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**An Roghchoiste um Choimirce Shóisialach,
Forbairt Pobail agus Tuaithe agus na hOileáin
Breithniú ar Imleabhar Meastachán Athbhreithnithe (ATHBH),
2023
Feabhra 2023**

**Select Committee on Social Protection, Community and
Rural Development and the Islands
Consideration of Revised Estimates Volume (REV) 2023**

March 2023

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Introduction

The Select Committee on Social Protection, Community and Rural Development and the Islands, held an engagement with the Minister for Social Protection and Rural and Community Development to examine the spending allocations and associated performance metrics for the following Votes:

- **Vote 37: Social Protection**
- **Vote 42: Rural and Community Development**

Standing Order 95(3) of Dáil Éireann states:

“The principal purpose of Committee consideration of matters of policy, governance, expenditure, and administration under paragraph (1) shall be— (a) for the accountability of the relevant Minister or Minister of State, and (b) to assess the performance of the relevant Government Department or of a State body within the responsibility of the relevant Department, in delivering public services while achieving intended outcomes, including value for money.”

Select Committees are tasked with consideration of the annual Revised Estimates for Public Services (or REV)¹ that fall within their remit. While Select Committees have no role in approving the Estimates, it is an ongoing opportunity for the Committee to examine Departmental expenditure, to make the budgetary process more transparent, and to engage in a meaningful way on relevant performance issues.

The Committee subsequently sent a message confirming completion of its consideration to the Clerk of Dáil Éireann on 1 February 2023 in accordance with Standing Order 101 of Dáil Éireann. Under Standing Order 100(2) of Dáil Éireann, this message is deemed to be the report of the Committee.

¹ The Revised Estimates (comprised of Ministerial Votes / Vote Groups) are included in the Revised Estimates Volume (or REV). REV2023 was published on 14 December 2022.

Reporting on REV consideration

Furthermore, Standing Order 215A of Dáil Éireann states:

Consideration of Estimates by Committees: Report of Committee on Estimate

215A. (1) Subject to Standing Order 215(2) and unless the Dáil shall otherwise order, Committees shall complete their consideration of Estimates referred to them pursuant to that Standing Order not later than 60 days after such Estimates have been so referred.

(2) Any report that a Committee proposes to make arising from its consideration of an Estimate shall be made within a further period of 14 days.

Under SO215A(2), this report summarises issues arising from the Committee's consideration and will be laid before the Dáil and sent to the Minister for consideration. This report will also be provided to the Committee on Budgetary Oversight which will examine all Select Committee reports, collate the information to identify any common issues or concerns, as well as examples of best practice, and make recommendations for the improvement of the consideration process.

This report comprises three sections as follows:

1. The REV process
2. Allocations and performance metrics
3. Other

Committee commentary on consideration of REV2023

The REV Process

Vote 37 – Social Protection

In a letter sent to the Minister from the Committee Cathaoirleach, a short, non-technical Departmental briefing for Vote 37 – Social Protection was requested on 15 December and a reminder sent on 13 January. The briefing was received on 27 January. The public hearing with the Minister was held on 1 February. The briefing comprehensive and ran to 101 pages. The Committee concluded that there was insufficient time to prepare for the public engagement with the Minister.

The engagement with the Minister to consider this vote was substantial and the Committee were satisfied.

Allocations and performance metrics

- Expenditure changes

In terms of the financials, Members were interested in the aspects of the Programme areas that are covered by the Department of Social Protection these were queried by members and explained during the engagement with the Minister. The Select Committee discussed the REV by chapter as set out in the table of contents as provided by the Department. This was discussed as follows:

- *Vote 37 – Chapter 2 (Pensions)*

The Minister was questioned on means testing of non-contributory pensions and dependent adults. It was noted that between 2012 and 2021, expenditure on the non-contributory pensions went up by only 12%. In the same period, expenditure on the contributory pension went up by 63%. The Minister was asked to explain why, if someone has a job, is on a non-contributory pension and earns his or her money through the PAYE system, that person can earn up to €200 per week which is not means tested? On the other hand, if that person has the same work but is self-employed, he or she can earn €30 a week but anything more, including savings, is means tested. The Committee sought an explanation for the rationale behind that arrangement.

Minister Humphreys told the Committee that improvements have been made in terms of credits for the Contributory Pension. People are allowed credits for the time they spend caring. Under new pension changes the Minister proposes to make, credits will be given for people who have been caring for people with disabilities for more than 20 years. The Department of Social Protection will do a complete trawl of the means test to see if changes can be made and the Minister made a commitment that this year the Department will do a full review of the means test across the board.

