the Oireachtas in December. The Citizens' Assembly on Biodiversity Loss held its final meeting in January, and its report and recommendations will be submitted to the Oireachtas in the coming weeks.

The Government has recently established a Citizens' Assembly on drugs use. Selection of citizens is underway with the first meeting scheduled for April. The Department of the Taoiseach provides a secretariat for the Assemblies. The Assembly will consider and make recommendations in respect of changes the State might make to reduce significantly the harmful impact of drugs use on individuals, families, communities and wider society. An important part of the assembly's work will be in developing an understanding of the lived experience of individuals, families and communities impacted by illicit drugs use. The assembly is scheduled to conclude its work and submit its report by the end of this year.

Provision is also made in the estimate in 2023 for a number of independent inquiries, including the Moriarty Tribunal, the Cregan Commission and the Cooke Commission.

The estimate includes an allocation of almost €2.5 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 on a wide range of important topics such as private rental in Ireland, the nature of the Irish economy, climate, biodiversity and transition in agriculture and how Ireland's Well-Being Framework can help identify inequalities.

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

ENDS