

Revised Estimates for Public Services 2021

Vote 28: Foreign Affairs

3 June 2021

Opening remarks by the Minister for Foreign Affairs

Mr Chairman, I am pleased to be here this afternoon to present the Revised Estimates for my Department for 2021.

I will focus on Vote 28, the Vote for the Department of Foreign Affairs, and my colleague, Minister of State Colm Brophy, will address you afterwards in relation to Vote 27 (International Co-operation).

2021 Estimates and Allocation

Members will have seen the advance briefing notes provided by my Department on the two Votes, which summarise the main activities and priorities under each Expenditure Programme.

For 2021, the overall gross estimate for the Foreign Affairs group of Votes (Votes 27 & 28) is **€807m**, This represents a €30 million increase on its 2020 allocation.

Vote 28 – Foreign Affairs

For 2021, the total gross expenditure allocation for Vote 28, including a capital allocation of €10.5m, is **€281m**. This is an overall increase of just over €10m or 4%. This increase has been allocated to programmes to assist the Department in meeting the many challenges and opportunities we face in the coming year.

The Vote 28 priorities for 2021 include:

- The next phase of the Passport Reform Programme;
- Protecting our interests in a post-Brexit EU;
- Northern Ireland;
- Maximising our position on the UN Security Council;
- The continued expansion of the overseas Mission network under the Global Ireland 2025 Initiative;
- Provision for urgent capital building and security works in our Missions abroad and
- Continuing investment in the Department's global ICT network.

My Department, and our mission network around the world, plays a critical role in promoting and advancing Ireland's interests through our international engagement, and will provide international support to the Government's Economic Recovery Plan announced on Tuesday. This is more important than ever as the country emerges from the Covid-19 pandemic. We will continue to strengthen our global presence, to ensure Ireland is ready to take advantage of new markets and opportunities and to continue to support our citizens and communities abroad.

As has been proposed, Mr Chairman, I will now proceed to make some short introductory comments on each of the programmes in sequence.

Programme A – Our People

Programme A (allocation €85.3m) covers many key policy areas for my Department, including Consular Services and Assistance, the Passport Service, our Emigrant Support Programme and Northern Ireland

The Passport Service and the provision of Consular Services and Assistance lies at the heart of the Department's engagement with citizens. This was clearly demonstrated during 2020, when the Department provided advice and assisted thousands of citizens across the world to return safely to Ireland.

As the Committee will be aware, the Passport Service scaled up to more normal operational levels on 4 May 2021. At that time, approximately 89,000 passport applications were on hand. The Passport Office has processed approximately 45% of these applications – which works out at over 42,000 passports. Of the remainder, 70% are awaiting further action from the applicant, such as a new photograph or supporting documents. With the full resumption of services, the Passport Service is issuing around 25,000 passports each week.

By the end of Q2 2021, Passport Online for all application types will be available for 97% of applicants worldwide. With this continued expansion, it is vital that the highest possible standards are maintained in security and service delivery. The 2021 allocation includes a capital allocation of €3.5m, to be focused on the updating of the passport operating system.

The 2021 allocation for the **Emigrant Support Programme** remains at the same level as it was in 2020 - **€12.6m** - underlining the importance the Government attaches to supporting and deepening our bonds with our vibrant and diverse global Irish community.

I commend the work of my colleague Minister of State Brophy in this important area in his role as Minister for the Diaspora, and he will take any questions that you have on these matters today.

This Programme also deals with matters relating to **Northern Ireland, North South Cooperation, and British-Irish relations**, which are a particular emphasis of my Department.

My Department remains focused on strengthening **our relationship with the UK** in the post-Brexit context. I visited London in April, and will travel there again this evening for further meetings. And I look forward to participating in a British-Irish Council Summit and a meeting of the British-Irish Intergovernmental Conference later this month. In July, we will open a Consulate General for the North of England in Manchester.

The Irish Government has committed to provide **€5m** in funding in 2021 to support the **International Fund for Ireland's** programmes. Funding for the **Peace and Reconciliation Fund** has been increased to **€5m**, reflecting the Government's ongoing commitment to building cross community reconciliation in Northern Ireland.

Programme B – Our Place in Europe

The focus of work under Programme B – Our Place in Europe (€36.5m) will be to safeguard Ireland's interests in the broader context of Brexit and the future direction and policies of the Union. It will also support Ireland's contribution to

the EU's global engagement on peace, security, trade and development, as well as security in the wider European region.

Programme B is also used to fund projects and proposals which further Ireland's **Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) priorities, support EU engagement,** and support the placing of **Irish Personnel in EU and International Institutions.** These projects have a very positive impact on Ireland's profile internationally with respect to our key foreign policy objectives, and can help to shape and implement EU policies that work for Ireland.

Programme C – Our Values

The majority of current expenditure under Programme C (allocation of **€56m**) consists of **contributions to international organisations.** The allocation set aside for these contributions, at **€34m**, is at the same level as last year.

Another key pillar of our international engagement under Programme C is our input into the shaping and formulation of the EU's **CFSP**, most notably at the monthly meetings of the Foreign Affairs Council in which I participate.

Programme D – Our Prosperity

Under this programme (allocation €44m) there will be particular focus in 2021 on assisting Irish business in the context of the UK's exit from the EU and as we emerge from the pandemic. The Programme also includes a capital allocation of €0.5m towards EXPO 2020, now set to run from October 2021 to end March 2022.

We will continue to intensify our collaboration and co-operation with other departments and state agencies, to ensure that we are effective and responsive to the needs and expectations of our citizens and our business sector.

Our annual St. Patrick's Day programme also comes under this Programme and this year, in partnership with other departments and state agencies, we delivered a virtual programme, including over 80 virtual receptions.

Programme E – Our Effectiveness

Programme E (allocation €48.7m) covers the management and development of staff, the management and mitigation of risk, ICT, property management and compliance with statutory and legal obligations. The programme also covers communication by the Department of its policies, objectives and activities to citizens at home and abroad.

That's a very quick overview of the main activities and priorities of the Department of Foreign Affairs for the year. I welcome any comments and questions from Committee members on any of the Foreign Affairs Programmes and the broader work of the Department.