

# DÁIL ÉIREANN

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## AN COISTE UM CHUNTAIS PHOIBLÍ

## COMMITTEE OF PUBLIC ACCOUNTS

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*Déardaoin, 27 Bealtaine 2021*

*Thursday, 27 May 2021*

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The Committee met at 9.30 a.m.

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### MEMBERS PRESENT:

Deputy Colm Burke,	Deputy Imelda Munster,
Deputy Cormac Devlin,	Deputy Catherine Murphy,
Deputy Alan Dillon,	Deputy Verona Murphy,
Deputy Marc MacSharry,	Deputy Sean Sherlock.
Deputy Paul McAuliffe,	

DEPUTY BRIAN STANLEY IN THE CHAIR.

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

## **2019 Annual Report of the Comptroller and Auditor General and Appropriation Accounts**

### **Vote 31 - Transport, Tourism and Sport**

**Mr. Ken Spratt** (*Secretary General, Department of Transport*) called and examined.

**Chairman:** No apologies have been received. I understand that Deputy Devlin may be late joining us due to prior commitments.

I will begin by welcoming all to this online meeting. Due to the current situation regarding Covid-19, the clerk, support staff and I are in the committee room. We are joined in person by Deputy Sherlock as he cannot attend remotely due to technical issues. You are all very welcome. The remaining members of the committee are attending remotely from within the precincts of Leinster House. This is due to the constitutional requirement that in order to participate in public meetings Members must be physically present within the confines of the place where the Parliament has chosen to sit, namely, Leinster House or the convention centre. I will ask members to confirm their location before contributing to ensure they are adhering to the constitutional requirement.

The Comptroller and Auditor General, Mr. Seamus McCarthy, is a permanent witness to the committee and is attending remotely. Today we engage with officials from the Department of Transport to examine the 2019 Appropriation Accounts, specifically Vote 31 - Transport, Tourism and Sport, and expenditure related to the following matters: BusConnects, the driver licence and testing process, the western rail corridor and the search and rescue contract. We are joined remotely from outside the precincts of Leinster House by the following officials from the Department of Transport: Mr. Ken Spratt, Secretary General; Mr. Fintan Towey, assistant secretary general, aviation sector; Mr. Garret Doocey, principal officer, sustainable mobility investment division; Mr. Dominic Mullaney, principal officer, regional and local roads division; Mr. Eugene Clonan, principal officer and acting director, the Irish Coast Guard; and Mr. Ray O'Leary, assistant secretary general, land transport. We are joined remotely from within the precincts of Leinster House by Ms Niamh Callaghan, principal officer in the transport, tourism and sport Vote section at the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform. They are all very welcome.

When we begin to engage, I will ask members and witnesses to mute themselves when not contributing so we do not pick up any background noise or feedback. As usual, I remind all those in attendance to ensure that their mobile phones are on silent mode or switched off. Before we start, I will explain some limitations to parliamentary privilege and the practice of the House as regards references witnesses may make to other persons in their evidence. The evidence of witnesses physically present or who give evidence from within the parliamentary precincts is protected, pursuant to both the Constitution and statute, by absolute privilege. However, a number of today's witnesses are giving evidence remotely, from a place outside the

precincts of the Parliament, and, as such, they may not benefit from the same level of immunity from legal proceedings as a witness physically present does. Such witnesses have already been advised that they may think it appropriate to take legal advice on this matter.

Members are reminded of the provision within Standing Order 218 that the committee shall refrain from inquiring 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. Members are also reminded of the long-standing parliamentary practice that they should not comment on, criticise or make charges against any person outside the Houses or an official either by name or in such a way as to make him or her identifiable.

To assist the broadcasting and debates services, I ask that members direct their questions to a specific witness. If the question is not directed to a specific witness, I ask each witness to state his or her name when first contributing. The fact that we are doing this virtually means proceedings will not always run as smoothly as at a meeting at which we are physically present, so I ask members and witnesses for their co-operation in that regard.

I now call on the Comptroller and Auditor General, Mr. Seamus McCarthy, to make his opening statement.

**Mr. Seamus McCarthy:** The appropriation account for Vote 31 - Transport, Tourism and Sport records gross expenditure of €2.3 billion in 2019. This was distributed across five expenditure programmes of widely varying value.

The bulk of the expenditure in 2019 was under programme B, for land transport. Expenditure on that programme amounted to €1.9 billion and accounted for 83% of gross voted expenditure. This comprised mainly investment in roads and road safety and regulation and current and capital spending on public transport. I note that spending allocated to the land transport programme has increased substantially since 2019. As recorded in the Revised Estimates Volume, the allocation for the programme for 2021 totals €3.3 billion. It may accordingly be time for the Department, in conjunction with the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform, to consider splitting the programme. This would allow the Department to provide more useful detail about the various spending lines, in both the Estimates and future appropriation accounts.

The largest of the other expenditure programmes for Vote 31 in 2019 related to programme E, tourism services, and programme D, sport and recreation services. Expenditure on these programmes in 2019 amounted to €158 million and €106 million, respectively. Both these programmes were allocated to the new Department of Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media following the formation of the Government in mid-2020.

Programme C relates to maritime transport and safety. Expenditure on this programme amounted to €96 million in 2019. This mainly comprised expenditure on the Irish Coast Guard service, which operationally is part of the Department. It includes recurrent expenditure on the long-term contract with a private sector supplier for provision of a helicopter search and rescue service. Expenditure under the contract in 2019 is not itemised in the appropriation account, but members may wish to note that the estimated residual financial commitment under the contract is shown in note 2.8. This amounted to €155 million at end 2019.

Programme A relates to civil aviation services. Expenditure under the programme totalled €34.8 million in 2019, including financial support for regional airports amounting to €21.8 million.

Receipts into Vote 31 as appropriations-in-aid are relatively small.

The surplus on the Vote for 2019 was €69.8 million. With agreement from the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform, €48.6 million in unspent capital allocations was carried over for spending in 2020. The remainder of the surplus, €21.2 million, was liable for surrender to the Exchequer at the year end.

I issued a clear audit opinion on the appropriation account.

The Department has an oversight role in respect of a substantial number of public bodies that operate under its aegis. These include bodies substantially funded from Vote 31 such as Transport Infrastructure Ireland, the National Transport Authority and the Medical Bureau of Road Safety; bodies that are funded mainly through charges and levies such as the Road Safety Authority, the Commission for Aviation Regulation and the Commission for Railway Regulation; and transport-related commercial State bodies such as the CIÉ Group, Dublin Airport Authority, the Irish Aviation Authority and a number of port companies. A list of bodies under the aegis of the Department can be seen in the appendix to the appropriation account.

Members may wish to note that, in the statement on internal financial control, the Accounting Officer discloses that shortcomings were identified in the process for procurement of vehicles for the Irish Coast Guard motor fleet. Having reviewed the circumstances of the procurement as part of the audit of the 2019 appropriation account, I decided to examine the matter further from a value for money perspective. We are in the process of finalising a special report about this procurement, which will be presented in due course.

**Chairman:** Mr. Spratt, you will appreciate that we are working with limited time. While you have your opening statement prepared, in fairness to you, I would ask that you keep within the five-minute limit, please.

**Mr. Ken Spratt:** In 2019, the Department of Transport, Tourism and Sport was one of the largest capital spending Departments. Its net allocation in the Revised Estimates for 2019 was €2.327 billion, comprising €1.85 billion capital and €742 million current expenditure. The allocation of capital was in line with the Department's core remit in investing in transport infrastructure and assets. Some 92% of the capital allocation was allocated to the land transport programme. Our allocation and expenditure in 2019 was closely aligned with our statement of strategy for 2016 to 2019.

