

Opening Statement from the Minister for Rural and Community Development, Heather Humphreys T.D.

Oireachtas Select Committee on Social Protection, Rural and Community Development, and the Islands – February 7th 2024.

Chairman and members of the Committee, thank you for the invitation to attend here today to discuss and seek approval for the Revised Estimate 2024 for the Department of Rural and Community Development.

I was here very recently for a supplementary estimate, and I am delighted to be here again, to bring forward this estimate, which will ensure the excellent progress made in recent years continues in 2024.

2024 Revised Estimate – High Level Figures:

For 2024, gross expenditure of €431 million is budgeted, which consists of €221 million in current expenditure and €210 million in capital expenditure. My Department also has a capital carryover of €20 million from 2023 into 2024.

In terms of the split across programme areas:

- €205.4 million is allocated for the rural development and the islands programme area
- €220.5 million is allocated for the community development programme, with €20 million of capital carryover from 2023 also being used to support the Community Recognition Fund in 2024.
- Finally, €5.4m is allocated for the work of the Charities Regulator.

Rural Development Programme:

The €205.4 million provided for the rural development programme, including the Islands, is made up of €166.8 million in capital funding and €38.5 million in current funding.

Capital funding is of particular importance for the rural development programme, delivering schemes including LEADER, the RRDF, Town and Village Renewal, LIS and CLÁR. These schemes are now really well established and are having a positive impact for towns, villages and rural areas throughout Ireland.

The €205 million will allow additional funding for both LIS and CLÁR, and will bring their funding levels to €13 million and €8.7 million. It also provides funding increases for the continued provision of lifeline transport services to our offshore islands and for capital investment on our islands.

Last year saw the highest level of capital investment ever by my Department. Over €213 million in capital funding was paid out, with €158 million of that under the Department's rural development programme. This funding is helping to make rural Ireland an even better place to live, supporting rural communities, and helping the rural economy to develop and grow.

I must also note the importance of the €38.5 million in current funding for the rural development programme. The current funding helps support implementation of policies such as Our Rural Future, Towns Centres First and the National Outdoor Recreation Strategy, and indeed ongoing policy development. It also funds vital schemes and services including the walks scheme, rural recreation officers, the Western Development Commission, and transport services to the Islands.

Community Development Programme -

Moving now to the Community Development Programme area, and Minister Joe O'Brien is here with me today to discuss this area.

The revised estimate will see a funding allocation of €220.5 million for 2024, with €177 million for current funding and €43.1 million in capital funding. In addition there is €5.4 million in current funding allocated for the Charities Regulatory Authority.

Important core current funding increases for community development are:

- An additional €4.6 million for SICAP and related measures, bringing core funding for social inclusion measures to €58 million;
- an additional €1 million for local community development committees , bringing that allocation to €3.4 million;
- an additional €1.5 million under the European Social Fund for social innovation supports to help mentor and develop social enterprises, and;
- €0.5 million to promote responsible dog ownership.
- An increase of €0.4 million for Water Safety Ireland to €1.8 million.
- an additional €100,000 for Public Participation Networks (PPNs), bringing that funding to €2.95 million.

There has also been an increase in funding for the Charities Regulatory Authority, from €5 million to €5.4 million.

The overall figure of €220 million for Community Development includes a non-core allocation of €11 million to assist with the community response to the Ukraine crisis, under SICAP and through volunteering supports. This funds important work to assist and help integrate new arrivals into local communities throughout the country.

With regard to capital funding for Community Development, I launched the Community Centre Investment Fund in 2022. The first funding round focused on upgrades and improvements, with approvals of €45 million made and €32 million paid out to date for these improvement works. A second funding round, focusing on New Builds, was introduced in 2023, and approvals for that will be announced shortly. A budget provision of €21 million is being made for this area in 2024, which covers the Community Centre Investment Fund and the Local Enhancement Programme, which is a small grants scheme for communities and community groups.

This scheme has really brought communities together and will ensure every community can be proud of their local community centre. I really look forward to seeing the impact of this new scheme continue in 2024 and beyond.

Finally, in 2023, following a Government decision, I established the Community Recognition Fund, to support community infrastructure in areas welcoming new arrivals. This capital fund recognises the contribution of communities to the national response. Under this round of the Fund €50 million has been allocated to 880 projects, with €10 million spent in 2023 and I hope to see the remainder completed as soon as possible.

Finally, as you are aware, Government continues to consider the needs of communities that are welcoming new arrival, and the impact of the Community Recognition Fund and the SICAP programme are part of those discussions. There are significant supports already in place, but additional supports may emerge following those discussions.

Conclusion –

In closing, this Revised Estimate for 2024 shows the Government's continued strong commitment to rural and community development, and provides the funding to make sure that our schemes and programmes continue to support rural areas and communities right across the country.

Thank you again for your time and, along with my colleague, Minister of State O'Brien, I am happy to answer any questions you may have.

Go raibh maith agat.

ENDS