

DÁIL ÉIREANN

AN COISTE UM CHUNTAIS PHOIBLÍ

COMMITTEE OF PUBLIC ACCOUNTS

Déardaoin, 21 Meitheamh 2018

Thursday, 21 June 2018

The Committee met at 9 a.m.

MEMBERS PRESENT:

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| Deputy Bobby Aylward, | Deputy Alan Farrell, |
| Deputy Shane Cassells, | Deputy Marc MacSharry, |
| Deputy Catherine Connolly, | Deputy Catherine Murphy, |
| Deputy David Cullinane, | Deputy Kate O'Connell. |

DEPUTY SEAN FLEMING IN THE CHAIR.

Mr. Seamus McCarthy (*An tArd Reachtaire Cuntas agus Ciste*) called and examined.

2016 Annual Report of the Comptroller and Auditor General and Appropriation Accounts

Chapter 14 - Control of Ireland's Bilateral Assistance Programme

Vote 27 - International Co-operation

Vote 28 - Foreign Affairs and Trade

Mr. Niall Burgess (*Secretary General, Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade*) called and examined.

Chairman: We are joined by the Comptroller and Auditor General, Mr. Seamus McCarthy, who is joined by Ms Georgina O'Mahoney, deputy director of audit. Apologies have been received from Deputy Deering. We are going directly to our engagement with the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade. With the agreement of the committee, we will stop at approximately 11.30 a.m. to allow members to be in the Chamber for the President of the EU Commission, Jean-Claude Juncker's address. We will take the business of the committee in the afternoon. The first item we are dealing with today concerns the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade. We will examine chapter 14 of the report of the Comptroller and Auditor General on the account of the public services 2016 - control of Ireland's bilateral assistance programme. We will be examining the following appropriation accounts for 2016: Vote 27 - International Co-operation and Vote 28 - Foreign Affairs and Trade. We also will look at matters relating to the Passport Office, which is under the Department's remit.

We are joined today by the following people from the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade: Mr. Niall Burgess, Secretary General; Mr. Austin Gormley, director general of the corporate service division; Mr. Ruairí de Búrca, director general of the development co-operation division; Ms Fiona Penollar, director of passport services; Ms Barbara Cullinane, director of the strategy and performance unit; Ms Caitríona Ingoldsby, director of the Irish abroad unit; Mr. James McIntyre, director of the finance division; and Mr. Michael Tiernan, accountant in the finance division. We are also joined by Mr. Brian O'Malley from the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform. They are very welcome to today's meeting.

I remind members and those in the Public Gallery that all mobile phones must be switched off or put into aeroplane mode. If they are on silent mode they will still interfere with the recording system. I wish to advise the witnesses that by virtue of section 17(2)(l) of the Defamation Act 2009, witnesses are protected by absolute privilege in respect of their evidence to this committee. If they are directed by the committee to cease giving evidence on a particular matter and continue to do so, they are entitled thereafter only to a qualified privilege in respect of the evidence. They are directed that only evidence connected with the subject matter of these

proceedings is to be given and are asked to respect the parliamentary practice to the effect that, where possible, they should not criticise or make charges against any person or persons or entity, by name or in such a way as to make him, her or it identifiable.

Members of the committee are reminded of the provisions of Standing Order 186, which state that the Committee shall also refrain from enquiring into the merits of a policy or policies of the Government or a Minister of the Government or the merits of the objectives of such policies. While we expect witnesses to answer questions put by the committee clearly and with candour, witnesses can and should expect to be treated fairly and with respect and consideration at all times, in accordance with the witness protocol.

Mr. Seamus McCarthy: I thank the Chairman. Key areas of responsibility of the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade include foreign policy advice and co-ordination, promotion of Ireland's economic interests abroad, management of the country's development aid programme and provision of passport and consular services for Irish citizens. The activities and running costs of the Department are funded under two Votes.

Gross expenditure under Vote 28 - Foreign Affairs and Trade amounted to €215 million in 2016. Administration subheads accounted for 71% of that expenditure. The largest element of this was the salary costs of some 1,280 staff, which came to just under €79 million. Office premises expenses of €23 million included costs associated with Ireland's network of embassies and missions abroad. The bulk of the non-administrative expenditure related to contributions to international organisations and grants for support services for Irish emigrants. Receipts into the Vote comprised mainly fees related to the issue of passports and visas, and other consular services. These receipts were approximately €12.3 million, or 30%, ahead of the level projected for the year, probably reflecting the first impacts of the UK Brexit vote in mid-2016. A net surplus of just over €8.7 million was liable for surrender to the Exchequer at the end of the year.

Vote 27 - International Co-operation is administered by the Department's development co-operation division and funds approximately two thirds of Ireland's official development assistance, with a particular focus on sub-Saharan Africa. The 2016 appropriation account for the Vote records gross expenditure of nearly €485 million. A surplus of nearly €2 million was liable for surrender to the Exchequer.

Chapter 14 of my report was compiled to provide an overview of the control systems in place in respect of bilateral assistance provided under Vote 27 and to review changes in the Department's administrative procedures for bilateral assistance following a significant fraud in Uganda in 2012. Some €386 million, or just over half of Ireland's development assistance, was applied as bilateral assistance. Bilateral assistance is the provision of direct assistance to a developing country through a variety of channels, including the country's government agencies, non-governmental organisations, international agencies and missionary societies. The remainder of the development assistance budget was applied as multilateral assistance, where contributions to international agencies or organisations are pooled and applied for development purposes.

Figure 1, which is now on screen, shows the breakdown of bilateral assistance in 2016. As can be seen in figure 1, a key element of Ireland's programme is the targeted delivery of assistance to eight selected key partner countries under long-term strategic partnerships. Assistance provided under these partnerships is managed primarily by the Irish embassy in the partner country. A five-year country strategy plan is drawn up for each of the key partner countries, outlining a framework of how the embassy will accomplish certain target outcomes. A review

of the country strategy plans for each of the eight key partner countries conducted as part of the examination identified that only five of the strategies were current. The Department's objective is to have new strategies completed and approved in time to coincide with expiring strategies. However, where there are significant changes in the key partner country, either regionally or nationally, or where a mid-term review suggests that a strategy is worth continuing, the strategy may be extended.

Given the nature of development assistance and the context in which it is delivered, the risk of fraud, corruption and misappropriation are significant factors to be taken into account by all donor countries. Following the discovery in 2012 of a significant fraud involving Irish funds in Uganda, the Department has revised its assurance process for the development assistance programme. More emphasis is now being placed on pre-funding assessment, monitoring and evaluation of projects and systematic review of external audit findings. Members of the committee who travelled to Tanzania last month will have had the opportunity to examine the practical application of that framework.

At the time we were completing the report, the Department had not reported publicly on suspected frauds in funded organisations or on the percentage of assistance funds that is lost to fraud. In 2016, 12 instances of fraud were reported in funded partner organisations amounting to potential losses of €312,000 or 0.043% of Irish development assistance funding provided in 2016. When recovered amounts of €126,000 were accounted for, the potential net loss was 0.026%. This is broadly in line with the levels reported by a number of government aid agencies in other jurisdictions. The Department has agreed a recommendation to develop a methodology to publish information in respect of frauds and alleged frauds affecting Irish Aid funds awarded to partner organisations, most likely through its departmental annual report.

Chairman: I thank Mr. McCarthy. I ask Mr. Burgess to make his opening statement.

Mr. Niall Burgess: I thank the Committee of Public Accounts for inviting me to assist it in its consideration of the 2016 appropriation accounts for the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade - Votes 27 and 28 - and Chapter 14 of the Comptroller and Auditor General's 2016 report on the control of Ireland's bilateral assistance programme. As the Chairman mentioned, I am joined by some colleagues from the Department who may be helpful to the committee: Ms Fiona Penollar, who is our director of passport services; Ms Barbara Cullinane, who is our head of strategy and performance; Mr. Ruairí de Búrca, who is the head of Irish Aid, Ms Caitríona Ingoldsby, who is the head of our Irish abroad unit; and Mr. Austin Gormley, who is the head of our corporate services division. I know the committee has been supplied with material which provides a factual summary of the main areas of departmental expenditure and receipts in 2016. I do not propose to repeat that orally. The programme structure for Vote 28 corresponds with the Department's strategy statement, which sets out its work in five priority areas: providing a service to Irish citizens, engaging actively in the European Union, promoting our values internationally, advancing our prosperity and strengthening our influence. Vote 27 is structured around a single expenditure programme based on poverty and hunger reduction.

We have been building strength around a cluster of issues which are disproportionately important to longer-term development. We have done this while keeping the most vulnerable people in mind at all times. Some of the most important issues in this context are access to education and health opportunities for women and girls, support to civil society, social support for the most vulnerable people, good governance, small-scale agriculture and childhood nutrition. The humanitarian challenges arising from conflict, political instability and climate change have reached unprecedented levels in Syria, Yemen, Myanmar, South Sudan, the Horn of Africa,

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southern Africa and northern Nigeria. It is estimated 3 million people were forced to leave their homes as a result of conflict and persecution in 2017, bringing the number of refugees and displaced people to an all-time high of 68 million. Against this background, we have directed new funding to more recent crises while maintaining a visibility and influence beyond our size, especially in refugee-hosting countries such as Uganda, Ethiopia and Tanzania. It is against this background of change and challenge that the Government has committed to publishing a White Paper on Ireland's international development co-operation programme that will guide progress towards meeting the target of allocating 0.7% of gross national income to overseas development assistance by 2030. I acknowledge the work of Members of the Oireachtas in compiling a report on Irish Aid earlier this year. This useful report is informing our thinking as this work is brought forward.

I want to address an issue which is topical for most if not all offices in the Oireachtas. I refer to the impact that the unprecedented demand for passports is having on the delivery of passport services to the public. Responsive public service is the bedrock of this Department's work. This can take the form of support for emigrant communities, consular care for Irish citizens abroad or the delivery of passports. We aim for continuous improvement in our service on the one hand, and easier access to services for our citizens on the other. Everything else is built on this foundation. I say this as someone who spent some of the most satisfying years of my career living and working with Irish communities abroad. For some years now, we have been working towards a thorough overhaul and renewal of the passport system aimed at providing a better, more responsive and more accessible service. The Irish passport card was a significant innovation and the first of its type. This facility for our citizens is unmatched by other countries. Our passport booklet is rated among the four most advanced and secure in the world. This is one of the reasons Irish citizens need so few visas for international travel, including to the US. The ongoing development of our online service allows citizens to apply from home and receive their passports in a matter of days. This goes hand in hand with robust procedures to verify and protect the identities of applicants.

As we take pride in what we do, it is a matter of immense frustration for us that some categories of passport application are taking longer to process than we had planned, that we are unable to answer all telephone calls to the Passport Office and that many people are concerned they will not receive their passports in time for their travel plans. I see the efforts being made by my colleagues in the Passport Office to get us back on target. I also see their immense grace under pressure as they answer telephone calls and deal with callers to the office. Our responsibility to verify and protect the identities of the citizens involved and ensure the integrity and international reputation of the Irish passport means that lost and stolen passports and first-time applications take longer. If one calls the Passport Office, however, one should get an answer. If we are frustrated at what we cannot do, our customers are even more so. The telephone service is not what it should be at present and I apologise for that.

It is important to provide reassurance that the service is working well for the most part. All applications processed online are issued within days. For those using this channel, the service from the Passport Office has improved immeasurably over the past 12 months. All renewals are being issued on time. This improvement on last year has been achieved even though the past six months have been the busiest in our history, with our activity having increased by 8.5% since last year. Most queries are being answered, with approximately 9,500 queries being answered in the past week. Processing times are in line with international norms and are coming down. I believe we will meet all our targets by next month. In the meantime, nobody affected by these delays who is at risk of missing a travel deadline has been turned away. In the short term,

probably before the end of this year, child renewals will go online. This will reduce waiting times and extend the benefits of the new system to more families. This would not be possible without the support of the members of this committee and their colleagues across the Oireachtas who have helped us to get clear information to applicants, who have guided them through the process and who have brought urgent cases to our attention. I acknowledge this assistance and thank Deputies and Senators for it.

Votes 27 and 28 support a great diversity of work undertaken on behalf of the State and its citizens. I have referred to the commitment of our colleagues in the Passport Office. I see that commitment across the mission network, which itself comprises great diversity. I was delighted to attend yesterday's launch by the Tánaiste of the Department's LGBT+ staff network, which is the first such network in the Civil Service. This complements the considerable amount of work that is already under way to advance gender equality in the Department. This initiative is part of an agenda that seeks to foster a culture of respect and equality to the benefit of staff, of the Department and, ultimately, of those we serve. Across its offices in Ireland and its missions overseas, the Department has staff members of approximately 70 nationalities. They speak 40 languages and work in 90 locations worldwide to support Irish citizens and represent Ireland's voice and interests on the international stage. My colleagues and I are ready to respond to any questions that may be posed by the members of the committee on additional issues across our Votes.

Chairman: I thank Mr. Burgess. Before I call the first speaker, I want to mention one aspect of the passport situation briefly. We might come back to it later. I thank Mr. Burgess for the information on processing times, which we have received in the last day or so. I want to verify some of what Mr. Burgess has said and highlight the problem areas that exist. Am I right in saying that the only applications which can be made online are renewals?

Mr. Niall Burgess: Only adult renewals can be done online at present.

Chairman: I do not think Mr. Burgess said exactly that. Over 100,000 renewals have been processed so far this year. Over 90% of them have been processed within ten working days. As we all know, some renewals are processed within two or three working days. That is an excellent service. I will mention the biggest issue that people have. Traditionally, many people go through the passport express system. There have been 100,000 renewals through that system so far this year. The Passport Office's target is to deal with passport express applications within 21 days. The real problem is that approximately 50% of such applications are not dealt with within the target time. So far this year, approximately 27,000 such applications have taken up to six weeks and a further 22,000 have taken up to eight weeks, which is two months. The difficulty is that when people go through the passport express system, they think it will take three weeks or thereabouts. When six weeks have passed and they are due to travel the following week, but they have not yet received their passports, it can be very difficult to retrieve their applications from that channel of application to speed them up in another way. That is the difficulty people are having with passport express applications.