The high-level goal for aviation in 2019 was to maximise air transport connectivity with a safe, sustainable and competitive transport network and services. We invested €26.188 million in current expenditure and €10.579 million in capital in the aviation sector. This financed public service obligations for the regional airports as well as capital investment. The Exchequer is not responsible for financing major projects at State airports. However, two of the biggest projects ongoing in the State during 2019 were financed by the Dublin Airport Authority, DAA, and Irish Aviation Authority, IAA, namely the north runway and the visual control centre, both at Dublin Airport.

For land investment, our goal was to service the needs of society and the economy through safe, sustainable and competitive transport networks and services. In this regard, we are responsible for the corporate governance of the two lead planning and investment agencies, Transport Infrastructure Ireland, TII, and the National Transport Authority, NTA. It is worth noting that over 75% of all inland passenger kilometres travelled in Ireland in 2019 were by private car.

Public service obligation, PSO, funded public transport providers carried more than 295 million passengers. Of public transport passenger journeys, bus journeys accounted for more than two-thirds. Until the time Covid-19 struck, there was a steady upward trend in growth in all public transport services, with near-term forecasts suggesting limitations in public transport capacity were being reached, particularly at peak times.

The Department has clearly defined investment programmes in all the main modes of transport - active travel, heavy rail, light rail, bus, and road - geared towards supporting the ambitions of the national planning framework, the programme for Government, and the climate action plan. The Government has also signalled its ambition to provide competitive fares and socially beneficial services for consumers through a system of public service obligations. In 2019, PSO payments accounted for 38.3% of the Department's gross current expenditure allocation. Protection of these vital services during the Covid-19 pandemic required an additional emergency allocation of €460 million for PSO services in 2020, on top of the annual core allocation of approximately €300 million. A further emergency allocation of €370 million is required this year.

Under the maritime programme, our goal was to facilitate safe and sustainable maritime transport and the delivery of emergency management services. Of the €103.068 million allocated to the maritime sector, €77.235 million supported Coast Guard services, €62.515 million of which was invested in the Coast Guard search and rescue service delivered by CHC Ireland DAC. A budget allocation of €5.659 million was also invested by the Commissioners of Irish Lights, who are responsible for maintaining marine navigation systems in Irish waters.

Turning to sport, our goal in 2019 was to contribute to a healthy and more active society by promoting sports participation, supporting high performance and the provision of sport facilities. A total of €126.162 million in Exchequer funding was provided to sport that year. The bulk of the funds were allocated to the sports grants scheme and to Sport Ireland.

On tourism, we focused on supporting the industry to grow in a sustainable way. The vast bulk of Exchequer funds were disbursed directly to Fáilte Ireland and to Tourism Ireland, which has responsibility for promoting tourism on an all-island basis. Some €175.655 million was allocated for tourism investment. Tourism Ireland, Fáilte Ireland and the marketing and product development funds managed by the two agencies accounted for over 91% of the budget allocation.

Projects under our remit will be key to improving citizens' quality of life. We all want less congestion, cleaner air and pleasant journeys. We also want to play our climate part and improve our economy's productive capacity. As we progress towards the tendering and construction phases of major infrastructure projects, we must be mindful of the reasons major projects overrun on cost, but also, if the right projects are successfully planned and delivered, of the significant benefits that will accrue. I am confident that, as a Department, we are taking an effective governance approach which emphasises responsible and prudent management of public funds and that we will see the benefits of careful planning and investment starting to emerge over the coming years.

I note the Comptroller and Auditor General's remarks regarding it potentially being time for the Department to consider splitting the programme. That is something we will take up with our colleagues at the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform.

**Chairman:** The lead committee member today is Deputy Dillon, who has just joined us.

Deputy Dillon has 15 minutes. The second speaker is Deputy Sherlock, who has ten minutes. All other speakers have five minutes. As time is limited, I will keep members to that time and will try to allow for a second round of questions.

**Deputy Alan Dillon:** I welcome our witnesses here today. I acknowledge their work done during the pandemic to keep their Department functional. As time is limited, I will jump straight in. My first question is for Mr. Spratt regarding the national development plan, which is being revamped and is due for publication in July. I would like to get Mr. Spratt's thoughts on whether priority should be given to balanced regional development in the building of infrastructure, be it rail, road, regional airports, ports, or whatever. Given that the west and north west was downgraded by the European Union from a developed region to a region in transition last year, and in this case there is urgent need for positive discrimination into the future, what is Mr. Spratt's assessment on that?

**Mr. Ken Spratt:** We are engaging with our colleagues in the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform on the national development plan. We have our own sectoral strategy which is called the national investment framework for transport in Ireland, NIFTI. That sets out a number of priorities for us, and balanced regional development is one of them. We also have other priorities and none of them are ranked, so they are equal priorities. They are decarbonisation, protection and renewal, urban mobility of people and goods, movement of people and goods in the regions, and regional connectivity.

We also have a number of hierarchies which guide us on how we should invest. Those hierarchies are modal and investment. From a modal perspective, we try to prioritise active travel before we move to public transport, and before we move to private car. From an investment perspective, we try first to maintain, then optimise, then improve, and only following this only will we get into new investment. Having said that, balanced regional development is very important. It is one of the priorities and one of the things we have uppermost in our minds as we engage with the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform on the review of the national development plan.

**Deputy Alan Dillon:** I thank Mr. Spratt for that. Coming from a rural constituency and representing people in Mayo, it is concerning that a report commissioned by the Northern and Western Regional Assembly, Region in Transition - the Way Forward, found that there is a startling level of inequality in investment across key areas, one being infrastructure and transport. Certainly, a failure to address these critical investment shortfalls means there will be a two-speed economy developed in Ireland, with one being on the east coast and the other being left behind on the west coast.

Looking at the appropriation accounts, making provisions for the regional airport programme is crucially important for my constituency and for Knock Airport. I want to get an understanding of the expenditure in 2019. It was increased to €21.8 million to maintain and improve air access to the regions. How was the amount calculated and determined per airport? Can we be provided with a breakdown of the expenditure in subheading A3?

**Mr. Ken Spratt:** If I point to the total capital provision over the five years, 2015 to 2019, Knock had €14,751,520 in capital funding. On top of that, there was current funding of €8.441 million over 2015 to 2020. It is a fairly significant amount over five years.

The national aviation policy recognises the role of smaller airports in supporting regional development and commits to supporting them to make a sustainable contribution to their re-

spective local economies and communities through the regional airports programme. The 2019 outturn for Knock was €9.48 million. I will refer to some of the investments we made. The grant aid total at Knock of €27 million was provided under the regional airports programme to support essential safety and security-related projects and activities at the three regional airports, Donegal, Knock and Kerry, over 2018 to 2020. The larger of the capital projects recently funded through the regional airports programme include the following at Knock Airport: €207,000 provided for a medical fitness facility for fire crew project in 2018 and around €526,000 for a whole baggage screening upgrade project in 2018, and €850,000 in 2019. Exchequer funding of around €1.173 million was given to a runway overlay project; €6.6 million and €550,000 were paid during 2018, 2019 and 2020. For 2019 the figure for the overlay project was €6.6 million. I hope that answers the question.

**Deputy Alan Dillon:** It does and I thank Mr. Spratt. Given the impact of Covid-19 has been enormous, what supports has the Department offered during the pandemic? Has it assessed the impact on each of the regional airports? It is hugely important that they continue to be supported. As what level has the Department engaged with Knock on this?

**Mr. Ken Spratt:** There are a number of things that we can do for airports, as well as ferry ports and airlines around Covid. The first thing the Government did was provide horizontal supports which help employees in the airports and ferry ports. There were three things we were very focused on during the pandemic. We needed to keep the airports open, we also needed to engage with our colleagues across Government on the restrictions to ensure the impact on airports and ferry ports was fully understood. We did that with our colleagues in the Department of Health and through the Department of the Taoiseach as well. The third thing will be incentives in due course, once the restrictions are eased, and what levels of incentives we need to ensure the airlines come into those airports.

