

The Office of Public Works

Vote 13

Minister O'Donovan T.D.

31st January 2024

I am pleased to be before the committee to present the 2024 Revised Estimate for the Office of Public Works. The gross allocation for 2024 is €645 million, which comprises €140 million for climate-responsive flood risk management and €505 million to be invested in estate management.

Firstly, the structure of the OPW Vote remains unchanged. However, in line with the Government's infrastructure investment of €165 billion under the National Development Plan 2021 – 2030, the OPW Vote has seen a **3.6% increase in its capital allocation**. This funding will contribute towards the ambitious plan for a greener, more efficient, connected Ireland – part of our climate goal to cut emissions by 50% by 2030.

As the OPW funding allocations, projects and scope of work continue to expand, the two main strategic programmes, Climate Responsive Flood Risk Management and Estate Management have grown in tandem.

The recognition of the threat of Climate Change has been underlined by events such as COP 28. While the State needs to introduce measures to decarbonise, it also needs to introduce measures to prepare and adapt to the impacts of climate change. As I have highlighted regularly, Ireland is an island and the sea is rising around us. This is one of our greatest risks.

Under its Climate Responsive Flood Risk Management brief, the OPW continues to coordinate Ireland's whole of Government approach to managing Ireland's flood risk from rivers and the sea, the primary source of Ireland's flood risk. The OPW's core objective is to reduce, to the greatest extent possible, the impact of flooding on homes and businesses, especially in those communities known to be at significant risk from flooding. I have seen first-hand the devastating impact that flooding can have on homeowners, businesses and communities.

The Flood Risk Management Plans, launched in May 2018, provide evidence to support the Government's investment in flood risk management over the lifetime of the National Development Plan. This investment supports the progression of some 150 flood relief schemes. As Deputies will know, delivering

flood relief schemes is a very complex process, with significant challenges, and requires us to:

1. Understand the specific sources, locations and extent of flooding;
2. Identify the preferred option, both technically and environmentally, which will protect at-risk areas;
3. Secure the relevant consents and planning permissions; and, ultimately,
4. Build and maintain the flood relief scheme, to the required standard of protection.

Throughout all stages, public consultation and detailed assessments of the environmental impacts are key to informing the design of a flood relief scheme for a community.

The prioritisation of schemes means that work is now underway to protect 80% of at-risk properties with proposed solutions for the other 20%.

Since 2018, the OPW has been able to treble the number of flood relief schemes at the design or construction stages to some 100 schemes. Flood risk projects require expertise and input from engineers in the area of hydrology. As we progress with future

schemes, the OPW will continue to make the most efficient use of all available resources and specialist personnel.

One of the principal factors affecting Ireland's flood risk management is climate change. In designing and building all of our schemes, provision is made to ensure they can meet the risk posed by climate change. The OPW's assessment of that risk is fully supported by the evidence from the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC).

We anticipate that the 2024 allocation will enable OPW to reach a series of important milestones in Climate Responsive Flood Risk Management, such as:

- Continuing the construction of three major flood relief schemes (Glashaboy, Morell River and Whitechurch);
- Commencing construction on up to five major flood relief schemes;¹ and
- Progressing up to three further flood relief schemes towards substantial completion (Athlone, Springfield and Templemore). These schemes will protect over 600 properties.

¹ These are King's Island, Morrison's Island, Crossmolina (subject to planning consent), the Poddle and the River Wad.

Outside of these major schemes, local authorities can address local flooding issues through funding from the OPW's Minor Flood Mitigation Works and Coastal Protection Scheme. This provides 90% of the funding required by local authorities and, since 2009, has protected some 7,900 properties.

In addition to the major and minor flood relief schemes, the allocation of €140 million to flood risk management in 2024 will help the OPW to maintain some 11,500km of channels and 800km of embankments as part of its statutory maintenance duties. This maintenance provides drainage outfall to 650,000 acres of agricultural lands and a level of protection from flooding to urban areas and critical infrastructure, including more than 20,000 properties.

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

In all, the OPW manages more than 2,500 properties on behalf of the State, which includes some of Ireland's most significant heritage properties, monuments, gardens and arboretums. Properties range from Leinster House to Sceilg Mhicíl and office buildings. This management role includes the curation and presentation of 30 major historical properties and 700 national monuments, as well as the State's Art collection, artefacts, plants and trees. This is work that makes a significant contribution to the health and wellbeing of the public, providing inviting green spaces and walkways for the public to enjoy and benefit from.

In 2024, OPW heritage sites will play a key role in the resurgence of Ireland's tourism economy which are particularly important assets for rural Ireland's tourism offering. Ongoing projects such as the new Visitor Experience at the Record Tower in Dublin Castle show that OPW continues to invest in the visitor experience and the conservation and enhancement of these unique places.

In the context of Office Accommodation, the OPW is charged with designing the workplace of the future for the civil service. It aims to deliver accommodation that facilitates more agile ways of working to meet our future needs.

In particular, the OPW is actively engaging with our clients in the context of their operational requirements and their long-term blended working policies to ensure that they have the right sized accommodation that continues to provide value for money for the exchequer.

Also in 2024, the OPW will see the reopening after a deep retrofit project in Tom Johnson House in Beggars Bush. This project, which is being largely funded by the EU under the National Recovery and Resilience Plan (NRRP), which has reached substantial completion, will provide an exemplar of how an existing obsolete building can be transformed into a modern highly energy-efficient and agile workplace. It will provide a long-term HQ for the Department of the Environment Climate Action and Communications, and this development will enable the release of an expensive leasehold property in due course.

Members will be aware that as a consequence of the ongoing war in Ukraine, Ireland along with our EU colleagues has welcomed thousands of displaced Ukrainians to our shores. The OPW is assisting the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth on an agency basis by piloting a project to deliver modular homes which will accommodate Ukrainians at sites around the country. Similar to the Brexit Infrastructure

projects the Ukraine Modular Homes project represents another example of the OPW assisting an all-of-Government response to an unexpected event or crisis.

A gross sum allocation of €505 million has been provided for Estate Management within the 2024 Revised Estimate. Of this €41m has been allocated as part of the EU National Recovery and Resilience Plan (NRRP). This funding was made available to Ireland to contribute to climate action projects. This will ensure the OPW is well positioned to continue to contribute towards Europe's climate and energy objectives and support the recovery of the tourism sector and the wider economy. Protecting the environment is at the heart of everything the OPW does in all aspects of our work, whether maintaining our national heritage sites or arterial drainage works.

Finally, I have only referred to a small section of the work of the OPW. The scale and complexity of the OPW's responsibilities in the delivery of its two infrastructural programmes have a considerable impact nationwide and are dependent on the expertise and commitment of its staff. The nature of the work of the OPW requires the input of a dedicated team of professional, technical and administrative staff, working in multi-disciplinary teams, across a wide range of Property Management, heritage conservation and Engineering functions. The roles cover

professional managers, valuers, architects, engineers, mechanical and electrical specialists, surveyors, planners, financial advisors, property economists, and project managers, and are supplemented by other specialists as required. These staff play a vital role in protecting, promoting and sustaining rural and urban Ireland.

I can say with confidence that the OPW stands ready to deliver key programmes for the Government. I would be happy to take any questions on the OPW's Revised Estimate requirements for 2024.