In essence, we are moving on. I would like to draw a comparison with an area of another Department. There was a time when people used to tax their cars by going to the local authority office. Then they started doing it by post, and now over 70% of people tax their cars online. Their applications are turned around within 48 hours and they get their tax discs back. The Passport Office needs to go there. It is going there. Passport Express is the slow lane and the online service the fast lane. I acknowledge that first-time applicants cannot use the online service, but people need to be told that while the turnaround target is three weeks, this is not pos-

sible in 50% of cases. If many of those who had used the Passport Express service had known about the delays, they would have used the online service. The Department needs to encourage people to renew their passports online, where possible. It needs to be more proactive in that regard. Staff in post offices are probably aware that 50% of applications submitted via the Passport Express service will not be processed within the target period, but it is not their job to inform people of this. It is the responsibility of the Department to encourage people to use the online service, where possible. I accept that staff in the Passport Office are under tremendous pressure, but the Department needs to step up the move to the online service, where possible. Will Mr. Burgess comment briefly before we move on to the next item of business?

Mr. Niall Burgess: I accept that Passport Express is the slow lane, but in its day, it provided an effective and rapid turnaround service. We anticipated the pressure that would be exerted on the Passport Office this year. From the outset of the year, we have engaged in an intensive communications campaign aimed, in particular, at getting the word out locally that, where possible, people should make their applications online. We have done approximately 35 local radio interviews and also worked heavily through local media.

Most Passport Express applications are processed on time within the 15-day target. Where applications made via Passport Express are first-time applications or for the replacement of a lost passport, a series of checks kick in, which delays processing. The frustration is being felt by families who have booked holidays where one child has not previously held a passport. The passports are bundled together, but owing to the making of a new application, we are working to a different timeframe. Where we know that someone is at risk of missing a deadline, we will pull the application and process it.

Chairman: We can come back to the issue later, if members want to do so. Owing to the time schedule, I ask them to stick rigidly to their 20-minute, 15-minute and ten-minute time limits. Time permitting, I will allow members back in a second time.

Deputy Alan Farrell: I welcome the witnesses. I acknowledge the extraordinary work done by personnel in the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, with many of whom I have had the privilege of dealing in the past few months on passport applications. I have no complaints about the manner in which they carry out their duties. I also recognise with some appreciation Mr. Burgess's reference to the launch of the LGBT+ staff network, particularly among his own staff, which is commendable, given the week that is in it.

I propose to focus first on the overseas aid programme and later the passport service. I was one of the three members of the committee who travelled recently to Tanzania, with the clerk, staff of the Office of the Comptroller and Auditor General and Mr. de Búrca. It was an eye-opening and extremely worthwhile visit to understand what the Irish overseas aid programme delivers. It is without doubt a worthwhile project across the globe. While some of my experiences were harrowing, others were incredibly uplifting. I also thank Mr. de Búrca for the information he supplied the ambassador, Mr. Sherlock, and his staff in Dar es Salaam and also his personal staff for their extraordinary hospitality.

There is reference in the Comptroller and Auditor General's report and also in Mr. Burgess's opening statement to the publication of statistics and analysis of fraudulent transactions within the budget. In his opening statement Mr. McCarthy referenced that the figure of 0.026% was in line with international norms. My understanding is it is the after recovery figure. The figure of 0.43% for 2016 is above the norm. Perhaps Mr. McCarthy might comment on the matter.

Mr. Seamus McCarthy: The percentage is small. If it was 1% on a gross basis, it would be of concern. When a percentage is so small, the anomalies from year to year are likely to throw up something like it. I am not too concerned that it is slightly above some of the figures. The figures we have quoted in the chapter are for a very small selection of countries. Internationally, there is not that much information available. One would need a broader spread of countries presenting this type of information which has to be built up. To me, watching the figure from year to year would I think yield value for the committee.

Deputy Alan Farrell: I agree that the percentage is a drop in the ocean. The programme first came to my attention as a new Member of the House in 2011. Shortly thereafter there was the incident in Uganda, which clearly was of concern. Broadly, it is a tiny amount in the context of a figure of €724 million.

Mr. Seamus McCarthy: The potential at loss in Uganda was €4 million-----

Deputy Alan Farrell: Correct.

Mr. Seamus McCarthy: -----which is significantly different from the figures that give these percentages. It can be anomalous.

Deputy Alan Farrell: Mr. McCarthy has also mentioned that the figure of 0.43% relates to a select number of countries only, rather than the entirety of the countries covered by the programme, or have I misinterpreted what he said?

Mr. Seamus McCarthy: The figure of 0.43% relates to Ireland. The countries with which comparisons were made are listed in the report.

Deputy Alan Farrell: What is of more importance is the Department's adherence, in the light of what happened in Uganda, to controls in memorandums of understanding and contractual arrangements with countries. That is probably of more importance to the committee in terms of controls and adherence to them. I understand from my reading of both reports that the contractual arrangements are fairly robust. Would Mr. Burgess or Mr. de Búrca like to comment?

Mr. Niall Burgess: I will address one or two points of detail and say a brief word about our general approach to risk. Since the 2016 report, we have recovered an additional €60,000. The process of recovery is continuous and does not stop until we recover the full amount. In many cases we do not recover the full amount, but it remains a continuous part of our work.

There was a question about international norms. We work closely with the audit network in other aid agencies and development partners. Our evaluation and audit team hosted the international auditors' network in Dublin recently. The intention is to identify and advance best practice among peers. We see this as a fundamental part of our work.

Deputy Alan Farrell: Are there comparative figures available? Mr. McCarthy said the figure was in line with international norms. Are there country donor data available which could be used to identify where we feature on the scale? There must be some verification process to assess other countries' fraud figures for the purposes of the ODA budget.

Mr. Ruairí de Búrca: There is an element of comparing apples and oranges because people fund in very different ways. Some countries publish information and we are looking to do so. Our network's audit and evaluation team meets the auditors and evaluators to discuss dynamic

relationships with organisations which we fund. This information exchange is intended to avoid getting into a situation where one ends up with suspected fraud. It is about sharing information on organisational management systems and early information on where we suspect there may be weaknesses. This allows us to get ahead of any fraud. The meetings take place on a regular basis. Often there are only allegations and suspicions rather than proven facts, but actions may be taken on what turn out to be proven facts. Our work is often prophylactic. In at least one instance there was theft from a warehouse and no fraud within the system. We are waiting to see if there will be a insurance payout in this case. There is a difference between fraud in an accountancy sense and in the sense fraud is understood by the man on the street. The latter includes trucks which are robbed or warehouses which are burgled. It does not mean that there is systemic fraud, although even in cases of robbery there may be some insider dealing.

Deputy Alan Farrell: We are donors from multiple sources for countries in need and do not just contribute via the Irish overseas programme. We also supply funds to the United Nations which has a target. Our rate is a bit off it. Is it only the ODA budget that goes towards the UN target, or do we take into consideration the fact that we fund the United Nations which also spends Irish taxpayers' money on behalf of the international community?

Mr. Niall Burgess: It is all incorporated. ODA is calculated as funding from multiple sources, provided it is classified as development assistance by the OECD. It includes our bilateral aid programme, humanitarian assistance, the money we use to fund the EDF through EU and UN channels and money from the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine and the Department of Finance through development bank funding mechanisms for the World Food Programme.

Deputy Alan Farrell: It is a global figure.

Mr. Niall Burgess: It is a figure from several sources. While the amount ODA delivers through the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade is the greatest part, it is not the sum total.

Deputy Alan Farrell: When does Mr. Burgess expect the White Paper to be published? What will be its scope in terms of the overall programme and what is the background to it?

Mr. Niall Burgess: Our current policy framework was launched in 2013 and a lot has changed since. On the positive side, the sustainable development goals provide us with a very specific agreed comprehensive framework for global development. It is a guide which we did not have in 2013. That, in itself, is a strong argument for looking again at our policies.

In the past five years the demands on humanitarian assistance as a result of climate change and conflict have been very significant, as has the pull on our development assistance. We have contributed over €100 million in responding to the Syrian crisis alone since 2012. The context in which Irish Aid is operating is changing and many of the long-term development partnerships we have are in countries which are also dealing with the issue of climate fragility and very significant refugee-hosting countries. There is now a compelling reason to stand back and look at the good use being made of our aid and the prospect of a significant increase within a relatively short timeframe requires us to give thought to how best we can use it.

Deputy Alan Farrell: We have missed our target, or moved in the wrong direction, owing to our economic environment. Based on current projections, how long will it take to reach the figure of 0.7% of GNI? I appreciate that it is a budgetary decision and will be voted on in the Houses, but what is the projected figure?

Mr. Niall Burgess: The objective set out in the Global Ireland document is to reach the figure of 0.7% of GNI by 2030. One would have to work out the level of projected economic growth during that period to get the figure, but it would require significant increases on an annual basis. How it is phased in over a period of 12 years is very much a matter for political decisions. It would probably be in excess of €2 billion.

Deputy Alan Farrell: That is the figure I had in mind.

Aside from passports, one of the biggest difficulties we face, as politicians, is the issuing of visas, particularly for family members of individuals who are legally in the State and have their paperwork in order. There are extraordinary delays in turnaround compared to the United Kingdom and France. My office has done some work on this issue and there is anecdotal evidence of the same thing happening in comparison to the USA. I am trying to understand why it takes so long to obtain a visa. There are differences of opinion in certain processing offices in different countries and sometimes it depends on the region involved. I do not say this as a slight on anybody, but I have come across cases where visas were granted, albeit months later, having been refused on a couple of occasions. It can be terribly frustrating for an individual who is living and working in the State and contributing to the community and to the State who wants someone to come over but they are not able to do it. I am aware of cases where the person goes to visit family in the UK instead because it is easier to get into the UK, even though he or she is not a British passport holder. I am trying to understand what it is we are doing. Is it a throughput issue with so many applications at the one time and not enough staff or does the process need refining?

Mr. Niall Burgess: I cannot really comment on the visa process because we do not manage the process of visa approvals.

Chairman: Is it the Department of Justice and Equality?

Mr. Niall Burgess: It is the Department of Justice and Equality, yes. We host visa offices in Ireland's embassies, but it is Department of Justice and Equality officials who report to the Department.

Deputy Alan Farrell: The crossover is there, and the fact that it is handled, but I find it very frustrating. I will skip over to the passport issue. I appreciate the information that has been provided. Every person I speak to who has gone online and received their passport has expressed surprise at how quickly it has come through. There is a reaction, especially online, at how extraordinary it is to get a passport on a Tuesday morning that was applied for perhaps on a Sunday morning while the applicant was in his or her pyjamas. We can see this reaction online.

The negative is that sometimes applications can take longer because of the volume. If a person is given a realistic projection of how long it might take he or she will not mind if it takes an extra day or two. The problem we now have, however, is that the stated processing time is up on the website in black and white, and a person may apply and be left waiting. In my experience this can happen with a lot of people who have new applications, or when a person has an expired passport. If the service gave people a realistic timeframe I believe they would be far more accepting, especially coming up to the summer when it is going to be busy.

The witness outlined the process of verification very well in his opening statement and explained that the integrity of the system must be maintained, and this is completely accepted. Is the issue about the number of staff available or is it a printer availability issue? How many

printers are there to print passports across the State? Is there a requirement for more printers? Has a cost-benefit analysis been conducted on whether it would be a benefit to acquire another printer? Are the witnesses aware of the per item cost to the Exchequer of each passport application, including the staffing costs, the processing costs and the passport itself? If the Department does not know this it should.

Mr. Niall Burgess: We do.

Deputy Alan Farrell: That is good. It is important for the committee to get as much information as possible. What are the alternatives? What is the Department looking at with regard to improving the service? At the outset of the meeting the Chairman and I said how we appreciate the kinds of pressures the service is under. Would providing an additional printer speed up the process or is it more about the verification process and the staffing hours that are required?

Mr. Niall Burgess: There are a series of questions there. Ms Penollar will speak about the cost per passport. We have the printer capacity and the machinery that we need. We have three passport printing machines that are capable of printing more passports per year than we actually process currently. The blockage in the system is the delay with the checks required for first-time applications and lost passports. These are far more complicated and they take more time. On the website we state 33 days, which is the actual turnaround time, but it has been coming down progressively.

On resourcing, we issue the greater part of our passports in the first half of the year. Over the last couple of years we have seen the surge coming a little earlier each year than it had the previous year. We take on temporary staff in order to manage this. We recruit and train these staff and we try to have them in place early. We had a particular difficulty this year, which lies at the heart of the delays in processing at the moment. Although we had intended to have temporary staff in place by 1 January, the vetting process for those staff took longer than it had in previous years.

Chairman: Is that Garda vetting?

Mr. Niall Burgess: Yes.

Chairman: Do staff require to be Garda vetted to work in the Passport Office because they are dealing with people's private details?

Mr. Niall Burgess: Yes. The Garda vetting took longer so we did not have our full complement of temporary staff in January when we needed them. The management of the balance between temporary staff requirements and full-time staff, and the time that the temporary staff get on board, is a critical factor for us in the Passport Office. The Deputy has asked what we are looking at for next year and this is one of the issues we will look at particularly closely.

We are involved in a major modernisation process in the passport service and this will address all of these problems over time. We are about half way through that process at the moment. The introduction of online passports for child renewals, which is on target, will make a significant difference to the processing times and the delays next year.

Deputy Alan Farrell: Why does the Passport Office handle an adult passport renewal online but not a child's? Why was that decision made?

Mr. Niall Burgess: This is a complex multifaceted three to four year project. We have taken

it on in blocks and phases. This involves replacing the software, replacing the machinery and phasing in of improvements over a period of time. It must be done in a phased way but the most significant improvement over the past year was the adult online renewals. The child passport renewals online are due to follow.

Ms Fiona Penollar: With regard to child passport online renewal, obviously child protection is extremely important to us. We must ensure that the guardians of a child have given their permission for the child to have the passport. The significant difference for child passport online applications is that we will still require signatures. There will be a required page to be sent in that will purely be the consent of guardians for the child to have the passport. This is a fundamental principle for the protection of the child and is a significant difference.

Chairman: Would this require a stamp by a Garda?

Ms Fiona Penollar: It would be a witness, in the same way as now. Currently there is no requirement for the guardians' consent to be witnessed by a Garda specifically, but we really want to target that witness to being someone who knows the child and has interaction with the guardians, for example a person in the child's school or a public health nurse or doctor. A witness from that sphere makes much more sense.

The Deputy asked about the cost per passport. There are many elements that go into processing the passport. For commercial reasons I will not go into the specific costs associated with the actual book cost but it is in the region of €10 per standard passport. A child gets a passport for five years and an adult can get a passport for ten years, so there is proportionally more work in approving a child application. A standard passport costs between €40 to €50, not including the central costs. When that is considered and taken into account, the average cost of the child or adult passport is very similar to the fees charged.