**Deputy Alan Dillon:** Will a stimulus be provided through the Department as we move out of restrictions?

**Mr. Ken Spratt:** Up to €6 million will be available to regional airports that provide connectivity under the EU temporary framework in recognition of the impact of Covid on their business. Applications for funding under this measure are being assessed. It is hoped that aid will be granted in coming weeks. Hopefully Knock will be able to apply for and benefit under that.

**Deputy Alan Dillon:** The NTA is pursuing the underground in Dublin city again as €4.5 billion, linking Heuston with the Dart line as part of a big three transport projects for Dublin city. The construction cost of some 500 m of this tunnel is estimated at €650 million, three times what the western rail corridor will cost for 52 km. What are Mr. Spratt's thoughts?

**Mr. Ken Spratt:** We are engaging with our colleagues at the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform. We do have instructions to deliver as set out in the programme for Government. We know we have to improve public transport provision, not only in Dublin city but all cities and all regional and rural areas. It is hugely important that we give the consideration required to all the projects at the outset. While it might look like a huge amount on a relatively small piece of connectivity we believe once we go through the public spending code and cost benefit analyses, we will get to a point where we can decide whether it is good value for money. Those figures are being spoken about by third parties but we have not got to the point where those costs and benefits have been assessed. We do not have that level of detail. There is a public spending code which we have to go through which we will do.

**Deputy Alan Dillon:** Mr. Spratt has to understand that I feel a percentage of my tax should be spent on infrastructure in a region that desperately requires balanced regional development to support quality of life and access to transport. When we see projects that cost billions of euro compared to what we are looking for in the west, it leads us to question the Department's priorities. It is difficult for us to accept some consultants' reports discussing the economic feasibility of a project against what is determined by officials in the Department. There is frustration out there.

I will briefly touch on the Coast Guard. I come from a constituency where it has units in Westport, Achill, Killala and Ballyglass. They are a hugely important part of coastal areas, with volunteers providing an important service. There was an underspend in Coast Guard purchases and upgrades in 2019. Why was that and what was the reason for the delay? What, if any, impact was there on services by not having this equipment?

**Mr. Ken Spratt:** I will ask the director of the Coast Guard, Mr. Clonan to answer the question about the underspend in 2019.

**Mr. Eugene Clonan:** The underspend in the capital was due to our building programme. The Coast Guard has Westport, Achill and Ballyglass and another 44 stations around the coast. We started from a very low base. We inherited the Coast Guard stations going back to 1993, which are mostly the old rocket houses, which were basically garages fit for a horse and cart and some equipment. Since then we invested an awful lot of money and brought them up to scratch. We have a building programme with the OPW. The priority in the building programme is Greystones, followed by Westport -----

**Deputy Alan Dillon:** Where are things at in Westport?

**Mr. Eugene Clonan:** It is almost across the line. We have a budget available, we are going through the planning process with Greystones, Westport and Killmore Quay and to a lesser extent in Cleggan. The OPW getting planning permissions and going to tender has been delayed because of Covid. The delays account for some of the underspend.

We hope to turn the sod at Greystones later this year and we hope to award the contract for the tender at the end of this year for Westport. Hopefully the money we have set aside for that -----

**Deputy Alan Dillon:** There is frustration that the Coast Guard is a key agency and the delivery of the capital projects seems to be dragging on. Other voluntary organisations such as the RNLI have the best of facilities and we are still working out of these rocket houses. More priority needs to be given to the upgrading of facilities in many of these areas which are crying out for better training centres and facilities to provide their services. We have seen a tremendous effort in Blacksod following the Rescue R116 incident. It is imperative that we respond to all of these people in a way that ensures that their value is fully recognised. That is the response from the constituents that I talk to in these areas. Westport and Ballyglass need a certain focus and this could be expedited as we move forward with the capital programme.

**Mr. Eugene Clonan:** I could not agree more with the Deputy. We have a building programme. There are 11 buildings on the list and we have 44. We normally get a new building across the line every two to three years. It started approximately ten years ago. We have a methodology and are going through the scope. Where we do not have adequate resources, which are some of the rocket houses, including the house in Cleggan, we have put in temporary



facilities. If we cannot get the temporary facilities in due to the leasing of land or whatever, we have to make arrangements with local hotels for such facilities, where they can do their training. That is what we are trying to do and I assure the Deputy that we are very much on top of the building programme and in touch with our volunteers on the coast. After all, these are the people who risk their lives and we support them with training.

**Deputy Alan Dillon:** I thank Mr. Clonan very much. Have I much time left?

**Chairman:** I thank Deputy Dillon. I call Deputy Sherlock now who has ten minutes and I will give him a reminder after seven.

**Deputy Sean Sherlock:** I thank the Chairman for facilitating me as I had some technical issues. I welcome the officials. I will focus on programme B, land transport, which is 80% of the overall gross expenditure for 2019. I also acknowledge that the 2021 total is €3.3 billion. Arising from land transport, there is the Road Safety Authority, RSA. The Secretary General will be aware that there is a serious backlog in driver theory testing and driver testing. Approximately 100,000 people are waiting for driver theory testing and the number is similar for the other test.

Today's issue is the relationship between the Department of Transport and the RSA in working through the backlog of lists. I wish to explore further that relationship in how resources are deployed by the Department to the RSA. The reason I am asking specifically about the RSA is that notwithstanding the positive engagement that I have had with the agency on driver theory testing and driver test backlogs, the announcement in the past number of days of an interim solution to be provided by moving driver theory testing online did not get off to a great start because the number of people who will be tested under that online system will be 4,000.

There are also further inherent issues then as to how the technology is deployed. Why, for instance, are only 4,000 people being tested online with this new interim solution? How is the Department resourcing that? What is the nature of the relationship of the RSA with the Department to ensure that we move from 4,000 being tested up to the full cohort and backlog being tested, which is the full 100,000 plus of people who are waiting for tests?

What are the technological issues arising from this interim solution where we are being told that to apply for the online driving test someone has to have a Windows 8 personal computer, PC, or above and that those using a phone, tablet or Mac computer will be excluded, as will those using android or iOS? Applicants must also be able to use Google Chrome and the minimum speed has to be 5 Mbps.

I want to explore with the Department its relationship with the RSA on the basis that it is a key Department in getting Ireland moving again in a post Covid-19 society. If we are to get people off the pandemic unemployment payment, PUP, and other Department of Social Protection payments to enable them to move, we need driver theory and driver testing to be fit for purpose. What is Mr. Spratt's current appraisal on when the Department expects that full cohort of people to be tested and what resources are being deployed by his Department to ensure that the RSA is fully resourced so that people can get back on the road?

**Mr. Ken Spratt:** I thank the Deputy. There are a number of questions and I will do my best to answer as many as I can. I may in due course call on my colleague, Mr O'Leary, who heads up our roads and related matters division.

First, there is a significant backlog in the number of tests as a result of Covid-19. That is something that we want to tackle as quickly as we possibly can. Our colleagues at the RSA

were looking at an additional 80 contract testers to be hired. It is also looking at permission to retain or rehire 36 testers which the authority previously had or may have on its books at the moment, but wants to ensure that it has the full 36.

Initially, we gave approval for those 36 to be retained or rehired and for an additional 40. However, given that the pandemic has lasted longer than we had anticipated when we first decided on this, the management board just on this past Tuesday took a decision to provide the additional 40. Now, instead of there being an additional 40, there will now be an additional 80 testers. The first tranche of 40 are in training at the moment and will be testing through their training in June and July. The second tranche of 40, once we have settled everything and have crossed the t's and dotted the i's with our colleagues in the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform, will be taken from the panel we have in place as we do not have to go through a recruitment process, and provided that we get that sanction, we will be able to put those in place reasonably quickly. That will give us additional testing capacity.