■ *Vote 37 – Chapter 3 (Working Age – Income Supports)*

The Minister was questioned on exceptional needs payments and additional staff in the Department. The Committee asked the Minister for an update on the additional staff and whether it is possible to apply for exceptional needs payments and additional needs payments online? The argument was made by the Committee that it would be helpful to a cohort of people to be able to upload all of their supporting documentation and submit their application online rather than having to go over and back when full information is not provided in the first instance. The Minister was also asked for more information regarding current processing times for applications for these payments or the most recent information the Minister has on them, and the figures on the number of people who receive the heating supplement every week

The Minister informed the Committee that at the end of December 2022, over 97,000 applications for additional needs payments were processed and awarded, which shows a 63% increase in awarded applications on the same period in 2021. The average amount paid for heating additional needs payments from the beginning of June to the end of December was €471 for electricity bills and €472 for gas. More than 36,000 additional needs payments for support to those fleeing the war in Ukraine have also been made by the Department. In response to the cost-of-living pressures in 2022, the Department of Social Protection ran two advertising campaigns in spring and summer of 2022 to promote awareness of additional needs payments. The Minister told the Committee that recruitment has begun for 74 additional staff, and it is expected that they will be in place by the end of 2023. In the interim, 30 social welfare inspectors have been temporarily reassigned to assist with claims processing.

The Minister also informed the Committee that work is under way to develop an online digital additional needs payment application, and it is anticipated that this will be live in the first quarter of 2023.

■ *Vote 37 – Chapter 5 (Illness, Disability and Carers)*

On Chapter 5, the Committee asked the Minister about the discrepancies between disability allowance and invalidity pensions. The difference between the requirements for both of the aforementioned schemes was discussed by the Committee.

The difference between those requirements for the disability allowance means that a person would have to be restricted from doing work that would be suitable for a person of his or her age, experience, and qualifications. For example, people who did manual work throughout their lives, are not expected to retrain once they can show they can no longer do that manual work. By contrast, people applying for an invalidity pension have no such “*get-out-of-jail free card*”. They are being told that they could be trained for an office job or be trained to be a professor or something else. In addition to the above, regarding allowing people with a disability back into the workforce, they are locked out of the ability to do that without having an invalidity pension.

Minister Humphreys responded to the Committee’s concerns, letting them know that the Roadmap for Social Inclusion 2020-2025 includes a commitment to develop and consult on a strawman proposal for the restructuring of long-term disability payments. The cost of disability research report was published by the Department in December 2021 and is feeding into preparation of the strawman reform proposal. The Minister told the Committee that she intends to carry out a wider consultation process with all the stakeholders and advocacy groups following publication and the issues raised by Members will be taken into account.

The Committee has no comment to make on the adequacy of the performance metrics provided, however, the Committee plans to undertake a more thorough examination of performance metrics as part of its work programme.

Committee commentary on consideration of REV2023

The REV Process

Vote 42 – Rural and Community Development (DRCD)

In a letter sent to the Minister from the Committee Cathaoirleach, a short, non-technical Departmental briefing for Vote 42 – Rural and Community Development, was requested on 15 December and a reminder sent on 13 January. The Department contacted the Committee Secretariat once receiving the reminder, letting them know that the briefing would be ready for Friday 20 January. The briefing was received on 20 January as agreed. The public hearing with the Minister was held on 1 February. The briefing was comprehensive, ran to 25 pages, and was accessible to Members. The Committee concluded that there was sufficient time to prepare for the public engagement with the Minister.

The engagement with the Minister was substantial and the Committee were satisfied.

Allocations and performance metrics

- Expenditure changes

In terms of the financials, Members were interested in the aspects of the Programme areas that are covered by the Department of Rural and Community Development, these were queried by members and explained during the engagement with the Minister, as follows:

- *Vote 42 – Programme A (Rural Development, Regional Affairs, and Islands):*

Under Programme A – Rural Development, the Committee queried the funding of Men's sheds. Funding was recently announced for Men's sheds, and this will be distributed via the Irish Men's Sheds Association. The Minister was asked about the possibility of an opportunity for funding for sheds that are operating outside the association. Men's sheds are an important outlet for men and the initiative is so important that there should be a specific funding stream in place as there was previously. The Committee wondered whether consideration will be given to re-introducing the specific funding stream that was in place previously.

Minister Humphreys addressed these concerns raised and acknowledged that Men's sheds do wonderful work. The Minister stated that they provide funding through the scheme to support national organisations, SSNO, and this year additional funding was given to Men's

sheds. Each men's shed will get €2,000. The Minister will consider whether they need more funding as the year goes on, and they also receive money from the Department of Health and through other schemes from DRCD.

- *Vote 42 – Programme B (Community Development):*

Under Programme B – Community Development, the Minister was questioned regarding refurbishment grants for community centres and the large grants for building new community centres. She was asked will applicants need to show form in terms of having land, planning permission etc, and asked will there be guidelines as to the maximum amount?

The Minister told the Select Committee that it is planned to use the €20 million of the CCIF and €5 million of the community enhancement programme. The scale of the community enhancement programme will depend on the level of demand under CCIF as the year progresses. The applicants will need to own the land and be ready and a great deal of preparatory work must be done before someone makes an application. This fund will target new communities that have developed in urban areas which have no community centres. The call for applications will be announced later this year by the Minister. The Minister told the Committee that there will be guidelines as to the maximum account, as the other scheme was oversubscribed and some of the applications were ineligible. The new fund will be a rolling fund for a number of years.

The Committee has no comment to make on the adequacy of the performance metrics provided, however, the Committee plans to undertake a more thorough examination of performance metrics as part of its work programme.