Chairman: The Passport Office roughly covers its costs.

Ms Fiona Penollar: Exactly.

Deputy Catherine Connolly: Cuirim fáilte roimh na finnétithe ar an lá is faide sa bhliain. Tá an t-ádh dearg orthu go bhfuil Uachtarán Juncker inár measc inniu so beimid go léir ag dul amach an geata roimh 12 meán lae. Is rud nua dúinn é sin. Táimid go léir sásta leis sin.

First of all I want to thank the Department. We recently went on a trip to Tanzania, and as has already been said by my colleague Deputy Alan Farrell, our hosts went above and beyond the call of duty. I want to thank the ambassador. I drew a blank on the name of the head of development, Ms Bronagh Carr. I give particular thanks to her, and also to Ms Olivia Kinabo, who is with us today. I will come back to some of the issues in a minute. On a positive note, the trip was certainly very good. It certainly was not a junket and it was well worth it. We experienced a range of projects. A group of people with acquired immunodeficiency syndrome, AIDS, gave us the privilege of seeing them dancing. We saw a connection between an Irish doctor and Our Lady's Children's Hospital Crumlin. That hospital is crumbling at the seams in my opinion, yet it was able to work very closely with the doctor and their staff in Tanzania, with both sides learning about the diagnosis of rare cancers.

I also want to thank the Passport Office. The word "grace" has been mentioned. I will get to the negatives in a minute, but certainly my experience with the Passport Office, under great pressure, has been that they operate with great grace. The interface with the citizen is extremely important. Of course, the passport is a vital document, so I thank the witnesses for that.

COMMITTEE OF PUBLIC ACCOUNTS

Regarding the accounts, a clear audit has been given but there are a number of questions I would like to ask. I have read it all and I was a tiny bit confused. I think I am clear now. Bilateral aid just about gets the bigger amount, and then there is the other aid. Bilateral aid comes under international co-operation. I wish to ask the Comptroller and Auditor General if I am correct in that or am I mixed up? There is multilateral aid and bilateral aid.

Mr. Seamus McCarthy: There is both bilateral and multilateral aid.

Deputy Catherine Connolly: I understand that the bilateral aid pertains to countries like Tanzania and a number of others. I think there are eight such countries.

Mr. Seamus McCarthy: There are some expenditures considered under multilateral aid that are made by the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, but a lot of this expenditure is made by other Departments. There is a diagram in the chapter-----

Deputy Catherine Connolly: I saw that, yes. That money is spread between appropriation accounts 28 and 27, two separate Votes.

Mr. Seamus McCarthy: There are also other sources. For instance, the World Food Programme is a charge on the Vote of the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine.

Deputy Catherine Connolly: I see.

Mr. Seamus McCarthy: Payments to EU and UN development agencies are partly funded by Irish Aid out of Vote 27, but are also funded from other sources.

Deputy Catherine Connolly: When we talk about international agencies we are referring to the UN and the EU. What money do we give to the EU, and where can that be seen?

Mr. Niall Burgess: We give money to the European Development Fund, EDF.

Deputy Catherine Connolly: What money is given to the European Development Fund?

Mr. Niall Burgess: I will get the figure on that. Some €32 million was given to the European Development Fund in 2016.

In regard to the complexity of the funding streams, looking at the amount of funding we give in humanitarian assistance at the moment, we find that the Department has a humanitarian budget line which is specifically used for this. However, we are also providing humanitarian assistance in our country programmes where there is fragility, refugee populations or instability in those countries. Moreover, both the European Union and the UN are providing humanitarian assistance as well, and we fund both core activities and specific activities of those organisations. The overall picture is quite complex.

Deputy Catherine Connolly: Mr. Burgess put it in context in his opening remarks. Some 3 million people were forced to leave their homes in 2017. There are 68 million displaced people in total as we speak.

Mr. Niall Burgess: Yes.

Deputy Catherine Connolly: I repeat, 68 million, the biggest displacement since the Second World War.

Mr. Niall Burgess: That figure is rising.

Deputy Catherine Connolly: That is the background. Within that background, Mr. Burgess mentioned Syria. I want to look at Syria, Palestine and Myanmar, formerly Burma. We are giving very small amounts of money to Palestine. I think the figure was €5 million. Can Mr. Burgess put that in context for me?

Mr. Niall Burgess: Our overall funding to Palestine is greater than €5 million.

Deputy Catherine Connolly: Is it?

Mr. Niall Burgess: The €5 million is the funding that we give to the Palestinian Authority through our office in Ramallah. The total we give includes additional funding towards projects in Gaza, core funding to the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East, UNWRA, and the support that we give through the Palestinian Authority, for example for education support.

Deputy Catherine Connolly: What is the total funding going to Palestine on an annual basis?

Mr. Niall Burgess: Last year it was €11.1 million.

Deputy Catherine Connolly: Mr. Burgess mentioned a figure for Syria.

Mr. Niall Burgess: The figure is about €107 million since 2012. That is from memory.

Deputy Catherine Connolly: That is okay, I am not holding Mr Burgess to a figure differing by a euro or two. Since 2012 we have given €107 million to Syria.

Mr. Niall Burgess: Yes.

Deputy Catherine Connolly: Where does that go?

Mr. Niall Burgess: That €107 million goes to a variety of programmes related to the Syria crisis. We give funding to support Syrian refugees in the region. We give funding to organisations that are working in Syria in support of displaced populations.

Deputy Catherine Connolly: Are those non-governmental organisations, NGOs?

Mr. Niall Burgess: Yes, but we also fund the UN for its activities. The figure I have for aid to Syria last year is €25 million. The funding we have been giving has been rising steadily since 2012. The figure so far for 2018 is €17.5 million. We are not yet halfway through the year.

Deputy Catherine Connolly: Is that mostly given to NGOs in the country?

Mr. Niall Burgess: It is given to refugee support in the region. Most of that goes to Jordan, Lebanon and Turkey.

Deputy Catherine Connolly: It is outside of Syria, then.

Mr. Ruairí de Búrca: Yes. I add that it is very difficult to work inside Syria, and our capacity to perform oversight is very limited because we cannot put staff at risk. As a rule, inside Syria we work with UN agencies or the International Committee of the Red Cross and Red Crescent. They have robust systems of internal oversight and we can work with them inside the country. Outside of Syria, people providing support to Syria are a much more mixed group. We work with some NGOs. We also work with some international organisations, depending on

who is best placed to provide a response. Given the huge numbers of people involved, there is a scale issue. That is why working with the UN High Commissioner for Refugees is the most effective and efficient mechanism for us in some instances.

Deputy Catherine Connolly: If I had more time, I would go into it. I refer to Burma, or Myanmar. What funding, if anything, has been given there? The reason I ask that is that I had the privilege, maybe a questionable privilege at this point, of giving the freedom of the city of Galway to Ms Aung San Suu Kyi in 2004, so I have a particular interest. I also want to ask a number of practical questions before I am stopped.

Mr. Niall Burgess: There is a mixture of direct and indirect funding to the Rohingya issue. We have pledged €2 million. We gave €1 million last year. We also fund the UN Central Emergency Response Fund, which is active in that crisis as well. We are one of the six largest donors to that particular crisis fund. The intention is to allocate €1.1 million this year.

We have a small development aid programme in Myanmar. We are accredited to Myanmar from Bangkok. We have a regional programme in south-east Asia as well. It is primarily centred in Vietnam but is now spreading to look at the most vulnerable in the region more broadly.

Deputy Catherine Connolly: I might come back to Mr. Burgess with Dáil questions.

Mr. Niall Burgess: I wish to make one point on the Syria crisis, because this is important. We were in the process of opening a number of missions overseas at the moment, six in total.

Deputy Catherine Connolly: I was going to ask about that.

Mr. Niall Burgess: One of those will be in Amman, Jordan. There are many very strong arguments for each of those missions, but one of the really strong arguments for opening and establishing a presence in Amman is that a large part of the crisis assistance to Syria, and indeed the crisis in Yemen, is headquartered in Amman Jordan as well. That will give us feet on the ground and better oversight of the funding situation in the region.

Deputy Catherine Connolly: I might come back to Mr. Burgess with practical questions on the number of embassies. For the purposes of the accounts, the Department learned from Uganda and there was a report which contained a number of recommendations. Is that right?

Mr. Niall Burgess: Yes.

Deputy Catherine Connolly: There were eight recommendations, of which three were still outstanding when I read this documentation. Have they been complied with?

Mr. Niall Burgess: We learned in many ways from the Uganda crisis.

Deputy Catherine Connolly: I understand that and just specifically-----

Mr. Niall Burgess: It fundamentally affected the way we deal with risk.

Deputy Catherine Connolly: I understand that. There is a new grant system and monitoring system in place. However, in relation to the recommendations, I read that five were implemented and three were not.

Mr. Niall Burgess: Is the Deputy referring to the three recommendations in the Comptroller and Auditor General's report of 2016?

Mr. Seamus McCarthy: It is figure 14.6; implementation of the recommendations made in the synthesis report-----

Deputy Catherine Connolly: It is the synthesis report.

Mr. Seamus McCarthy: -----as at June 2017. This is a summarisation of the recommendations. Our assessment was that, across nine broad areas, there were three in which there was still work to be done. Otherwise, the recommendations had been implemented.

Deputy Catherine Connolly: Can we have an update on the three areas where work remained to be done?

Mr. Seamus McCarthy: I am sorry. It was two areas where work had to be done.

Deputy Catherine Connolly: It was three at some stage but it may be two now.

Mr. Seamus McCarthy: No. They were subsets. If one looks at item No. 5, there were two categories with a total of three areas within the recommendations where additional work needed to be done.

Deputy Catherine Connolly: In the other two, yes.

Mr. Ruairí de Búrca: I might take this. As I read it, there are three orange lights in figure 14.6. The first recommendation was that a review of appropriate staffing complements should be carried out.

Deputy Catherine Connolly: And skills.

Mr. Ruairí de Búrca: Yes. That is done. There is always a challenge between what people want and what resources are available. That is a different management question but the review of staffing complements has been done. It was recommended that key senior mission staff should have the skills necessary to manage significant budgets and risks. That is part of our ongoing training and as such is under way. Mr. Burgess and I have been working with other members of the senior management team, including the chief financial officer, to carry out a series of visits to all of our missions. Where we assess that there are skills deficits, we will ask people to do more. Recommendation No. 7 was on formal management training. That is part of our pre-posting training suite.

Deputy Catherine Connolly: The reason I zone in on it in this short time is that week after week reports force changes in institutions. I wonder why the change does not come before. We are then left asking whether the change has occurred after the synthesis report, after the questions that were raised or after the fraud in Uganda. That is why I am asking in that context and Mr. de Búrca is telling me the recommendations have been implemented and the last two are in the process.

I have a practical question on buildings, land and premises. It appears in both accounts. I ask about this all the time in terms of what is rented and what is purchased and owned. Looking at Votes 27 and 28, land and buildings on page 11, is there a schedule of such land and buildings? How is valuation carried out? How are decisions made on buying or renting property? The same applies to Vote 28 on page 11, land and buildings. If we open the two together under capital assets, one figure is €7.639 million while the other is €156.548 million.

Mr. Seamus McCarthy: Most mission assets are under Vote 28, the Department's Vote.

There is a small number of assets which are specifically used for development aid purposes.

Deputy Catherine Connolly: Is there a schedule of all of those assets?

Mr. Niall Burgess: Yes.

Deputy Catherine Connolly: Who does the valuation on those?

Mr. Niall Burgess: We have a property management unit which manages rentals and the property we own. It is a small unit which we are currently expanding. One of the reasons we are expanding it is because the property market is dynamic and also because needs change in some missions. We have a policy now of looking at purchase options where that makes sense and where there are long-term savings. One issue we face in respect of our property budget is rapidly escalating rents. In many cases, our larger missions are in cities where rents are particularly high and increasing rapidly.

Deputy Catherine Connolly: That is why I am asking the question and it is what we see here all the time. More and more public bodies have rented buildings. The Department is looking at it now, but did it look at it before in the context of value for money?

Mr. Niall Burgess: Does the Deputy mean look at the option of purchase?

Deputy Catherine Connolly: Yes.

Mr. Niall Burgess: We did not have access to capital in recent years. We have not had the option of capital purchase, but it is becoming available to us now.

Deputy Catherine Connolly: How is that becoming available now?

Mr. Niall Burgess: The budget room is there for it. Most of our capital budget goes to ICT and passports at the moment. It is only in the last few years that we have been able to take funding for purchases. We have begun to do it in the last number of years. We did it with our embassy in Malawi last year and we are in the process of purchasing land in Tokyo to build an Ireland House as our rents in the city are very high.

Deputy Catherine Connolly: The Chairman is looking at me but I will stop. I will come back continually to the ongoing renting of premises with no value for money being obtained. It is every public body in Ireland and abroad and it is contributing to rents going off the Richter scale, not to mention the cost. It should be looked at.

Chairman: Can the Department send the committee a schedule of the countries in which we own the embassies? I am sure the witnesses have it, but they can send it on.

Mr. Niall Burgess: I have it here.

Chairman: Also, please send a schedule of countries in which we are renting setting out the rental costs per location. That will answer the question.

Mr. Niall Burgess: We will do that.

Deputy Catherine Murphy: I will start with passports. Our constituency offices are a barometer of what works and what does not. People come into us when something does not work. Elements of something might work very well while other aspects do not. We all have the personal experience of people coming to us. The Department indicated earlier that no one had

failed to travel where they had a requirement, but I have had a few. I had someone who could not get a passport and missed a wedding. I have had one or two other cases within the last year which would fall into that category. It is not always entirely the Department's fault if someone looks at his or her passport a week or two before an event, but I have seen cases where it was a couple of weeks before but the person still did not manage to travel. One particular case sticks out because it was felt to be very hurtful in the family.

Certainly, the online process is working and making a significant difference and I am very pleased to see that the service has been expanded. The reason people come to our office due to passport express service is because the word "express" and the timelines given give rise to an expectation that people are within time. However, it then goes a week or two beyond the date but the person has not sent in his or her travel documents as he or she expected fully to receive the passport back within the timeline. When they cannot get through to the passport office, they get on to us. That is the scenario. As such, something must be done to address the communications issue where there is an expectation that it will take longer than the stated time. It is taking up to eight weeks to get a passport. It would be useful to communicate that if people are going to travel within eight weeks, they should forward their travel documents. That would allow the office to determine the applications where it will run into a difficulty. This is the experience we have had. As much as some people believe politicians want constituents to keep queueing up and coming through our doors to access passport services, that is actually not the case. We want the systems to work for people. The issue is one of identifying solutions.