The RSA is also working on the setting up of additional centres. We are hoping that we will be able to move through the backlog reasonably quickly. That should make a good and decent dent in the testing backlog.

As to the theory testing, I agree with the Deputy that in this day and age people want to access public services on all platforms and want user-friendly services to be provided very quickly. I was disappointed when I read reports on the online theory test being confined to certain technologies and operating systems. That is something that I am just hearing about in the past number of days and is something that I want to engage on with the RSA. If it is the case that this needs additional help from us, that is certainly something that we will be willing to consider.

Generally speaking, I have a very good personal relationship with the RSA as I believe has the Department. I meet with the chief executive of all of the agencies at least twice a year with nothing on the agenda. I also meet with them from time to time when needs arise. We have a good relationship but are very conscious of the need, to use the Deputy's phrase, "to get Ireland moving again" to ensure that people can get back to work, education and can go about their business as usual. In rural Ireland, in particular, that means that people must be able to drive their cars. We are very conscious of the need to get going on all of this. We will leave no stone unturned to make sure we get the backlog cleared as quickly as possible. I commit to taking up the matters the Deputy raised with the chief executive before the close of business tomorrow.

**Deputy Sean Sherlock:** I welcome those assurances. The 100,000 people waiting for the driver theory test and the 100,000 who are waiting for the full test may take some comfort from those words. For the cohort who are waiting on the driver theory test, the technology needs to be user-friendly and fit for purpose and there should be protocols put in place in terms of the use of the technology, in that when camera technology is being used, assurances are given to the person who is being tested that any data collected is collected in a safe and appropriate way. That is important for people who have decided to put trust in the system.

If the RSA can reach a target of 50,000 per month, the lists will be got through within a short space of time. I welcome the statement by the Secretary General on providing us with an update and commitments in respect of close of business tomorrow. It is important we ensure we can get people moving again. So many people are reliant on this. It is an important service for everybody in this country.

**Deputy Paul McAuliffe:** I welcome everybody here today, especially Mr. Spratt, who

comes from the same parish as me. On B6 in the Vote, the smarter travel carbon reduction, particularly as it relates to small public service vehicles, SPSVs, there was an €8.9 million budgeted amount and a €5.6 million outturn. Will Mr. Spratt talk through the reasons for that shortfall?

**Mr. Ken Spratt:** I mention the electrification of small public service vehicles, such as the fleets and taxis. We have a national electric SPSV grant scheme. It was established in 2018 by the then Department of Communications, Climate Action and Environment to support the electrification of taxi, hackney and limousine fleets. The scheme initially provided grants of up to €7,000 for battery electric vehicles, BEVs, and up to €3,500 for plug-in hybrid electric vehicles, PHEVs. To encourage greater take-up, the grant levels were increased in 2020 to €10,000 and €5,000 for BEVs and PHEVs, respectively. Between 2018 and 2020, this initiative supported the registration of 101 electric SPSVs through grants of €627,000.

In addition, €1.5 million was allocated in 2020, to support a small public service vehicle recharging network scheme, which will see the installation of SPSV dedicated electric vehicle, EV, fast charging infrastructure at transport hubs around the country. Chargers were installed at Dublin and Cork airports as well as Heuston Station, Cork Kent Station and Limerick Colbert Station.

While we in the Department have just taken responsibility for EVs, we have been supporting the EV tolling incentive scheme since 2018, as I am sure the Deputy knows. The EV tolling incentive scheme provides discounts of approximately 50% on tolls for electric cars and vans. To date, registered vehicles have made more than 1.3 million discounted journeys and can claim up to €1,000 back every year.

**Deputy Paul McAuliffe:** I accept that, but there was a reduced spend and, obviously, there are structural issues. We all want to see a decarbonisation of the fleet, but there are clearly issues other than the grants which are being made available, especially to taxi drivers. As Mr. Spratt knows, taxi drivers will gather in Merrion Square today and many will say, in terms the end-of-life vehicle changes, they are not in a position to be able to garner credit, even with the electric vehicle grants, especially given the past year but also generally. Clearly, there is an inability to spend it as a result of structural problems, and we need to look at those structural problems. Are the Department and the National Transport Authority, NTA, looking at why that shortfall was not spent?

**Mr. Ken Spratt:** We are. There was a lower than anticipated uptake of the grants. We accept that. It might be owing to a trend of drivers delaying vehicle purchases pending the anticipated launch of longer range models. That might be something to do with it. To encourage a greater take-up of EVs in the sector, which plays an important leadership and normalisation role, the grant levels of the scheme have been increased from seven to ten.

However, we need to do more. We are required to reduce our carbon emissions by 51% by 2030 and to be carbon neutral by 2050. A big part of what we do between now and 2030 will be around biofuels and electric vehicles. We are working through the options on that, but we need to figure out how we can get the behavioural changes we need. We are conscious of the exemplars that taxi drivers are when it comes to EVs, so we are working through that. We expect, with the revision to the climate action plan, we will be able to set out our stall and we might need to do more on that front. That is something we are considering, but we are glad to take the Deputy's feedback on it.

**Deputy Paul McAuliffe:** We will need to do more, for that very reason of reaching the targets in the climate action plan, but it points to a broader problem as well. The NTA regulates taxi licences, but we do not have anybody looking at the taxi industry. What has been spent in terms of research on the taxi industry, the impact Covid-19 has had on it and how we can assist thousands of operators within a sector to ensure they are a key and important part of the public transport network? I do not believe the NTA is approaching it from the perspective of researching best practice and working with the industry. It seems to be approaching it purely from a regulatory perspective.

**Mr. Ken Spratt:** That is something I will take up with the NTA. I know it is something it is very focused on, but to ensure I give the Deputy the correct information, I will undertake to come back to him on that having engaged with the CEO of the NTA. I will do that over the coming week.

**Deputy Paul McAuliffe:** I appreciate that.

**Deputy Catherine Murphy:** On the opening comment, why has the interconnector tunnel not happened already? The old Great Southern and Western Railway terminated at Heuston Station. It needs to be connected. It went to railway order in approximately 2015. It is only a comment. It is the game changer and the missing piece, which is not to say the western rail corridor is not important, but this requires to be done. Will Mr. Spratt give us a note on how much of the previous work in bringing it to railway order level can be reused if there is an evaluation?

On the rollover and the extension of the search and rescue, it is due. It is 2012 to 2022 and there is an option of another three years. A lead-in piece has to be done. In terms of the capital cost, did the Department or the State fund any of the capital costs for the purchase or financing of helicopters? If so, is there an ownership? I know there is a depreciation of approximately 25 years on these. Does the State own any assets? If a new company comes in or if it is split between State-run and a combination of State-run and private sector, there will be a training component. Is this component built into the cost? I find it quite difficult to see how this rolls over without there being sizeable work. Are there any assets?

**Mr. Ken Spratt:** I am conscious that I am going to eat into the Deputy's time but could I spend about two minutes on it? The Chairman could extend the Deputy's time if that is okay. There has been much interest in our search and rescue responsibilities and I would be grateful to set out important facts. The existing contract with CHCI was to run for ten years from July 2012 with an option for three one-year extensions. The contract has been extended to July 2023. The annual cost is approximately €60 million. The current service was procured on the basis of a thorough scoping exercise at the time involving all stakeholders, including the Department of Defence and the Air Corps. Based on that analysis, the recommendation for the new service was to significantly enhance the search and rescue capability, which involved modernising and upgrading the helicopter fleet to cater for the wide range of scenarios for maritime search and rescue, including a mass rescue. Thankfully, we have not had to do that but we have the capability to do so should we need to.

It was tendered by open competition. A compliant process was followed and independently audited. This resulted in a Government decision to award the contract to CHCI at the time. The construction of the tender bids was a matter for each tenderer based on the specification required. It was not for the Department or the Coast Guard to dictate whether it should buy or lease but to assess the relative costs between the two final bidders. The tenders were evaluated on the basis of the stated award criteria and CHCI was determined to be the preferred bid. This

is not a fixed-cost contract. There are agreed monthly standing charges and variable elements on top of that. There are costs associated with modifications, which are agreed with the Coast Guard. There can be other additional costs, all of which are provided for in the contract terms. The contract costs on average €60 million per year, which is broadly in line with expectations at the outset. CHCI has provided an excellent service and the contract has delivered on all key performance metrics. The Air Corps was not in a position to deliver the service at the time and this was acknowledged by the Department of Defence. The question of the State purchasing helicopters, which was raised by the Deputy, was considered at the time. This would require significant upfront costs and would have involved significant associated risk to the State. In buying a service, the risk of helicopter loss or depreciating values of the asset, which is important, is carried by the service provider. To sum that up, it was something that was considered at the start but it was decided on the basis of what we required to procure that it was better not to be the owner of those assets. I might ask Mr. Clonan to address the training component.

**Deputy Catherine Murphy:** My time is limited. I am not sure that the statement made by Mr. Spratt gets to the point I am trying to get to, which is whether we own any assets or assisted in purchasing any assets. He might provide us with a note on this because we are limited on time. Do we own any assets?

**Mr. Ken Spratt:** The answer to that question is “No”.

**Chairman:** Before Mr. Spratt answers that question, I want to intervene. The question of whether the State owns any of those helicopters that were procured at that time has been asked. We have gone two minutes over the Deputy’s time so I will allow Mr. Spratt to come back to answer that question and will then move on to the next speaker.

**Mr. Ken Spratt:** It is a very straightforward answer. We do not own the assets.

**Chairman:** Before I move on to the next speaker, I remind members that the contract for search and rescue services will be subject to new procurement shortly. In light of EU procurement principles of fairness, equity, transparency and non-discrimination, the committee or individual members cannot express a view that indicates a preference for or in favour of any particular tender or tenderers of any particular member state. I ask members to keep this in mind. A procurement process on this is pending. Members can refer to the previous one but I ask them to bear that in mind.

**Deputy Marc MacSharry:** I welcome all our guests. Under the Regional Airports Programme 2021-2025, is it the case that other airports can apply for funding there if things are needed around security, fire or safety? I am referring to Sligo Airport.

**Mr. Ken Spratt:** I might hand over to Mr. Towey on that. The regional airports programme does not fund airports that do not have scheduled services so I think the answer is “No”. I am sorry to disappoint the Deputy when it comes to Sligo Airport. I do not know whether Mr. Towey wants to add to that.

**Mr. Fintan Towey:** The Secretary General explained the position. The regional airports programme is to support airports with scheduled services.

**Deputy Marc MacSharry:** Of course Waterford is the exception to that.

**Mr. Fintan Towey:** Waterford has received some funding on an exceptional basis - not formally as a regional airport. It approached the Department at the end of 2017. At that point,

unless emergency funding was provided, the airport would have been at risk of entering liquidation. That would have had immediate implications for the continuance of the search and rescue base at the airport. Arising from that, emergency funding was provided to the airport and this has continued on the basis of plans for works that would enable the return of scheduled services put forward by the airport and accepted by the Government. However, arising from changed circumstances, the Minister has confirmed to Waterford Airport that the continuation of funding on that basis would not be possible.

**Deputy Marc MacSharry:** Okay but what we have established is that depending on the Minister of the day, if one wants to give a bit of twine to an airport that does not have scheduled services like Waterford, it can happen. We are not doing it for Sligo Airport, which does have needs, does have a rescue service and does house the CHC choppers in Strandhill, where I live, but it is one rule for Waterford and no rule for Sligo. Is that not the case?

**Mr. Fintan Towey:** The difference, which was accepted by the Government, was that Waterford had a plan that was perceived to be credible to undertake works that would bring about the restoration of scheduled services. There is no plan for the restoration of scheduled services at Sligo Airport.

**Deputy Marc MacSharry:** Mr. Towey said earlier that it was affecting or could affect the future of the base of the Coast Guard centre. In his second response to me, he changed that to say that the work was really to do with assisting the return of scheduled services whereas the truth is that the former Minister, Deputy Ross, just decided that we were going to give €5 million to Waterford. What I am trying to establish is whether if he was so disposed, the current Minister could make funding available to Sligo Airport, which, as Mr. Towey probably knows, has had to realign its runway from a safety perspective to keep CHC at the base. Is that not correct?

**Mr. Fintan Towey:** No, I think it is important to be clear here that-----

**Deputy Marc MacSharry:** Indeed it is.

**Mr. Fintan Towey:** The initial payment to Waterford was emergency funding based on the fact that the airport was at risk of liquidation in the absence of that funding and this would jeopardise the continuation of the search and rescue base.

**Deputy Marc MacSharry:** Where does Mr. Towey think Sligo Airport gets its money from?

**Mr. Fintan Towey:** During the period in which that funding preserved the position of the airport, the airport developed a plan for the extension of the runway with a view to the restoration of scheduled services. It put this plan to the Government and the Government accepted it. In conjunction with that plan, the Government accepted that there should be a continuation of the emergency funding.

**Deputy Marc MacSharry:** Waterford Airport effectively duped the Government into providing money because there has been no return of scheduled services. If we are being honest and saying that we are not seeking a return to scheduled services in Sligo, although we very much want to maintain our CHC-run Coast Guard base, if the Minister is so disposed, will the Department be able to provide some support to Sligo Airport, which has made very significant health and safety amendments to the layout of its runway involving the replacement of all of its lighting?

**Mr. Fintan Towey:** Sligo Airport is a private enterprise that provides-----

**Deputy Marc MacSharry:** It is not a private enterprise. It is not run for profit. It is owned by the people of Sligo rather than by any individuals. Who owns Waterford Airport?

**Mr. Fintan Towey:** It is also a private enterprise.

**Deputy Marc MacSharry:** This is the point I am making. To try to let Mr. Towey out of the gap, I put the following question to him. If the Minister of the day is so disposed, can we get money for Sligo Airport so that we can maintain the high standard of air and sea rescue currently carried out by CHC Ireland on behalf of the State at the bargain price of €60 million a year? We need a safe airport and a small amount of capital support. I am not talking about capital expenditure or operational expenditure. The airport is not run for profit but is owned by the people of Sligo. Can Mr. Towey confirm that, if the Minister is so disposed, money can be made available to Sligo Airport for this purpose?

**Mr. Fintan Towey:** CHC Ireland, which operates the Coast Guard helicopter service, makes payment to airports for the provision of support services for its bases. It makes provision to Sligo Airport in that regard. If there are additional costs in that regard, it is a matter to be negotiated between-----

**Deputy Marc MacSharry:** I am sorry for interrupting Mr. Towey, but that is not the question I asked. If the Minister is so disposed, as the former Minister, Shane Ross, was disposed, can money be provided for the regional airport in Sligo?

**Mr. Fintan Towey:** Ultimately, it is a matter for the Minister and for Government.

**Deputy Marc MacSharry:** That is all I need to know. I will move to the next question. While I fully appreciate that we are going down-----

**Chairman:** The Deputy is two minutes over time. I will let him back in for a second round of questions later. I call on Deputy Munster.

**Deputy Imelda Munster:** I want to get back to the issue of driving tests and the driver theory test. Why did it take the Road Safety Authority so long to make the driver theory test available online when the test for bus drivers was already available online? What were the challenges the RSA was unable to overcome until now?