There has been a sizeable increase in the numbers of passport applications arising from Brexit. Ireland is in a very precarious position because of Brexit. I presume these numbers will not tail off but will continue at current levels for some time as British people working in the European Union seek to secure a passport from one of the other EU states. A large cohort of British people would qualify for an Irish passport through Irish parentage rules. Has the service been future proofed in terms of staffing? How is this being handled? Have the increases been projected out in terms of increased staff and, if so, will Mr. Burgess tell us about this?

Irish passports are sought after and important internationally. They are European Union passports. Obviously, they are sometimes lost or stolen and, possibly, misused. How does the Passport Office deal with that issue? Does it have a unit or section that deals with it? Are there costs associated with this? Is the theft or misuse of an Irish passport solely a matter for the criminal code of the jurisdiction in which it takes place?

Mr. Niall Burgess: There are people who miss connections because they do not have a passport, and I acknowledge this. What I was saying was that nobody who is caught up with these delays, who submitted a passport with one expectation in terms of the processing time and then found their application was delayed, and who came to our attention and of whom we are aware, has missed a flight because we will always pull that passport application and try to process it for that person. If people discover they have lost their passport on the morning they are due to travel, they will miss their flights. This is happening quite a lot. We are making determined efforts to ensure nobody suffers by missing a connection because of the delays being experienced in the Passport Office.

Accurate communication is fundamental and information has to be put into people's hands. We took the view when we looked at our communications for this year that prevention is much better than cure. Therefore, we have put a lot of effort into communicating clearly ahead of time that if people are travelling this year they should look at their passports early. We have tried to give clear guidance, through Members of the Oireachtas and local media, on how to do

this. We have kept our processing times accurate on the Department's website. Communication is fundamental and one of the issues at present is that people feel they cannot reach us, and this is a real problem and concern for us.

On the Brexit dimension, the increase arising through Brexit is not the major part of the increase in demand we are experiencing. We see most of the Brexit-related increase through Northern Ireland and the UK, and each of these two categories constitutes approximately 10% of the total number of applications coming into the Passport Office. So far this year, the numbers coming in from Northern Ireland are approximately comparable to last year. There is no significant spike there, although there is a slight increase. The increase in applications from the UK is approximately 20% compared with last year. That is a 20% increase this year on a 10% slice of the passports. The greater part of the increase has to do simply with the fact that more people are travelling and applying for passports. People who did not travel in previous years, for one or other reason, are applying now. This is the greater part of the increase.

We do projections every year, and we have done projections on a range of scenarios on the likely increase arising directly from Brexit. I will ask Ms Penollar to say a few words on this. By and large, our projections in the previous year have been in line with what we see each year. I do not think we have got the projection part of it wrong so far, and we are projecting a range for next year.

Deputy Catherine Murphy: In that case, is it a staffing issue?

Mr. Niall Burgess: The issue this year has been getting the right staff in place at the right time of the year and holding on to those staff. I mentioned that we manage the surge in passport applications in the first half of the year with temporary staff. We are finding it harder this year to hold on to the temporary staff we recruited and trained in January. They are leaving because they are getting other opportunities, so staff turnover is higher in the Passport Office. This means we need to look again at the balance between full-time staff and temporary staff when we come to next year.

On stolen passports, I will ask Ms Penollar to speak about the integrity dimension, which is a big part of the passport's work, and which goes unspoken and unreported to a large extent.

Deputy Catherine Murphy: Given that the processing of passports through the Passport Express service is taking up to eight weeks for a large number of people, should those who plan to travel within an eight-week timeframe not include their travel documents with their application in order that the Passport Office knows which applicants will run into difficulty? I know the Passport Office wants to take applications in sequence but one solution would be to deal with those that will run into trouble.

Mr. Niall Burgess: People who know they have a difficulty and are up against a tight deadline have the option of seeking an accelerated turnaround or of getting an appointment at the front desk.

Chairman: Deputy Murphy is speaking about people who are already in the system through Passport Express.

Deputy Catherine Murphy: Yes, they cannot access other options.

Chairman: That is the problem. They are locked into that channel.

Deputy Catherine Murphy: That is exactly the point. People are in the system and they cannot change the route they will go through.

Ms Fiona Penollar: I will start with turnarounds. On a weekly basis, we have updates on our website on exactly where we are on turnaround times so people know before they choose a channel which one to go down. It is a lot harder for us when someone is in the Passport Express system. On one of our busiest days in May alone we received 10,000 applications. The Deputy can imagine the difficulty we would have extracting one application from 10,000 applications. The challenge for us is that when we extract an application from Passport Express it has a natural knock-on effect on other people who may not have contacted us because they understood their application would be processed within a certain time. If we extract applications, other people will be affected so it is very much a balancing act.

The turnaround times shown on the website are live and valid. Today on the website the turnaround time for first-time, lost or stolen applicants is 33 days for the first time this year and it is 15 days for renewals. The actual turnaround time is 14 days for renewals and 31 days for the others, but we like to give a buffer as it gives us a bit of flexibility.

Chairman: Six and a half five-day weeks amounts to 33 days. The message today for first-time applicants or those who have lost their passports is that applications through the Passport Express system will take six and a half weeks.

Ms Fiona Penollar: Absolutely, for first-time applicants-----

Chairman: That is the message the Department needs to get out so that people might opt for the other route.

Ms Fiona Penollar: Absolutely, and that is really important. As the Secretary General said, I have done more than 30 different radio interviews and collectively on Twitter we are trying hard to get the message out that people should choose their channel.

Chairman: A sign must be placed in post offices where people make their passport applications - and nowhere else - because they will see it in front of them. We can talk about Twitter, Facebook and websites, but the 200,000 people who have used the Passport Express service so far this year should see a sign in front of them in the post offices. That is where they would see it because they could not pick up a passport application form without seeing it.

Ms Fiona Penollar: I cannot disagree, and we have very close communication with An Post about this. Obviously, it is up to An Post and the franchise holders to decide what signs they have in post offices.

Chairman: They genuinely need to work on that issue because An Post will claim it is not up to An Post to explain delays in the Passport Office. They are two State bodies and should put the sign up between the two of them.

Deputy Alan Farrell: The guy behind the counter is not working for a State body, in fairness.

Chairman: An Post.

Deputy Alan Farrell: No, as in the guy in the post office. It is a slightly different mentality. I know what the Chairman is getting at.

Chairman: It is An Post, a semi-State body. I have made my point. I come back to Deputy Catherine Murphy.

Deputy Catherine Murphy: The Chairman is going to give me a bit of extra time.

Ms Fiona Penollar: The Deputy wanted me to talk about integrity, which is a fundamental part in the protection of the Irish passport. Regarding the lost or stolen passports, since 2013 when we introduced a new passport with over 80 security features, we have not actually found an incident where someone has been able to tamper in any credible way with a passport. Because of the security features it is very hard to substitute a photograph. It is very hard to doctor the passport. That is a huge pillar of our protection.

We also have an integrity unit which has very close links, not only here with An Garda Síochána and others involved in integrity issues, but also with Interpol. We have international groupings where we meet and discuss latest trends and risk profiling. We put an awful lot of emphasis on protecting the integrity because it is so important for every passport holder. The integrity of the passport means that, as the Deputy says, we can travel. We have that visa-free travel. We are either number four or five in the world as a passport for visa-free travel. That is primarily down to the integrity of the actual physical passport but also the process. That again comes back to the turnarounds in some areas.

Deputy Catherine Murphy: Okay.

Chairman: The Deputy will get a second opportunity.

Deputy Catherine Murphy: I ask the Chairman to put me down to come back in then.

I wish to deal with another topic involving a small amount of money relative to the Department's budget. Two centres are funded - the cultural centre in Paris and the arts centre in New York. Based on replies to parliamentary questions a sizeable amount of funding is given to the arts centre in New York from the US side - way more than is provided from Ireland. Why have those two locations been selected? Is it because there is a benefit? I can see the benefit from New York. Why, for example, would the cultural centre in the UK not feature where there might be a more significant population than in Paris? Why does that happen?

Mr. Niall Burgess: If I take New York, there are a number of factors. When the Irish arts centre in New York was originally conceived - it was not a Government project, but a project that was taken on largely by the Irish community in New York itself - they were conscious of the fact that almost every European community in New York has a platform for its culture in New York. The Irish arts centre in New York, which was a very small operation, was teaching dance, giving language classes and offering a venue to host young Irish artists who were coming over. It was really done on a very modest basis. I think the community itself felt it wanted a platform that was comparable with what other communities have but also was a worthy platform for Irish culture in the US. By far the greater part of the funding for that project has come from New York City Council-----

Deputy Catherine Murphy: I can see that.

Mr. Niall Burgess: -----and from New York State as well. We have provided some funding. It was not funded in 2016 but we have provided some funding from the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade. The Office of Public Works has provided funding in kind as well.

Deputy Catherine Murphy: I can see that there is a real value in that. What about the one in Paris?

Mr. Niall Burgess: We have a facility in Paris, the Centre Culturel Irlandais, which has received significant capital investment from the State. If one looks at Paris as a platform for Irish artists, it is one of the most important and significant staging points for them. Both of those places, New York and Paris, would be launching pads, if one likes, and showcase venues for Irish artists.

Deputy Catherine Murphy: I do not have a difficulty with the spending, which is very modest. I am trying to understand the process by which the locations are selected. It strikes me that the cultural centre in the UK should feature given the relationship there is.

Chairman: I want to give other speakers the opportunity.

Mr. Niall Burgess: We do support the London Irish centre as well. We support the London Irish centre through the emigrant support programme and that should be here. I can get the Deputy figures-----

Deputy Catherine Murphy: Okay.

Mr. Niall Burgess: -----with the support we do give.

Chairman: Mr. Burgess can send those on directly to the committee.

I call Deputy Cassells. We are down to ten-minute slots and the Deputy will get a second chance as well.

Deputy Shane Cassells: I thank the Secretary General and all the staff at the Department for their work. I acknowledge the work of our diplomatic corps. Deputy Farrell and I, through our membership of the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe, OSCE, would have occasion to deal with our embassies a couple of times a year and see their work at first hand. I also have seen this recently in respect of the Inter-Parliamentary Union. Mr. Burgess talked about communication. The recent RTÉ documentary showing the working of our missions was very important in getting that out to the wider public. I acknowledge that at the outset.

A key role of our ambassadors is linked to the promotion of this country, its economic base and the strength of our firms on a global basis. In that context Martin Shanahan from IDA Ireland spoke about and spoke highly of that work when he was here. One of the key countries is undoubtedly the US given its influence here in terms of investment. This week some Members of the Oireachtas have refused to attend celebrations at the US Embassy in the Phoenix Park because of the actions of the US President. His actions involving the imprisonment of people in meshed cages on the border would not be seen in "Game of Thrones". I think this man is trying to style himself on Ramsay Bolton, such is the cruelty of the actions he is overseeing

I ask the Secretary General to outline the impact of these globally viewed actions on relations between us and US representatives in the Phoenix Park. I am conscious of the fine line, given the work of people like Martin Shanahan and the investment he speaks of. Does that play a role in restricting the Department's response both here and in our embassy in the US when there might be an intention to want to go harder? It is an extremely important issue this week. That Members of these Houses are refusing invitations from the US Embassy is a very serious matter from a diplomatic point of view and I would like to hear the Secretary General's

thoughts on that.

Mr. Niall Burgess: I would distinguish it from the political response we would make to actions of the US Administration with which we do not agree. There is an open and at times robust discussion on many issues, including global and regional. That is a part of the relationship and it has been a part of the relationship for quite some time now. Ireland-US relations are probably unmatched in their richness and complexity outside the European Union. Martin Shanahan was reflecting one aspect of those relations, which are incredibly important to us but are actually very important to the US as well. Close to 100,000 US workers are employed by Irish investors in the US.

Chairman: Could you say that again?

Mr. Niall Burgess: Close to 100,000 US workers are employed by Irish companies in the US.

Chairman: It is important to dwell on that for a few seconds. Everyone talks about investment into Ireland by multinationals. Mr. Burgess is saying that in reality, there are probably as many people employed by Irish multinationals in foreign countries as there are employed by foreign multinationals in Ireland.

Mr. Niall Burgess: Not quite as many but the gap is not significant. Therefore there is a reciprocity in this relationship that is very important. There is a people-to-people dimension to this relationship that is very important as well. We have vibrant emigrant communities in the US. We have a vibrant and caring diaspora in the US that has been incredibly important to us and remains so in terms of our own peace process. We have a very rich cultural relationship as well. All of that needs to be borne in mind when we talk about these issues.

Deputy Shane Cassells: That richness and complexity is borne out of shared values and cultures, espoused by former Presidents, but they certainly could not be reflected in the values or cultures of the present incumbent. I do not expect Mr. Burgess to comment politically but I am asking if, from a diplomatic point of view, those actions which are not shared by this country place a strain on those relations.

Mr. Niall Burgess: We can see the impact of some actions on the ground. We were talking earlier, for example, about the situation in Palestine; in the West Bank and in Gaza. The US withdrawal of funding for UNRWA is having a significant impact on the ground. In respect of the US withdrawal from the United Nations Population Fund, UNFPA, an organisation we work with closely which deals with issues of gender and equality that we care about deeply, we can see the impact of that on the ground as well. There is a shift in the development and humanitarian landscape and that is one example.

Deputy Shane Cassells: Turning quickly to another of our embassies, that in the Holy See, have resources been added there to the detail of the ambassador, Ms Madigan, since its reopening? Financially, was it the drain on resources it was made out to be at the time of the closure?

Mr. Niall Burgess: The Embassy to the Holy See is a single diplomat mission. It is one of around ten single diplomat missions.

Chairman: Could Mr. Burgess explain that for those watching who might not understand that?

Mr. Niall Burgess: A single diplomat mission has one assigned officer from the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade working with local staff. In the case of the Embassy to the Holy See, I think we have two local staff and a small chancery very close to the Vatican. That mission has done an extraordinarily good job on limited resources in a very limited period. It is an example of what we can do with modest resources. The Global Ireland document refers to looking again at this model. If there is a single assigned diplomat, in respect of sickness or annual leave there are duty of care considerations for us as a Department. That would give us concern about the model and the Global Ireland document does refer to progressively phasing it out and increasing the resources we have in very small embassies.