**Mr. Ken Spratt:** As I understand it, it was a matter of the RSA wanting to crawl before walking or trying to run. A new service was being introduced. An element of systems analysis and design had to be gone through. The RSA had to test that online system. This is something that is new to the authority. It is, therefore, introducing it incrementally. It was initially introduced for a particular type of vehicle. The RSA hopes to roll it out for other drivers but, as I mentioned earlier, there have been some teething problems and challenges. That is something I will be taking up with the chief executive of the RSA with a view to determining what can be done to roll it out more quickly.

**Deputy Imelda Munster:** I was curious because Mr. Spratt said earlier that it was only in the last few days that he had heard about the problems in respect of Windows 8 and above and the fact that the test could not be accessed through approximately 50% of the devices used daily in Ireland. What sort of engagement has his Department had with the RSA in light of the fact that the number of people on waiting lists was spiralling out of control and had reached almost

100,000 people? The Department was aware that the RSA had requested 80 additional testers, although the Department initially granted it only half of that number. Mr. Spratt has said the process of securing the others is now in train. Given the seriousness of the issue and given that waiting lists are spiralling out of control, it does not appear that the Department had very much engagement with the RSA over the past 12 months or so, especially as Mr. Spratt only became aware of the access problems in recent days.

**Mr. Ken Spratt:** We have very regular engagement with the RSA. I personally engage with the chief executive a couple of times a year with nothing on the agenda. I also engage with him several times a year between those meetings with regard to any issues that have arisen. Mr. O’Leary is the assistant secretary with responsibility for road safety and related matters. He might be able to update the Deputy on the more detailed engagement that happens between the Department at divisional level and the RSA. My sense of the matter is that we are very close. We are as engaged as we need to be. The RSA comes to us and we come to it whenever issues arise. We are working with the RSA to address these backlogs as quickly as possible. I accept that, as the Deputy has said, we initially only gave the RSA 40 of the 80 testers it had requested but, given that the backlog is growing, we moved this week to provide it with all of the testers it needs. Is there anything Mr. O’Leary wants to add?

**Deputy Imelda Munster:** I am sorry, as we are under time constraints I will make the point that, despite the engagement Mr. Spratt has mentioned, he did not realise that the RSA’s system is not really fit for purpose. The authority has described it as a temporary position, which is not really satisfactory. I want to highlight the fact that, as he has said, Mr. Spratt only recently became aware of this despite the constant engagement with the RSA he has mentioned. I just wanted to flag that. The effort the Department seems to have put into enabling the RSA to tackle those figures is quite shocking given the numbers on waiting lists.

I wanted to touch on another matter, if I have time. It was reported last month that the Pensions Authority had warned the trustees of the CIÉ pension scheme that they could face prosecution if they do not come up with a plan to address a deficit in that scheme. Can Mr. Spratt confirm that the current total deficit does not exceed €975 million?

**Mr. Ken Spratt:** As I understand it, the net pension fund deficit increased by €199 million at the end of 2020 and, as of that time, had reached €975 million.

**Deputy Imelda Munster:** Is the Department of Transport involved in seeking a resolution to the issue? Does it see itself as liable for picking up the tab? How does it intend to react to what appears to have been a gross mismanagement of the scheme?

**Mr. Ken Spratt:** As the Deputy will know, the Workplace Relations Commission issued a proposal in respect of one of the two schemes, the regular wages scheme. It proposed that the retirement age be increased to 65 and this proposal was approved in June 2020. CIÉ has submitted a draft statutory instrument in that regard, which is being worked through. The second scheme, which I believe is the scheme to which the Deputy is referring, is known as the 1951 scheme. Proposals in respect of this scheme were initially voted down by 80% of the members who voted in a ballot last September. However, the trade union group recently balloted members on Labour Court proposals which emerged in November 2020 and, on 5 May this year, the Department was notified that there had been an overall acceptance of those proposals.

**Deputy Imelda Munster:** I am sorry. I had asked whether the Department saw itself as liable for picking up the tab and how it intends to react to what appears to have been gross mis-



management of the scheme.

**Mr. Ken Spratt:** There is a process to be gone through. The Pensions Authority has commenced a section 50 process and has written to the scheme trustees seeking details of a funding proposal to address the deficit. These trustees are required to respond to the Pensions Authority by 22 June. I should point out that CIÉ has offered to engage with the committee. This offer still stands. It is to be hoped that things will become clearer over the coming months. The Minister will then introduce a draft statutory instrument for consultation. I emphasise that this is a matter for consultation. We will then take it from there. That process must be gone through.

**Chairman:** I call Deputy Hourigan.

**Deputy Imelda Munster:** I am sorry. Did the Chairman say my time was up?

**Chairman:** The Deputy may go ahead, but just for a second.

**Deputy Imelda Munster:** Okay. I had thought the Chairman said that my time was up. Mr. Spratt said earlier that the Department wants to improve transport provision. Last week, it was reported that Bus Éireann is to cut some of its intercity Expressway services. I believe nine regional routes are affected. It seems an odd time to suspend services when the country is on the brink of reopening. What is the Department's view on that? Should we be seeking to increase public transport capacity?

**Chairman:** Mr. Spratt may answer briefly, because we have gone way over time.

**Mr. Ken Spratt:** We want to provide services where they are required and when they are required. Bus Éireann is obviously one of our agencies. There is a commercial operation, which is that particular part of the company's operations. It needs to take decisions based on the market. It has to take decisions based on the revenues it can generate. Based on the services-----

**Deputy Catherine Murphy:** I cannot download the material sent to me.

**Mr. Ken Spratt:** Sorry, I have lost my train of thought. The summary of it is, from the Department's perspective we want to ensure services are available where they are required. However, decisions for Bus Éireann are decisions for the company itself.

**Chairman:** As Deputy Hourigan does not appear to be present, I call Deputy Colm Burke.

**Deputy Colm Burke:** I am at the convention centre. Over €1 billion has been spent on road improvement and road maintenance programmes. The big complaint I constantly hear is about where major road improvement is carried out and shortly afterwards another utility company comes along and excavates it again to put down ducting, cables or whatever. What kind of co-ordination involving local authorities takes place before work starts to avoid duplication and excessive expenditure? I was a member of Cork City Council during 2003 and 2004 when there was major refurbishment in Cork city. We notified all the utility companies that we would not allow any excavation to take place for ten years once it was completed, meaning that they had to put in all their required ducting. Is it the Department policy to co-ordinate work with all the utility companies that operate in the State?

**Mr. Ken Spratt:** I will ask my colleague, Mr. Mullaney, who is the principal roads adviser to take that question.

**Mr. Dominic Mullaney:** I deal with the roads issues. The Deputy is quite right. There is

an issue which in the past required to be addressed regarding road openings. Quite recently the Department updated what is called the purple book, which provides the guidelines on road openings. It also has put in place centralised portal systems in order that all applications come through the one system and are then diverted to the relevant local authority. It is a single portal which speeds up the whole process. What the Deputy says is right. There is provision for local authorities to have embargoes on reopening a road. If for some reason a road has to be reopened by a utility within a short period before the period of five years, or in some cases ten years, is up, there is a surcharge to be paid by the person who does so.

**Deputy Colm Burke:** Is there a system in place whereby the utility companies operating in this country are advised in advance before major road infrastructure works take place? That is my question.

**Mr. Dominic Mullaney:** Absolutely. The road programmes are made available to them because three-year plans are prepared on a rolling basis. They are made available to utilities so that they can see where the works are taking place and they can plan their work in order that they get in before it.

**Deputy Colm Burke:** Mr. Mullaney referred to a surcharge. Can we get details of the number of companies where surcharges were imposed? Do particular utility companies incur a higher number of surcharges because of their not planning ahead and not being there before the major road infrastructure work takes place?

**Mr. Dominic Mullaney:** It is something we can certainly follow up on. I would not like to say I could have it to the Deputy immediately because we will have to go back to the local authorities to collate the information and go to the road management office, RMO, which operates the central system. We can certainly follow up and check how it is being applied across the country.