On the cost cutting, that was done on financial grounds. That is my understanding within the Department and I have never seen any suggestion or evidence to the contrary.

Deputy Shane Cassells: I am asking whether, since its reopening, it has proven to have been a drain on resources or otherwise.

Mr. Niall Burgess: Has it been a drain on resources since it was opened? No. It has produced a value disproportionate to the cost. I would say that of most of our small missions.

Deputy Shane Cassells: That is an important point. The Secretary General has acknowledged that it adds a value disproportionate to its cost. Would there be work between our ambassador there and the Vatican in respect of the visit of the Holy Father to this country in August of this year?

Mr. Niall Burgess: Yes. It has been central in the planning of that visit.

Deputy Shane Cassells: In respect of the passports, it was outlined to Deputy Farrell that three machines are working and how the difficulties are not at a technical, physical level but in terms of the checks and so forth. Mr. Burgess touched on the strategy in terms of communication going back to the earlier part of the year and focusing at a local level and on local media. What lessons have been learned from that in looking towards rolling it out more broadly? What worked well and did not work well?

At a national level, a few weeks ago the Department got a whole Joe Duffy show to itself. One knows one has made it when one gets a whole Joe Duffy show. Communications happen on two fronts. They happen on a macro level whereby the Department wants to get its message out to advise people as to the best channels to obtain the documents they need. The biggest thing we would find as public representatives is the frustration people are feeling with the communications at a micro level. Could Mr. Burgess touch on the communications strategy and on what has worked well on a micro level? I appreciate that the Department cannot deal with every single telephone call that comes through but it is a frustration for people.

Mr. Niall Burgess: I will ask Ms Penollar to answer that because she designed the system and has been implementing it since the start of the year.

Ms Fiona Penollar: The lesson learning is an ongoing process that is so important to us in the communications strategy and everything else we do in the passport service. On the micro level, there are a couple of points to touch on. To put it in context, I will take the figures from last week. We had personal contact with roughly 9,200 people in that one week.

Deputy Shane Cassells: Can Ms Penollar categorise those contacts in terms of emails, phone calls, person to person contact and so on?

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Ms Fiona Penollar: I will talk from the top of my head but am fairly confident that I am in the right ball park. It was about 2,300 people on the phone, about 1,500 people on web chat, about 3,500 on email and the remainder are personal walk-ins dealt with at the counters in Dublin and Cork. I am not including appointments. That is for lodging of applications. That is separate.

Deputy Alan Farrell: How many contacts were from Members of the Oireachtas?

Ms Fiona Penollar: We get approximately 400 representations a week.

Chairman: A week?

Ms Fiona Penollar: Yes.

Chairman: What does that mean?

Ms Fiona Penollar: That it is very important.

Chairman: In fairness to us, none of us was elected to hurry up passports and our offices-----

Mr. Niall Burgess: It tells us that right now, we need you.

Ms Fiona Penollar: That is exactly it. As the Secretary General said earlier-----

Chairman: We will help you this year once you sort it out for next year. That is all I can say.

Mr. Niall Burgess: On the communication front, from the moment we realised that the communications were overwhelming our resources, we have taken resources from across the Department to deal with this in three successive phases. There are people from divisions right across the Department - from Mr. de Búrca's division in Irish Aid, Mr. Gormley's in corporate services, and Ms Cullinane's in strategy and performance - who are volunteering, working with the Passport Office to help them on communications, particularly on web chat. We have taken resources from elsewhere to work the phones and we have resources now helping us to deal with the passport backlog as well. This is a collective, corporate effort across the Department.

Deputy Catherine Murphy: It is also a collective, corporate effort in respect of our offices. It is taking time that it should not be taking.

Chairman: I think the witnesses are getting the point. We will go back to Deputy Cassells.

Deputy Shane Cassells: At the micro level, in terms of resolving and working through people's queries, is it simply a case of acknowledgement or is it more substantive in respect of the communication that is actually happening? That is the biggest issue. It is one thing acknowledging a representation, phone call or email. How is it panning out in terms of actually following that through to an end result?

Ms Fiona Penollar: Whether in the representations or communication with people, very often they want reassurance. We have the tracker system, with which I am sure many members are familiar. Over 60% of our conversations with people are to the effect that they saw something on the tracker and they are asking whether it is true. It is important to give that reassurance. If we are aware of someone who is travelling on a date who is in any way affected by the delays, we ensure that those people are moved along. We look at between approximately 200 and 400 people a day with whom we are having such contacts. That is because we are in the

peak of the peak at present. We have ridden the crest of the wave and are now coming down. If we were having this conversation in four weeks' time, it would be very different with regard to volumes etc. It is important that we take on board those lessons and that in future, we put measures in place to ensure that we can improve our communications constantly. Web chat has been a major development for us this year and has really changed how we are able to interact with people. In a web chat scenario, one operator can have conversations with six or seven people at a time, which is very different from phones and is a much better situation. As the Secretary General said, we have, in the past number of weeks, increased our resources there. We have moved from perhaps a relatively low base but have tripled our web chat in the last four weeks, and we continue to do that, because that is a lesson learned in respect of where we want to go.

With regard to moving from local to national media, a reason we have focused on local media is because it gives more intimacy. A challenge we have when communicating about passports, which I am sure members have come across many times, is that people only apply once every ten years. If they are in between that ten-year cycle, to be frank, the message does not really resonate with them because they are not in that position. That is the huge challenge. Perhaps when they go to the bedside locker and realise that the passport that they were convinced was in the safest place ever is not there, it is not immediately clear to them what that message was. The focus on local media is to bring it into that background noise so that they will recall it. We have found that has worked this year. We will only increase it and make it work better for us as we go forward.

Deputy Shane Cassells: I have a final question. With regard to elections, there has been much talk of extending the franchise to Irish citizens abroad. I sit on the Seanad electoral reform group myself. That has been spoken about with regard to elections too. Many other countries use their embassies abroad to facilitate that with elections. What opinion do the witnesses have about replicating that? Would we be equipped to do that, both from a cost and a practicality point of view?

Mr. Niall Burgess: I would have real doubts about the practicality of it.

Deputy Shane Cassells: Is that because of the number of citizens abroad or that we do not have enough of a presence in certain areas? What practicality issues would there be?

Mr. Niall Burgess: It is a number of things. It is the way our embassies and missions are set up. Some are very small, modest offices that do not lend themselves to being polling booths. It is related to our spread. We are not where even some of the classic Irish communities have been. We are only opening now in New Zealand, where there is a very large emigrant Irish community. Newer, recent Irish communities are much more dispersed than the older Irish communities. In Australia, we have a large Irish community in Perth and in Melbourne. They will not come to Canberra or to Sydney to vote. We have also looked at how other systems operate. I will ask Ms Caitríona Ingoldsby from our Irish Abroad unit to talk about this. We have been looking at this closely to see how it might be operated.

Ms Caitríona Ingoldsby: The options paper that we published with the Department of Housing, Planning and Local Government last year addresses some of these issues and the practical and legal questions relating to extending the vote to our citizens abroad. That options paper currently identifies postal voting as the preferred option for a number of reasons that the Secretary General has outlined. E-voting is a possible future solution but according to colleagues from the Department of Housing, Planning and Local Government, it is not universally

accepted as secure. Postal voting is the preferred solution at present. Because our citizens are so displaced and our representational footprint is small compared with the number of citizens we have abroad with, for example, Perth being a five-hour flight from Canberra or Sydney, would we expect our citizens in Perth to take a five-hour flight to cast a vote when casting one by postal vote might be easier?

Deputy Shane Cassells: I thank the Department for that response. I raised the issue of on-line voting with the Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government yesterday, stressing that point. We have seen it in smaller nations which have increased their franchise, even in domestic parliamentary elections. There is a big distinction between electronic voting and online voting. Online voting allows one to capture that. I think it would allow our citizens abroad to participate in the democratic process.

Deputy Alan Farrell: I compliment Deputy Cassells on raising the issue of what I would call an embassy stunt. I do not want to insult anybody but I think it is. Our relationship with the United States transcends one individual and it is far more important for us to maintain relations with the United States rather than having certain difficulties with policies initiated by the US Administration. That is my point of view, not that I am going anyway. A stunt is a stunt. Does the Department have a PR firm to advise it on communication strategies?

Mr. Niall Burgess: No.

Deputy Alan Farrell: The Department does not. Is it in-house, then?

Mr. Niall Burgess: Yes.

Deputy Alan Farrell: They are very effective.

Mr. Niall Burgess: On the Irish Aid side-----

Mr. Ruairí de Búrca: On the Irish Aid side, we have PR contracts out for two particular things. One is Africa Day, which is a very big thing. That is contracted out. The second is the Simon Cumbers Media Fund, which is effectively a scholarship for journalists to propose articles on development themes, of which a variety are awarded on an annual basis.

Deputy Shane Cassells: Sorry to cut across Deputy Farrell. The late Simon Cumbers was from Navan and I know his parents very well. I pay tribute to that fund and the journalistic work.

Deputy Alan Farrell: I think, from a PR perspective, the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade is one of the better Departments, from what I see as a social media user and somebody who reads three newspapers a day. I see the work of the Department highlighted on a regular basis. It is a compliment, not that there is anything wrong with having a firm in place in the first place but it was a question nonetheless. I have to bring it back to the number of interactions the Department has about passports and the fact that 400 representations are made by Members of the Oireachtas. I would love to know it on a county breakdown but do not tell me because I probably should not know.

Chairman: Would there be a geographical breakdown? One would presume those closest to Dublin-----

Deputy Alan Farrell: I do not think we should. The reason I do not want to know is because I want to make the point that, with the turnaround times the Department has, with all

the information there, with the web chat, which is a fantastic initiative, and all those steps, it is unfortunate that Members of the Oireachtas, collectively, have to be involved in the process. I acknowledge that we aid the process and that there are always individuals who might need a bit of extra help, which is what we are here for. The fact that it is 400 a week is about 375 too many. I might get a dozen or two dozen in the run-up to the summer and then sporadically across the rest of the year. Is it an online accessibility issue, a regional issue or a rural issue? Forgive me, I cannot see Fiona's full name. Is it Penolly?

Ms Fiona Penollar: Penollar.

Deputy Alan Farrell: Ms Penollar mentioned background noise in terms of what the Department is trying to achieve to get the message out and engage with local media and newspapers. Deputy Cassells will be delighted to hear that given his former profession. It is vital that this is done. It is not simply that it would reduce what we have to do – I do not have a problem doing the work – but at the end of the day the Department is providing the service and we might aid the service.

One important point is that I have to do everything on email. I have no wish to be taking up the time of personnel in the Passport Office but I would like to be able to telephone them on a dedicated Oireachtas line, as is provided in various other Departments. That is a necessity. Maybe it should have limited opening hours but I believe it would aid the process. If I sent an email about Austin Gormley's passport application, I might get a response. I would get an acknowledgement but I might not get a response until close of business the following day. That is not really a big issue, but we have all highlighted cases where it is critical and crucial that we can get in contact. Deputy Murphy mentioned the person who missed the wedding. I have no wish to be in a queue, frankly. I imagine the officials understand that my office deals with a great many issues. That is something to bear in mind. If the webchat can be promoted as a mechanism available to the public, it would be fantastic.

I am keen to go back to the total cost of embassies. It would be helpful for us to be provided with the document that the Chairman has already requested, that is to say, a document with a breakdown of rent versus buy. We have discussed the matter previously, especially in the crash period between 2011 and 2013, when we were closing embassies among other steps. The cost of the embassy in Japan was highlighted because it was the most expensive real estate in the world. Anyway, there is a point at which the State must make a decision on whether it is far better to buy than rent when we have escalating costs and fluctuations in the property market. We could even use the analogy of the Irish property market - it is a good example. If a person bought property in 2008 he is lumbered with it for life, whereas if he bought in 2012 he would have paid less than half the price or even less again depending on the property. One suggested policy direction for the Department to take, in consultation with the Minister, is to upscale the number of purchases that we should pursue rather than a policy of rental. This is especially relevant in the context of the six new embassies – which are very welcome – that are to be opened next year. Some of these are additional facilities in countries where we already have a base. However, in other cases there is no base. The officials referenced Ukraine, which is strategic for us. Deputy Cassells and I work on the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe. The Russia-Ukraine relationship is important and so on. I spotted the Ukrainian ambassador wandering around the halls of Leinster House first thing this morning. The constant interaction with those two countries is important. The price of property in Kiev is probably only a drop in the ocean compared to Tokyo but the idea should be pursued as far as possible. The final point I had intended making has been covered.

Chairman: Mr. Burgess, do you wish to respond? Deputy Connolly will be next.

Mr. Niall Burgess: Deputy Farrell asked about property. I figure it is always going to be a mixed portfolio and it will look a little different depending on where we are. In Cairo, for example, where we have concerns around security and the safety of our staff at the embassy, we are co-located with the Dutch. We take tremendous benefits from that, not only the natural benefits from working closely with another EU partner but from some of the systems the Dutch bring because they have a foreign Ministry of scale. One of the things that we look at as we open more embassies is the option of co-location.

It makes absolute sense in the areas where we have major strategic interests and where the perspective is for rents to continue increasing. Japan is always going to be an important relationship and platform for Ireland. That is where we begin in the short term. Anyway, I completely agree: more often than not when we consider the arguments for purchase the long-term benefits are significant and weight in its favour.

There are some issues around accommodation. Many of our embassies are very small and families have different needs. When I was in New York I had my two children with me. We were a family. I was succeeded by an officer who did not have children. We were in accommodation that was rented as standard by the Department. Sometimes the needs of the individual officer vary as well and in smaller locations it may make sense to look at short-term rentals. The arguments for purchase in the longer-term generally stack up – I agree with that.

Deputy Catherine Connolly: I welcome that and I realise it is complex but we should not go down the road of renting without thinking. Only recently we had the president of a university before the committee. He was in accommodation for €3,000 per month on taxpayers' money. That is simply an example. Whether that is good value for money is a matter for us to examine. Anyway, that mentality has persisted in recent years. That is why I made my comments.

I have some specific questions on fraud and I will come back to justice and aid in a moment. Page 20, dealing with Vote 28, refers to fraud and suspected fraud. What is the update on that note? It states that the Department initiated an investigation that was at an early stage. The note dates from 2016 but we are in 2018 now. Has that been completed? Where are we on that?

Mr. Niall Burgess: No, that investigation is still under way. It is a police investigation at the moment. It is an incident that we are taking very seriously. I visited the mission myself with our chief financial officer. It is still ongoing.

Deputy Catherine Connolly: Is there anything else Mr. Burgess can say about it? What quantity of money is involved?

Mr. Niall Burgess: I will try to get the figure. The figure is €62,000.

Deputy Catherine Connolly: We will leave the Garda or whatever the relevant police force is to that job, but the matter of governance is relevant for the Department. Did the Department discover this? What has the Department learned from it? Were governance procedures working to enable the Department to discover it?

Mr. Niall Burgess: Yes, we discovered it as a result of an internal audit.

Deputy Catherine Connolly: I am unsure where to direct a question on emergency consular assistance. Who deals with distressed citizens abroad and helping people in emergencies

and so on?

Ms Caitríona Ingoldsby: It does not come under the Irish Abroad unit but we are happy to discuss it.

Deputy Catherine Connolly: The figure has gone up. Obviously, the number of people seeking emergency assistance has gone up. Is that correct?

Mr. Niall Burgess: Yes.

Deputy Catherine Connolly: Can Mr. Burgess put a little context on that, please?

Mr. Niall Burgess: It is climbing steadily. Several factors are behind it, but they are all longer-term factors that we have to take account of.

Deputy Catherine Connolly: Does Mr. Burgess have a figure for the number of people who sought emergency consular assistance last year?

Mr. Niall Burgess: I will get that figure for the Deputy. Anyway, Irish people are travelling at a younger age than before. We are spending a good deal of time talking in schools at the moment about consular care. We ask all our recruits to go out to schools to talk to transition year students about how to take care of themselves. Irish people are travelling at an older age as well. They are vulnerable to falling ill and having health problems while they are abroad. Irish people are travelling further afield in south-east Asia, further from our embassy network where consular complex cases can arise which can consume a great deal of time and attention. The world is a more dangerous place in many respects as well, not just in the areas-----

Deputy Catherine Connolly: We might come back to the reasons that is.

Mr. Niall Burgess: -----where one would think it is dangerous. In the last few years, Irish citizens have been killed in a terrorist attack in Tunisia. Citizens have been injured in several terrorist attacks and citizens were involved in terrorist incidents in the European Union. The scale and complexity of this aspect of our work is growing rapidly. The numbers are increasing.

The numbers are increasing also because we are becoming aware of more cases. We are recording more cases, and as we go out and get the message out, people are coming to our embassies. In terms of our online services, we have an online app, which we encourage people travelling abroad to download onto their phones, which gives them travel advice for the countries they are going to.

Deputy Catherine Connolly: What type of figures are we looking at?

Mr. Niall Burgess: On the app itself or on the consular cases?

Deputy Catherine Connolly: Those seeking emergency assistance.

Mr. Niall Burgess: In 2016, we assisted 2,762 Irish citizens. That compares with 1,676 in 2014. Between those two years, there was an increase of 65%. I will get the Deputy the figure for this year, which has gone up significantly on that as well.

Deputy Catherine Connolly: Okay, we will get them. In relation to those, there is a range of reasons, I would imagine, from losing a passport to unfortunately being caught in a terrorist attack. How does the Department operate recovery of expenses or does it? Does the Department give this service free of charge?

Mr. Niall Burgess: We recover costs.

Deputy Catherine Connolly: What model has the Department for recovering the costs, for instance, in the simple example of losing one's passport? Does the Department charge that person for the cost? How does it work with somebody who is injured?

Mr. Niall Burgess: We do charge.

Ms Fiona Penollar: If we issue an emergency travel document, there is a charge for that. Depending on whether it is out of hours, there is a charge for that. There are set fees.

Deputy Catherine Connolly: Is there a set list?

Mr. Niall Burgess: Yes. There are also facilities for families who cannot afford the repatriation of remains as well. We do work with a trust.

Chairman: A charitable trust?

Mr. Niall Burgess: That is right, yes. It helps families with the costs.

Chairman: Mr. Burgess might give its name.

Mr. Niall Burgess: It is the Kevin Bell Repatriation Trust.

Chairman: It is just so that people will be aware. For those watching, Mr. Burgess might give the name of that travel app he mentioned. He mentioned there is an app for people travelling abroad. Is there a name on that travel app?

Mr. Niall Burgess: We call it the travel app, travel advice.

Ms Fiona Penollar: TravelWise.

Mr. Niall Burgess: TravelWise.

Chairman: Those viewing will get that. I thank Mr. Burgess.

Deputy Catherine Connolly: I have one final practical question on fraud. The Department does not publish details. I think it is in the process of changing that policy.

Mr. Niall Burgess: Yes. We will publish all reported fraud cases in our annual report, which we are preparing at the moment for 2017.

Deputy Catherine Connolly: Will that be the first time?

Mr. Niall Burgess: Yes.

Deputy Catherine Connolly: Will that be for the 2017 accounts?

Mr. Niall Burgess: Yes.

Deputy Catherine Connolly: I have a number of questions in relation to the EU. I am reading an Orwellian document here on the long-term European Defence Fund and the European Defence Agency and money going to that from Ireland. Is there any way that is going through the Department in the form of aid?

Mr. Niall Burgess: No.

Deputy Catherine Connolly: Is there a suggestion that the cost of our direct provision would form part of the aid programme or would go in under that figure?

Mr. Ruairí de Búrca: Basically, what we can count as overseas development aid, in other words, what we can use Vote 27 for because it is Vote linked, is according to a set of criteria defined by the OECD.

Deputy Catherine Connolly: Does that include direct provision?

Mr. Ruairí de Búrca: That allows for what they call “in-donor refugee costs”.

Deputy Catherine Connolly: “In-donor”, is it?

Mr. Ruairí de Búrca: It is a technical term. What that means, in effect, is the first year’s costs of somebody who applies for refugee status in any country, including here in Ireland, can be counted against overseas development aid - not indefinite, but the first year’s costs. Up to now, we have not counted that.

Deputy Catherine Connolly: The Department has not counted it.

Mr. Ruairí de Búrca: We have not-----

Deputy Catherine Connolly: Good. But it is open to.

Mr. Ruairí de Búrca: -----but we could.

Deputy Catherine Connolly: There are two direct provision centres in Galway, for example. Could some of the cost of running them be included in the ODA budget?

Mr. Ruairí de Búrca: It would not be included in our budget but it could be counted potentially. Elements of it could potentially be counted against the overall national contribution to ODA.

Deputy Catherine Connolly: Potentially. It has not been done yet.

Mr. Niall Burgess: It would be a question of how one describes it as opposed to how one funds it.

Deputy Catherine Connolly: I note the language. We will hear some more language later today. I refer to the European defence agencies and language being changed to talk about peace enforcement and all sorts. I will not go there. Luckily, we are running out of time.

In terms of aid, I wish we had more time. Mr. Burgess has certainly given me food for thought and I thank him for all the documents. We are looking at Syria, Burma and Yemen. We have arrangements with eight or nine partner countries. In the case of the other countries, is it *ad hoc* as crises arise?

Mr. Seamus McCarthy: There are a number of countries that are assisted on a programme basis, but are not key programme countries, and then there is humanitarian assistance expenditure as well which may be directed towards specific problems related to specific situations.

Deputy Catherine Connolly: I am looking at the change. It now will be 2030 before we hopefully reach what we promised the UN in 1970. It will take 60 years to reach the target that has been changed on I do not know how many occasions and we see so much money going

into defence. I have other words for that. Mr. Burgess probably cannot comment because it is policy. The Department is doing great work, albeit with some questions around various issues that have been dealt with. We are struggling to come up to that percentage of 0.7% of GDP yet we have any amount of money for defence projects. We will hear from the President of the European Commission later today.

Mr. Niall Burgess: If I could make a couple of points-----

Deputy Catherine Connolly: Yes.

Mr. Niall Burgess: -----the first is that there is not a spectrum which goes from a partner country to *ad hoc* arrangements. We have detailed sustained activities in other countries which are not *ad hoc* and we are increasingly trying to take a regional view of our programming. We have a country programme in Ethiopia, for example, and we have a programme in Uganda. Uganda is receiving a lot of refugees from South Sudan. Ethiopia is in a fragile region. We are increasingly trying to take a look at how our programming has a wider regional impact, and it does do so. It is misleading and artificial to draw a line between development programmes and humanitarian assistance and the profound insecurity that one finds in these regions as well. The Irish Defence Forces, for example, have assisted with training in Somalia, which is one of the most insecure parts of the world. We have assisted as well in Chad, in Mali and in the Congo and the attempts to provide human security for citizens in these profoundly unstable areas has to be seen also as contributing to the conditions which allow for sustainable development in those countries too.

Deputy Catherine Connolly: I understand the point Mr. Burgess makes but there are 65 million people displaced. At some stage, there needs to be a recognition at Government level that we cannot go on without looking at what is causing this in the first place and our role and the EU's role in that in terms of policy. We have policies that are leading to the lack of stability yet we are struggling to bring a little assistance and aid.

Mr. Niall Burgess: I think the Deputy is talking about conflict, but the kind of activities I am talking about are peace building and peace reconstruction activities. We see the consequences. The instability in many of the regions where we work is impeding our development programme.

Deputy Catherine Connolly: It may well be but the decision has to be looked at. What is causing the conflict in the first place and what is leading to 65 million refugees? We must look at that on a policy level and begin to question. This aid is fantastic but it is tiny and it is trying to make up for what we are doing wrong in the first place.

Mr. Ruairí de Búrca: Questions around migration are very important right now. We are involved in the Global Compact for Migration, which is an effort to address some of the underlying issues. As we develop the new White Paper, it is clearly one of the questions of the age. We try with our development co-operation programming to address some of the root causes which are around poverty and development questions to a large extent. In addressing poverty and development issues in Africa or elsewhere, we must be careful not to make our aid an instrumentalised issue. It is not just about targeting migration. It has to be about the defined needs of the populations we work with. There is a delicate balance that we will have to work out. That is where having a presence on the ground through embassies is very important. It helps us to fine tune the responses to what locals need.

Deputy Catherine Murphy: When I was in Tanzania, I listened carefully to different issues. It was like being at home in Ireland. Tanzania has the fastest economy in east Africa. We were asked to look at gender violence, which we are very familiar with here. We have huge difficulties with it. There were many other issues, including lack of infrastructure, just like here. What struck me was the last presentation from the World Bank. I think it was the World Bank.

Mr. Ruairí de Búrca: It was the Africa trade presentation. I know the man the Deputy means.

Deputy Catherine Connolly: There was a separate woman anyway. There was an absence of climate change consideration. It was not mentioned. Developed countries are huge contributors to climate change and terrible suffering yet it did not feature in that high-level presentation. We were reassured subsequently that it does feature, but I did not see it. I have run out of time but it is a major challenge. Language is being used all of the time to the effect that we are helping, but we are in fact causing the problems by and large. When I say “we”, I mean Ireland and other developed countries.

Mr. Niall Burgess: To fulfil one commitment, I come back to the committee on consular numbers. We have dealt with approximately 900 consular cases to the end of May. That is before the consular season has really started, which is the summer season. That tells me the figures will be up again this year.

Deputy Alan Farrell: I echo the recollection of Deputy Connolly. I cannot remember the gentleman’s surname. I think his forename was John and he was an impressive person. However, there was a noticeable absence of any overview on climate change. Mr. de Búrca may be able to confirm that our food provision and other programmes have an environmental aspect which recognises that there may be by-products that might, for example, damage a water table, and that things could be done in another way. Mr. de Búrca is nodding, which I will take as a “Yes”. I do not want to delay proceedings.

The only thing we have not touched on at all was suspected fraud, or rather suspected irregularities, within the Department, which is referred to in the Comptroller and Auditor General’s report. An investigation into the nature and scale of this was reported to be at an early stage. These accounts are from 2016. Can we have more information on that?

Mr. Seamus McCarthy: Deputy Connolly has already asked about that one.

Deputy Alan Farrell: Forgive me. I stepped out for a little while.

Mr. Seamus McCarthy: It was the item at the end of Vote 28.

Deputy Alan Farrell: Note 6.3. I apologise. I must have missed Deputy Connolly’s question.

Mr. Seamus McCarthy: We will be following up on that with the Department in the context of the 2017 audit.

Deputy Alan Farrell: Does Mr. Burgess want to offer anything on that point?

Mr. Niall Burgess: No, except to say that a lot of issues get flagged as suspected fraud where that gets ruled out fairly quickly afterwards.

Deputy Alan Farrell: I appreciate that. I do not wish to duplicate Deputy Connolly’s

contribution.

Deputy Catherine Murphy: I noted that €2 million in the Vote under foreign aid was unspent and returned to the Exchequer. I understand that may happen where something that is intended to be done does not happen. Was there a specific reason for the return of that €2 million?

We hear repeatedly about commitments made internationally when humanitarian crises take place. Those commitments are not always honoured. Is there any profile of those commitments being made by Ireland but not honoured and, if so, what are they?

Mr. Niall Burgess: When we make a commitment, it is usually the case that we pay rapidly and upfront. Even regarding our core contribution to the UN, we are marked by that body as one of the member states which pays up within weeks when it falls due.

Mr. Ruairí de Búrca: People sometimes overpledge, but that is not our tradition. Our tradition is that if we pledge money, we pay it. Sometimes, we pledge over a multiannual period and we keep track of that in the Department. If we pledge €20 million over three years, we ensure that we have paid it out by the end of the third year. By and large, we have done that. The only time I am aware of when we undershot was in or about 2010 when, for reasons to do with the economy here, there were big budget cuts. In that instance, we tried to do it in a way which was agreed and notified to allow partners to plan.

Deputy Catherine Murphy: When the amount in aid is calculated internationally, is the amount paid what is calculated rather than the amount that is pledged?

Mr. Ruairí de Búrca: That is true. It is calculated in arrears. We are compiling our 2017 figures now and will report them to the OECD which will verify that what we spent meets the ODA criteria. That will allow us to report in a way which is comparable to other countries.

Deputy Catherine Murphy: Was there a specific reason the €2 million was unspent?

Mr. Niall Burgess: I am squirrelling into the figures but I do not see an answer immediately. We may need to come back to the Deputy on that.