**Deputy Colm Burke:** Regarding the major road projects taking place now, are all the utility companies given the option of putting in place ducting along those main highways or is there any process for that? This is about planning into the future, whether it is ten, 15 or 20 years' time. Is that option being made available?

**Mr. Dominic Mullaney:** In terms of motorways, there are restrictions regarding the placement of ducts. It is not the norm. Longitudinal ducts are put in place along roads in order to cater for future things like variable message signs. TII has put in extra ducting along dual carriageways where there are gaps in the network.

**Deputy Colm Burke:** Coming back to my initial question, is the Department satisfied that local authorities have made progress in recent years in advising utility companies beforehand or does further work need to be done on this? I have come across cases where the local authority has carried out major resurfacing or major drainage work and six months later, I have seen the same roadway being excavated again.

**Mr. Dominic Mullaney:** There is actually a liaison committee, which has representatives from local authorities and representatives from all the utilities across the board. They meet about three or four times a year. It is called a joint utility local authority, JULA, group. That is the forum where any of these issues get raised and addressed. If industry representatives feel they are not fully informed, they can raise it at this particular forum and there is follow-up to it.

**Deputy Colm Burke:** I ask Mr. Mullaney to come back to me on the surcharges.

**Chairman:** We have gone three minutes over time. I will allow the Deputy back in later if we have time.

**Deputy Colm Burke:** May I ask one final question?

**Chairman:** No. We have gone three minutes over time. I need to accommodate other Deputies. As Deputy Carthy is not present, I call Deputy Devlin.

**Deputy Cormac Devlin:** I thank the witnesses for attending this morning. I also thank them for the detailed information they provided in advance of today's meeting which is greatly appreciated.

My first question is for Mr. Clonan. I represent Dún Laoghaire and obviously I have great affinity and respect for the work that the Irish Coast Guard does, in particular the volunteers in the Dún Laoghaire Coast Guard unit. My information is that the Dún Laoghaire Coast Guard is quite busy and I expect it to be far busier this summer given the requirements for an outdoor summer. That will place considerable pressure and strain on the volunteers. My information is that 20 volunteers are attached to the Dún Laoghaire Coast Guard. How is the recruitment of new volunteers nationally going? Obviously, I am sure that the Dún Laoghaire Coast Guard could do with more. Is there a cap on the number of volunteers attached to each Coast Guard station? I also seek information about the replacement of and investment in equipment for Coast Guard stations.

**Mr. Eugene Clonan:** There is quite a lot in those questions but I will do my best to go at them. Regarding the Coast Guard maritime search and rescue function, we have the three rescue co-ordination centres and search and rescue units on the coast to respond. There is our search and rescue helicopters, the RNLI and, finally, our Coast Guard units, of which there are 44. There are three functions. Every team has a search function. They have vehicles, they break into teams, they have PPE and they search the coast. The next function a Coast Guard team could have is a boat. The Howth team, over on the other side of the harbour, has a boat. They are trained in that, equipped and so on. Another function a Coast Guard team has is a cliff team. Greystones has a cliff team, a boat and a search team. They are trained on that.

I will concentrate now on Dún Laoghaire. Dún Laoghaire has a small search team, an RNLI unit in the harbour and the helicopter behind it in Dublin Airport. Based on the risk assessment, that is the search unit for that area and it is very busy. With Covid, and looking at last year and this year so far, in the first quarter of this year we responded to about 435 incidents nationwide. During the month of August last year we responded to 430 incidents in just one month. We are expecting a huge ramping up of incidents this year. It is not the fishermen or the merchant ships; it is the people of Ireland availing of recreational facilities, particularly around Dún Laoghaire: the Forty Foot, Seapoint and the surrounding areas.

As for the number in each station, generally a search team has about 15 people. If you add boats and cliff teams, the number goes up to 25. As to how we recruit, every team has 15 members. It has a volunteer person in charge, a volunteer deputy, an education officer and a training officer. They are the main functions and they recruit locally.

**Deputy Cormac Devlin:** Yes, they do. Staying with that issue, Mr. Clonan mentioned vehicles. Is it true that volunteers cannot use their vehicles? I understand that in some stations they can. Obviously, however, it limits their ability to respond if they cannot. I understand that the Coast Guard vehicles are one of the four blue light vehicles but they are limited in where

they can use those vehicles. Maybe that is more a question to the Department than Mr. Clonan, but that hampers the ability of volunteers, depending on their location, to respond to incidents. I am just thinking ahead to this summer, as I said. I am nervous because they do fantastic work, the volunteers are on call 24-7 and we need to ensure they can respond but my information is that some stations can use the vehicles and bring them home so they can respond more quickly to incidents while other stations cannot. What are the criteria there? Who can use the vehicles and when?

**Mr. Eugene Clonan:** All the units are search teams. We need vehicles for towing boats and vehicles for moving the equipment. They have to be extremely mobile. Most units have two four-by-fours and, depending on their functions, may have a cargo van, a quad or whatever, but it is based on that. There is no restriction on using vehicles. If they are on exercise, they use the vehicles. If they are on a call-out, they use the vehicles. The officer in charge, OIC, has charge of his or her vehicles. If they are on exercise or are called out to an incident, they use the vehicles. There is no restriction on using vehicles. In the event of distress or someone being in immediate danger of loss of life, they can put on the blue lights and respond. We are working with the Road Safety Authority. It has emergency driving courses for the emergency services. Deputy Devlin is correct that we are one of the blue light services along with the fire service, the ambulance service and the Garda. For a small organisation there is a huge burden, if you want to call it that, or a requirement to train people to be able to drive safely. All our volunteers have been trained in driving with blue lights. We are a little different from the other three services in that they are allowed to break the rules of the road, basically, where it is safe to do so, whereas our guys must stay within the rules of the road when there is an emergency. We are in discussions with the Department on legislation to amend that. With the other emergency services there are specific blue light driving courses on which you drive at speed and that type of thing. That is in the pipeline.

**Deputy Cormac Devlin:** That is really welcome. I am delighted to hear that that is in the pipeline and under way.

Finally, if I am a volunteer with the Coast Guard-----

**Chairman:** Deputy, I will let you in for a second round of questions.

**Deputy Cormac Devlin:** No problem at all.

**Chairman:** Deputy Carroll MacNeill is not present. If either her or Deputy Carthy show up, I will allow them in later. Deputy Verona Murphy is next.

**Deputy Verona Murphy:** Good afternoon, everybody - or good morning still, I should say. I am up early enough for it to be the afternoon. I welcome everybody to the committee meeting. As we have only five minutes each, I want to make a couple of observations that have been brought to my attention. One is the theory test going online. It appears it is not the only problem, in that you have to have a certain type of software on your computer to use it but if you apply for a test you do not get one until 2023. Maybe that can be brought back to the RSA. It could be that nobody knows the answer to this but could somebody supply to the committee a figure for the cost of putting the theory test online and how much was spent on it? Ultimately, it is a bit of a disaster at the minute.

Regarding the appropriation accounts - and this is probably a question for Mr. Spratt - paragraph 2.10 relates to the €1.2 million that was paid out in respect of the Smith v. Meade case.

That case arose because, effectively, the wrong transposing of a directive on car insurance occurred. Who within the Department has been held accountable for that failure? If the Exchequer is down just short of €1.2 million due to that mistake, have lessons been learned? If so, what lessons have been learned?