Mr. Seamus McCarthy: The Deputy raised an issue around the surrender. There is in Vote 27 a special provision which is not in use in other Votes whereby there is a buffer in relation to bilateral and other co-operation grant funding. If it is not all used, it does not get surrendered. That is a special concession from the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform.

Mr. Ruairí de Búrca: We have many hundreds of grants a year. What one thinks what will spend on 1 January is not necessarily what one's outturn is. We try to balance it and reprofile during the year, but there is always a margin on foot of due diligence, prudence or because something is finished. As such, the €2 million is probably made up of a number of different transactions which undercut it.

Deputy Catherine Murphy: The Department is going to come back to us on that anyway. We are talking about expanding the number of missions overseas. The Department has described a scenario in which there can be a change in the profile of people taking over in terms of family situation and so on. While the buildings themselves are one thing, the fit-out, creature comforts and the transport of possessions are another matter. Is there a provision for those costs or a standard amount provided? How does it work?

Mr. Niall Burgess: It depends on the accommodation. I will give an example from my

own experience. I moved into accommodation that was provided when I was in New York. It was furnished to representational standard, but we lived in a small space at the back. We had three bedrooms, a small living room and a kitchen. That was our family space and we brought our own furniture to accommodate it. In an embassy, if one has a representational function, the furnishings are provided as part of the official set-up of the building. Officers on a short-term assignment have the option of renting a furnished apartment or bringing some of their own furniture. Most want to bring some of their own immediate surroundings to provide a sense of home.

Deputy Catherine Murphy: My final question relates to the election observer roster. Is it an open process or is it something that is handled within the Department? How is it managed?

Mr. Niall Burgess: As it is being managed by Mr. de Búrca, I will ask him to say a word on it.

Chairman: He might send a detailed note on the process because it is something in which people are often interested.

Mr. Ruairí de Búrca: Sure. As we are at the end of the lifetime of the current roster, in the next two weeks a new call for applications will be made. Our intention is to try to get approximately 200 people on the roster. It will be a competitive interview process. There will be a full note on it on our website with the call for applications. We will send a copy to the committee. Language is one criterion because in some of the countries people do not speak English. We want to get good people in order that the process will be competitive. I imagine that not everybody who will apply will meet the threshold, but we hope to get 200 good people on the roster. The number of elections held per year varies, but, on average, there are around 20 electoral missions a year, either EU or OSCE missions. During the lifetime of the register we try to give everybody an opportunity, but we have to take account of language and other criteria which the organising bodies impose on us.

Deputy Catherine Murphy: Does the Department publish the grants that have been paid or the list of people involved? Where is the information on the current roster that is coming to an end kept?

Mr. Ruairí de Búrca: We have not published it *per se*, but we have given details in responses to parliamentary questions. I am sure we can give a degree of detail, but there might be some data protection issues regarding individual identities. We can put it in a letter to the committee.

Deputy Catherine Murphy: Sure.

Deputy Catherine Connolly: Are the criteria still the same, namely, language, experience and two others? The existing panel is coming to an end. Why has there been a delay in putting a new panel together? I understand the Department is extending the current roster to the end of the year. If that is the case, why was a new panel not picked before now? Who carries out the assessment process for the new roster?

Mr. Ruairí de Búrca: The panel was extended because we wanted to double check that our systems were robust. In addition, there were staffing issues and we have had some challenges in moving the work along. The assessment will be made on the basis of a competitive interview, with one person from my division, somebody from HR and an independent chairperson. The marking system will be transparent. The details will be included in the document. I hope we will turn it around reasonably quickly.

Deputy Catherine Connolly: It is a wonderful scheme and people are interested in being involved. Questions were raised in the past that have been addressed. I have looked at the Official Report of previous meetings of the Committee of Public Accounts. It helps from a governance point of view to set a clear time limit and stick to it. When I hear a reference to staffing issues, my ears prick and I ask what is happening, why the process has not taken place within the stated time and where are we going in order that people can have trust in the system. Why was the staffing issue not sorted out?

Chairman: Will the Department also explain why there was a delay? How many passports have been issued to Irish citizens? Most people have a passport at this stage.

Ms Fiona Penollar: I do not have the actual number of live passports, but there are approximately 7.5 million passport holders. They might not all necessarily be valid.

Chairman: Will the Department send us details of the current number of passports? Will the information be broken down into categories such as adults, males, females and minors, for example? We would like to get the figures because we are told Ireland has one of the highest percentages of passport holders in the world.

What was the biggest number of passports issued on one day? It must be in the thousands. How many passports are issued on a busy day?

Ms Fiona Penollar: As I happened to see the statistics yesterday, off the top of my head, it was about 5,500.

Chairman: Was that the total number of passports issued yesterday?

Ms Fiona Penollar: Yes, actual physical books.

Chairman: Yes, that is exactly the information I want to receive. Is that figure near the high end? Will Ms Penollar send us a figure?

Ms Fiona Penollar: Yes, I can send the information. No, it is not the most we have issued.

Chairman: We want people to know the scale of the work done by the Passport Office. I am sure the peak number is even higher.

Ms Fiona Penollar: Yes, it could be up to 10,000.

Chairman: I suspected that could be the case.

Mr. Niall Burgess: It is concentrated in specific months of the year.

Chairman: I am sure there are days on which a very small number of passports is issued. The Passport Office should give us the highest figures in order that people will be able to see how busy an operation it is and the number of passports issued as a proportion of the population.

We do not have time to address it now as we must go to the Chamber, but can we receive a note on the effect of Brexit? We received information from the Passport Office on the figures for the Northern Ireland Passport Express office and another figure for renewals in Northern Ireland, which was a small percentage of the overall number. We have heard about Brexit being the reason for the increase.

Mr. Niall Burgess: It is overstated.

Chairman: As I said this morning on Newstalk. I think Brexit has been overstated as a reason. It was said there had been a 25% increase in the number of passports issued owing to Brexit, but that might be going from a very small to a slightly bigger figure.

Mr. Niall Burgess: Yes.

Chairman: We want figures to show the impact of Brexit.

One other point is that the Passport Office could publish information on its website on the six-month rule which is catching a lot of people. Currently, the reference on the website is to “some countries”, which does not help. A list must be provided. Some people think it can include EU countries. The Passport Office knows that that is not the case, but the public does not know.

Ms Fiona Penollar: Yes.

Chairman: The Passport Office must make the note a little clearer and more explicit because some people panic unnecessarily when they see the reference to “some countries”. It is difficult to find out which countries are included. I have had to ring embassies in certain countries to find out if they are among the countries affected and it can be difficult to get through on the telephone. I am sure the witnesses understand the point I am making. They should send the committee a note, but, more importantly, they should place the information on the website.

Ms Fiona Penollar: I have one concern in that regard because the last thing I want to do is place inaccurate information on the website. The position is that countries change rules and do not necessarily inform us when they do.

Chairman: How does the travelling public know if the Passport Office does not know?

Ms Fiona Penollar: We definitely advise people to contact embassies in countries to which they are travelling.

Chairman: Can we say for definite that the six-month rule does not include EU countries?

Ms Fiona Penollar: Yes, absolutely.

Chairman: I received telephone calls from people who were travelling to Greece who thought they might be affected. I suspected that was not the case, but I could not be definitive. However, that was not enough for those who had sought the information and they wanted proof.

On Vote 27 and the Comptroller and Auditor General’s report, overseas development assistance, ODA, was approximately €725 million in the year under review. There was another €485,000 approximately in the Vote. There is also a reference to a figure of €240 million from other sources. I think it was said the figures were included in Irish Aid’s annual report. Will somebody send us a snapshot to show from where the other figure comes? Who is responsible for publishing Irish Aid’s annual report?

Mr. Niall Burgess: We are.

Chairman: Is there a special account for it or is the report a combination of information from different sources? Is the account audited?

Mr. Niall Burgess: No.

Ms Barbara Cullinane: No.

Chairman: Is the answer provided in the breakdown included in the report?

Mr. Niall Burgess: Yes.

Mr. Ruairí de Búrca: The other money is mostly accounted for by our contribution to the European Union.

Chairman: Will Mr. de Búrca send it to us as we are caught for time? It was said we had paid the United Nations on time, but are we owed any money by it? That was an issue in the case of various peacekeeping missions in the past.

Mr. Seamus McCarthy: It is more an issue for the defence Vote.

Chairman: We will write to the Department of Defence about it. I read an article at the weekend in which it was stated we were making a big bid to gain a seat on the UN Security Council and that U2 had invited every ambassador in the world to its concerts. If it secures us a vote, I am all in favour of it. Are we paying for the tickets or is it U2?

Mr. Niall Burgess: We are not paying for them.

Chairman: There is no cost to the Exchequer. The reason I ask is people saw the article and were musing on it.

I thank all of the witnesses from the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, as well as from the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform who got off lightly today. I also thank the Comptroller and Auditor General and his staff.

The witnesses withdrew.

Sitting suspended at 11.30 a.m. and resumed at 2.40 p.m.

Business of Committee

Chairman: This morning we dealt with the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade.

Are the minutes of the meeting of 14 June agreed? Agreed. Is it agreed that there is nothing arising that will not be on the agenda? Agreed.

There are three categories of correspondence. Category A relates to briefing documents and opening statements. Correspondence item 1392A is a briefing document from the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade for today's meeting. We note and publish that. It has already been discussed.

Document No. 1411A is the opening statement from the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade for today's meeting. We note and publish that. It has already been discussed.

Correspondence item 1405A from the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade provides statistical information on passports requested by the committee. We note and publish that. We had a detailed discussion on that earlier today.

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Correspondence category B is correspondence from Accounting Officers or Ministers or both and follow-up to Committee of Public Accounts meetings. A number of members are not present and others have not had an opportunity to read some of the correspondence. I have been asked to hold a number of items of correspondence over to next week.

Correspondence item 1370B from the Secretary General of the Department of Housing, Planning and Local Government, dated 11 June 2018, provides an information note requested by the committee on the funding scheme in place for local authorities to provide housing for refugees. We note and publish that. We had a detailed discussion on that earlier today.

Correspondence item 1371 is from Mr. Seán Ó Foghlú, Secretary General, Department of Education and Skills and is dated 11 June 2018. I have been asked by members to hold that over until people have an opportunity to consider it. The same applies to the next item, correspondence item 1380 from Dr. Graham Love, chief executive of the Higher Education Authority. Due to members not being present I have been asked to hold that over to the next meeting. Correspondence item 1384B also is from Dr. Graham Love of the Higher Education Authority dated 15 June 2018. I have been asked to hold that over and it will be on our list next week.

Correspondence item 1385B from Ms Dee Forbes, director general of RTÉ, dated 15 June 2018, is in response to an email received from an individual querying information provided to the committee regarding the possibility of having an RTÉ 2+1 channel. Ms Forbes clarifies that RTÉ 2+1 does not currently exist, which is something I asked. I think we will hold that over. There is a second item of correspondence. I express my exasperation. We had a detailed conversation with the Department about getting an RTÉ 2+1 channel on the Sky platform. We received a detailed reply last week which does not answer the question and does not correct the record. In the meantime, we have received a further letter from Dee Forbes of RTÉ, which again does not fully clarify the matter. They are all just talking around the system. We asked a direct question and had the debate here about putting the RTÉ 2+1 channel up on the Sky platform and we have now established that the channel does not even exist. It may get permission and then make the channel; I do not know the details of the technology. We will hold this over because we are expecting further correspondence to clarify what I thought was a simple question.

Deputy David Cullinane: That will be the Chairman's legacy.

Chairman: I will get home to watch my RTÉ 2+1 channel if I get out of here. That item is held over until the next meeting.

The next item, correspondence item 1387B from Mr. Seán Ó Foghlú, Secretary General of the Department of Education and Skills, dated 12 June 2018, is held over to the next meeting.

Correspondence item 1388B received from the Department of Housing, Planning and Local Government, dated 5 June 2018, relates to the local government funding baseline review and consultation process. We note and publish that. I encourage all members of the committee and all Members of the Houses to make a contribution to that consultation process because it exercises the minds of many public representatives.

Correspondence item 1389B is from Mr. Tadhg Daly, chief executive officer of Nursing Homes Ireland. The document is a formal agreement between the Competition and Consumer Protection Commission, CCPC, and Nursing Homes Ireland. This was provided at last week's meeting. We are just noting and publishing that.

Deputy David Cullinane: Can we scroll down to this for a second?

Chairman: It is on the screen now.

Deputy David Cullinane: In the discussion we had with that body, its representatives said that the CCPC had basically given Nursing Homes Ireland a clean bill of health. I made the point that it did not resolve the question of whether issues of price fixing were discussed by Nursing Homes Ireland but were never actioned. Because they were never actioned, no action could be taken by the CCPC. It actually states here that it can confirm-----

Chairman: Which paragraph is the Deputy on?

Deputy David Cullinane: I am on paragraph with the heading, NOW NHI AND THE CCPC HEREBY AGREE AS FOLLOWS. It states “NHI hereby confirms that NHI and, to the best of its knowledge, its members did not at any stage implement any collective actions...” Therefore we know it did not implement any, but the question was whether it was discussed.

The document continues to state: “NHI hereby undertakes...” All of the undertakings are the issues that were in the public domain that appeared in the minutes. It is quite interesting. Essentially NHI is saying it promises not to implement what it said it did not talk about. We need to note that we were stonewalled. The witness had a right not to answer questions when he was here. However, the CEO was not in a position to confirm or deny whether the word “boycott” was used. He simply said he did not use it. This document indicates there was an agreement with the CCPC that it did not action what was potentially discussed at that meeting and that it would not do so in future. It is set out in the document. It vindicates us in pursuing this. I acknowledge that there is now a written legal agreement that it will not. However, it certainly raises questions for the organisation about it putting itself in that position in the first place. It ended up having to sign such an agreement with the CCPC.

Chairman: The Deputy’s point is clear. Why is there a commitment not to discuss a certain issue if there was not a feeling it had been discussed? That is the point he is making. In any event that is now published by Nursing Homes Ireland here as a result of last week’s meeting. The point the Deputy makes speaks for itself. We note that and the Deputy’s comments are also recorded.

Deputy David Cullinane: We can finally move on and bookend that one.

Chairman: Okay.

Correspondence item 1390B is from Mr. Ray Mitchell of the HSE dated 15 June 2018. This is a briefing note requested by the committee regarding the organisational structure of the national screening service. We note and publish that. Correspondence item 1391B from Mr. Ray Mitchell of the HSE dated 15 June 2018 providing information requested by the committee on-----

Deputy David Cullinane: On that one-----

Chairman: Let me read out what it is about and then we can discuss it. It relates to a note on the lab screening data; copies of emails or other correspondence from the national director of acute hospitals in which he forwarded correspondence received on 13 July 2017 from the CEO of the University of Limerick group; and a note on the contract with the laboratories and whether there is any provision which gives recourse to the State to pursue a laboratory where

an indemnity to the patient is invoked.

Deputy David Cullinane: I do not know if a written question was sent by the clerk to the committee or the secretariat to the HSE but we had already received the laboratory data for 2013-16 when its representatives appeared before the committee. We were looking for the laboratory data from 2008-12, which we have not received.

Chairman: We have not yet received those data.

Deputy David Cullinane: The HSE sent us data we already had in answer to our question, and that is playing games. The Accounting Officer stated that the HSE would send us the data we were seeking as quickly as it could. It is a bit rich to send us data we already have in order to pretend that it was answering the question or providing us with information. We should write back to the HSE in very strong terms. We already had those data and the HSE should know that. We are seeking the data for 2008-12.

Chairman: The HSE stated that it hopes to have those data by the end of next week. Deputy Cullinane is correct that we have not yet received it.

Deputy David Cullinane: Where does the HSE state that?

Chairman: It is referenced in the response to question 2.

Deputy David Cullinane: Yes.

Chairman: The last line of the response states that the HSE expects to have the remaining information requested-----

Deputy David Cullinane: What does “remaining information” mean? When writing to the HSE we must be clear in regard to what we are seeking to avoid any misunderstanding.

Chairman: We asked for records for the period from the inception of the screening programme until 2013.

Deputy David Cullinane: Yes.

Chairman: We asked for the information relating to the period before 2013. Our request is fair and the HSE stated that we will have that information next week. We will wait until the week is up.

Deputy David Cullinane: A follow-up call should be made to ensure the HSE knows what we are seeking.

Chairman: We expect to have it in the next few days, possibly tomorrow, because the response issued last week. We will note and publish that and wait for the rest of the information.

Correspondence item 1394 is from Mr. Ray Mitchell of the HSE in regard to a matter raised at our last meeting regarding offering open access to all records to Dr Scally. What does that letter say? It is a short note. We will note and publish that.

In correspondence category C, items 1342C, 1355C (i) to (vi) and 1362C in regard to wards of court were held over from our last meeting. We will hold them over until our next meeting.

Item 1347, relating to GoSafe cameras, was held over from the last meeting. Some mem-

bers who are not present asked that it be held over as they are not here.

The next item of correspondence is 1350. It was received from an individual regarding a submission to the committee on protected disclosures in the Irish Prison Service. I was asked by members who are not present to hold that over to the next meeting.

Correspondence item 1386C is an anonymous letter from an individual who made a protected disclosure in regard to wrongdoing at a location in Limerick. It requests that the committee make inquiries with the Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection. Again, members not present have asked for that to be held over.

Correspondence items 1398C and 1399C, dated 18 June 2018, are from Deputy MacSharry and draw attention to issues in regard to the selection and operation of the election observation roster by the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade. This matter was dealt with during our engagement with the Department this morning. The Department has a panel which is expiring. The Department representatives said they hope to establish a new panel but that will not be done until the end of the year, so the current panel will remain in place until then. The Department will publish criteria in the next two weeks and invite interested members of the public to put forward their names for consideration. A new panel is about to be established. Is that of benefit? I am summarising what was said this morning when that topic was specifically discussed. We are to receive a detailed note on why the current panel was allowed to expire without this action being taken in advance. The witnesses stated that there were staffing issues. We asked for a detailed briefing note this morning and we will receive that shortly. We will note and publish that item and wait for the response.

I will return to correspondence item 1316, received on 11 May 2018 from the former vice president of Cork Institute of Technology, CIT, regarding matters discussed at the committee meeting on 22 March 2018. We held this item over. At our meeting on 22 March in regard to public private partnerships, PPPs, a number of points were made regarding the former vice president and his role as contract manager at CIT's National Maritime College, which he says were untrue or misleading. He has written to the committee to state that he was not here to respond to those points. We are providing this opportunity for him to correct the record. At the request of the committee, the clerk has liaised with the individual to summarise the main points of his letter. It is an extensive letter and I do not wish to read it all, so will just give the main points. I ask any member with observations on what I am about to read into the record to listen carefully and take me up on it if he or she so wishes.

First, the individual clarifies that he was not the contract manager during the construction phase and accepts that, as a scientist, he would be unlikely to have the skills to oversee the construction phase. The committee acknowledged that already at our meeting on 24 May. Second, following the hand-over of the building, he oversaw the operational phase on request of the Department of Education and Skills. He believes it is not accurate or fair to say that he did not have the relevant skills to oversee the operational phase. Third, the individual states he was never employed by companies that were subsets of the college. However, the committee notes that he was an unpaid director. That was put on the record on the last occasion this was dealt with and we again note it now. Fourth, following retirement, he was employed one day a week by Cork Institute of Technology to support the college in a number of areas but that what was involved required attendance in the college on three or four days a week. Fifth, in respect of his retirement party, he states that CIT did not contribute to this but that it was paid for by friends and colleagues who attended. Sixth, he states that any problems with the building were the responsibility of the PPP company and it was required to meet the costs. That was also stated at

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the meeting on 24 May. In summary, the individual was greatly upset by what he believes were false and misleading statements made about him while he was not present to defend himself. We have now provided an opportunity for the record to be corrected. Can we note and record that item of correspondence? Noted.

The committee has received five items of correspondence from an individual regarding matters arising from the amalgamation of Kiltoghert Co-operative Agricultural and Dairy Society and the North Connacht Farmers' Co-operative Society in 2000. These items have not been circulated. The correspondent makes a number of allegations in regard to irregularities in the amalgamation process, procedural and behavioural matters relating to the Garda and procedural failures by officials of the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine. The substantive items in regard to the amalgamation process of co-operatives and allegations in regard to the Garda are not within the remit of the committee. For informational purposes, issues relating to the amalgamation should be addressed to the Registrar of Friendly Societies in the Companies Registration Office and allegations in regard to the Garda should be dealt with by the Garda Síochána Ombudsman Commission, not the Committee of Public Accounts. Given that serious accusations are made about specific individuals, with the consent of the committee I propose that the items not be circulated and that we inform the individual that we will not consider the matter further. I propose that we return the documentation to the individual. If any member wishes to see the documentation before it is returned, he or she may contact the clerk. Is that agreed?

Deputy David Cullinane: What is this about?

Chairman: The amalgamation of two co-ops 18 years ago, in 2000. The individual alleges irregularities in the amalgamation-----

Deputy David Cullinane: It is not in regard to NAMA.

Chairman: -----of North Connacht Farmers Co-operative Society and Kiltoghert Co-operative Agricultural and Dairy Society. Does Deputy MacSharry know in which county Kiltoghert is located?

Deputy Marc MacSharry: Leitrim. Kiltoghert.

Chairman: Kiltoghert. I do not know where it is. It is somewhere in the north west.

Deputy Marc MacSharry: It is in Leitrim.

Chairman: Yes. These events occurred 18 years ago. There are allegations about the amalgamation process, comments about the Garda and specific allegations in regard to an individual. It is not within our remit so I propose, with the consent of the committee, to return the documentation to the correspondent and say-----

Deputy Marc MacSharry: Is there anybody who-----

Chairman: The registrar of-----

Deputy Marc MacSharry: Is there a more appropriate body to which we could refer the complaint?

Chairman: We will return the documentation to the correspondent and tell him that matters in regard to the amalgamation should be referred to the Registrar of Friendly Societies in

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the Companies Registration Office and matters in regard to the Garda should be dealt with by the Garda Síochána Ombudsman Commission. We will inform him of the two agencies with which he should make contact. If any member wishes to view the documentation, he or she may contact the clerk in that regard but we will return it to the correspondent after the weekend.

Deputy Bobby Aylward: Are public funds involved?

Chairman: No.

Deputy Bobby Aylward: If not, the matter is not within the remit of the committee.

Chairman: It is not within our remit, so we will return the documentation. It is unusual for the committee to do so but we will return all of the documentation.

Deputy Bobby Aylward: Should we refer the matter to the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine or the Oireachtas Joint Committee on Agriculture, Food and the Marine?

Chairman: Deputy Aylward knows that it was 18 years ago. There is enough to do at the moment. We will move on and return it with that covering note, explaining those two points.

The next item is statements and accounts received since the previous meeting. The first one is a clear audit opinion on Dublin City University and the usual issue around the third pension funding in the public sector. That is normal.

The next item is a clear audit opinion from the Commission for Communications Regulation.

The next item is from the Health Information Quality Authority, HIQA. A qualified opinion has been given because of its retirement benefit entitlements, which are only met as they become payable. That is a regular issue arising in respect of public sector bodies concerning payment for pensions.

The next item is the Louth and Meath Education and Training Board, ETB. It should be remembered that these are the accounts for 2015, so they are a bit behind times. We highlighted last year that there was a specific problem with this ETB. Attention is drawn to the disclosure in the statement of internal control. An invoice redirection fraud on the board in November 2017 resulted in the loss of an estimated €246,000. That is shocking. We have to write to the ETB for a fully detailed report as to how that happened. There is also a question of weakness in the board's control regarding accumulated PLC fee income and bank accounts. There is a further on the delays in finalising the financial statements in 2015 due to changes in senior personnel in the ETB. We were made aware of that in public here last year when the ETB appeared before the committee. We need to write to the ETB for a detailed note about that loss of €246,000 and the invoice redirection fraud. I do not know anything about it, so I believe we need detailed information about it.

The next item is the Clare and Limerick ETB. It has supplied its audit opinion and, again, there is a level of non-compliance with national procurement guidelines. We will have to come back to that issue across the entirety of the public service because it is cropping up every week.

The next item is from Waterford Institute of Technology for the year ending 31 August 2016. Attention is drawn to the going-concern status of the institute, which had an accumulated deficit of €4.4 million to the end of August 2016 and which did not provide for pension benefits in the financial statements. That is normal, but the issue of the deficit still arises. The accounts

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were prepared on the basis that the institute will continue to receive State funding. That is probably a reasonable assumption. However, the Comptroller and Auditor General cannot give a cast-iron guarantee that that will happen. He has to draw attention to the fact that this place can only continue to trade if it continues to get funding.

Deputy Bobby Aylward: Is there a limit on what an institute of technology can borrow? Is it up to the institute of technology itself or are there guidelines from the Department?

Chairman: There are borrowing restrictions in the legislation.

Deputy Bobby Aylward: Are the institutes of technology allowed to borrow that kind of money?

Chairman: If the Deputy considers the local authorities, the money being borrowed by the institutes of technology is not big money relative to other public bodies. Local authorities borrow much more than that. That is not a big amount in terms of organisations of that type.

Deputy David Cullinane: Institutes of technology cannot borrow. They are not allowed to borrow. They are also not allowed to have deficits. That is the difficulty here. Waterford Institute of Technology is not the only offender, but it would be useful if the committee wrote to the Higher Education Authority to ask for a breakdown of the finances of each institute of technology to ascertain which were in deficit. This would give us a picture of how Waterford Institute of Technology compares to others. Can that be done?

Chairman: We can do that.

Deputy David Cullinane: In the case of Waterford Institute of Technology, we should ascertain the up-to-date position. The accounts presented were from 2016. I know that containment measures were put in place, so it may well be out - or close to being out - of deficit.

Chairman: I thank the Deputy; I was not aware of the borrowing restriction in the legislation. It is important we get updated accounts. We will ask for a report which covers all of the institutes of technology.

The next item is a clear audit opinion from the Strategic Banking Corporation of Ireland.

The next item is a clear audit opinion from the HSE. The attention of the committee is drawn to some non-competitive procurement, inadequate monitoring and the oversight of grants to outside agencies. The statement of capital income and expenditure shows a surplus from 2016 of €15 million brought forward even though sanction was not obtained to do so. The HSE is on the work programme for this committee and it is due to appear here on 5 July. We can discuss all of those issues on that day. We will note it in the meantime.

The next item is a clear audit opinion from the National Asset Management Agency.

The next item is a clear audit opinion from the language body. Its accounts have been jointly audited with the Northern Ireland Comptroller and Auditor General.

The next item is a clear audit opinion from Trinity College Dublin. However, attention is drawn to the deferred pension funding, and the disclosure of a cyber fraud on the Trinity Foundation in 2017, at a cost to the university of €975,000. That is staggering. We have found out about two educational bodies today that were subject to cyberfraud or invoice redirection fraud, being Louth and Meath ETB to the tune of €246,000, and Trinity College Dublin to the tune of

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€975,000. That is €1.25 million of taxpayers' money.

Deputy David Cullinane: We need to know where that money is and if any of it has been recovered.

Chairman: We are told that the fraud was perpetrated against the Trinity Foundation as opposed to the college, but we need a detailed report.

Deputy David Cullinane: This shows why there should be greater controls in the foundations.

Chairman: We are going to write to Trinity College Dublin and ask for a detailed note. If we see any further examples we will have to look at that specifically. We have seen two examples of fraud. The money taken from the foundation may not have been taxpayer money but rather money from donations, but if the foundation loses money the deficit will have to be made up eventually.

The next item is the work programme. On Thursday, 28 June, the Tax Appeals Commission and the Revenue Commissioners will appear at the second session at 11.30 a.m. to deal with tax debt write-offs, withholding taxes and the appropriation accounts. The Tax Appeals Commission is a new organisation. There has always been a tax appeals commissioner, but there is a new structure in place. It is a new organisation with a separate Vote, so it will be dealt with separately. On 5 July, the HSE will appear before the committee. On 12 July, the National Treasury Management Agency will appear before the committee, including the State Claims Agency and all the organisations under its remit.

Is there any other business? I want to refer to one item of business in private session. Can we go into private session for a moment? Is there anything else to deal with in public session? We have to deal with two issues in private session, namely, one item of correspondence and the discussion document circulated by the committee secretariat about preparing information for a periodic report. It depends on how much time people have had to look at the document in advance, but we do have to clear it quite quickly. It does not have to be finished today.

The committee went into private session at 3.10 p.m. and adjourned at 3.20 p.m. until Tuesday, 26 June 2018 at 3.30 p.m.