**Mr. Ken Spratt:** I thank the Deputy. I have a very long note in front of me which, if I were to read through it, would probably take up all her time and probably even go over it, so what I might do about the lessons learned is come back to her with a context note but also set it out in a note for-----

**Deputy Verona Murphy:** I would be delighted with that. It would suit me fine to submit it to the committee. That would be great. I ask that Mr. Spratt do the same in respect of my next observation. From the point of view of value for money and the Committee of Public Accounts, I understand why the search and rescue service-----

*(Interruptions).*

**Deputy Verona Murphy:** -----contract, as the Department outlined in its letter. However, it has been brought to my attention that significantly, €7.5 million was paid out perhaps over ten years ago in respect of night vision goggles in addition to CHC helicopters. As the training has yet to be completed, it would appear that those goggles are not being used in the service at all. I need to understand how we spent €7.5 million on something that has not yet been used. Would Mr. Spratt be able to compile something on that for me?

**Mr. Ken Spratt:** I can do that, but if I could just address the matter very briefly, there is-----

**Deputy Verona Murphy:** No. If Mr. Spratt could just submit exactly the history of the matter, where it is at and where it is falling down because it is a significant amount of money and it is ten years old. I have some other questions, so if Mr. Spratt could submit a report to the committee on that, I would be delighted.

**Mr. Ken Spratt:** I will submit that. The situation is a bit more positive than the Deputy thinks but we will provide her with a note on that.

**Deputy Verona Murphy:** Good. I appreciate that. I am just concerned that it would take that length of time. It may not be through any fault of the Department's at all. I thank Mr. Spratt.

The other thing I am concerned about is that the Department's report says we are missing a significant number of board members from the likes of CIE. Is that still the situation?

**Mr. Ken Spratt:** The Department has 19 agencies with boards under our aegis. Obviously, we need to recruit board members. We have processes in place to recruit those board members. We need to make sure we have the knowledge, skills, expertise, capacity, competence and capability for all our board members, so filling the board member vacancies does take time. Yes, we have some vacancies on a number of our boards but we are trying to fill them as quickly as we possibly can. In that context, did the Deputy mention the board of CIE?

**Deputy Verona Murphy:** Yes, and I also looked at the Port of Cork. I know that, up to December, with Brexit pending, there were five members of the Port of Cork board whose vacancies had not been filled.

**Mr. Ken Spratt:** We move as quickly as we can to fill those board vacancies and we have

processes under way for-----

**Deputy Verona Murphy:** That is okay but it is still the case. I do not understand this in respect of vacancies because we have plenty of notice.

**Mr. Ken Spratt:** Yes.

**Deputy Verona Murphy:** Why does it take so long? I understand the competencies and I know many people, particularly from the road haulage sector for instance, who would have certain competencies and practical experience but may not meet the exact criteria the Department is looking for, but perhaps we may be able to discuss this issue again. There is one other issue-----

**Mr. Ken Spratt:** There is only one vacancy on the Port of Cork board at the moment.

**Deputy Verona Murphy:** Yes, but with Brexit pending there were five vacancies and this was a crucial time. I do not know whom to pose this question to but it concerns road safety. What does the Department consider to be the most important aspect of road safety? Obviously there are many, but what would be considered to be the most important aspect?

**Mr. Ken Spratt:** Before I hand this matter over to Mr. O'Leary, having competent drivers on our roads is the most important thing to me regardless of the vehicle the person is driving. I will ask Mr O'Leary if he wishes to add anything to that point, but that for me is the most important thing.

**Mr. Ray O'Leary:** I thank the Deputy. I am the assistant secretary with responsibility for road transport. To be honest, you would never say there is one single factor because when you look at most, in particular fatal, accidents, there are usually a number of factors involved.

**Deputy Verona Murphy:** Because of the time constraints, I will be more direct. Would Mr. O'Leary consider the condition and state of the road as being such a factor?

**Mr. Ray O'Leary:** That is generally not the prime cause. As the Secretary General has said, it is generally driver behaviour that is the main cause of fatalities on the roads. The classic killers which are the target of enforcement-----

**Deputy Verona Murphy:** Where I am coming at it from is the way roads funding is allocated per kilometre as opposed to the state of road. Does Mr O'Leary not think that approach is contradictory to our road safety measures?

**Mr. Ray O'Leary:** There is a specific programme within the local and regional roads allocations which is safety targeted. Mr. Mullaney could speak about that at greater length but our time is limited. Local authorities apply for specific safety schemes, as indeed does TII, which targets specific safety schemes within its programme which has been expanding recently.

**Deputy Verona Murphy:** I will certainly need to talk to the Department about this because with the increase in the traffic to Rosslare, a number of significant safety issues are arising that I would have brought to the attention of the council, but I understand these are under TII's remit. I do----

**Chairman:** Deputy Murphy has gone way over her time, and I ask that Mr. Mullaney might come back to her with a note on her question on how money is distributed and whether this should be on a road safety or on a per kilometre basis, if the Deputy is happy with that.

**Deputy Verona Murphy:** Yes, Chairman.

**Chairman:** I will allow the Deputy in for a second round of questions but I must move on. I have a number of questions for Mr. Spratt. If he can keep his answers short, that would be helpful. A couple of hundred thousand people are waiting for both the theory and the full driver test. Why was the theory test suspended? The theory test can be run in a cubicle with a screen, similar to what is in every bank, post office and public building. Members of the public have asked me this question and I do not have an answer for them but I told them I would raise it with the Department today. I am at a loss as to why the theory test was suspended.

**Mr. Ken Spratt:** We pressed as hard as we possibly could with our colleagues in the Department of the Taoiseach to try to ensure theory tests were not suspended. As was the case with many of the decisions that were taken, the Chief Medical Officer had his view and made his input, and when it came to marginal decisions, public health guidelines overruled and took precedence. While we fought as hard as we possibly could to keep the theory test going and we contributed to the final decision, public health guidance was also submitted and it was a decision that went against us.

**Chairman:** I appreciate, from what Mr. Spratt is saying, that the Department made a case to keep the tests going, but it was one of the decisions that baffled me and many members of the public because it does not take into consideration the practicalities of how this works. I also welcome the fact Mr. Spratt's Department pushed this matter.

I also ask about the instructors, and Mr. Spratt clarified earlier there will be 80 and not 40 extra employed. I very much welcome this good news. On clearing the waiting lists backlog, how many does Mr. Spratt's Department hope to clear in each of the months, July, August and September?

**Mr. Ken Spratt:** Does Mr. O'Leary have a sense of what we could clear in each of those months?

**Mr. Ray O'Leary:** I do not have those figures immediately to hand, Chairman. I have a note from the RSA outlining its plans.

**Chairman:** How many of those are expected to be cleared? Does Mr. O'Leary have a number per month he thinks can be cleared?

**Mr. Ray O'Leary:** I do not have that figure to hand.

**Chairman:** Will Mr O'Leary revert to us with a figure on that, please?

**Mr. Ray O'Leary:** We can provide a note from the RSA outlining its ramp-up plans. It is starting incrementally with the longest waiting non-essential drivers, which has already started. The authority is finding there is quite a heavy dropout rate because these are very often the people who are taking longest to pass their tests. It will be ramped up over time, and as the additional testers are deployed, the numbers will increase during July and August. We can give the committee a note outlining how that figure will ramp up over the course of the year and where we expect to be by the end of the year.

**Chairman:** I make the point to the Department that many people require these tests for employment purposes.

I also raise the issue of motorbike tests being stopped. Again, a constituent who needs a mo-

torcycle to get to work contacted me about this last week. I failed to provide an answer to that person as to how you would catch Covid-19 on a motorbike. I have observed the test because my office is on a circuit used for the motorcycle driving test and I regularly see the candidates passing. There is a motorcyclist and a tester some distance behind him. I fail for the life of me to see how that kind of testing could not have continued. It is just to highlight that. It is to be hoped we will not be into another lockdown or semi-lockdown. If we are, I appeal to the Department that we please keep the theory and the motorcycle tests going.

On the NCT centres, my understanding is these centres are not accepting cash. I have had complaints, especially from pensioners who may not have a card, online banking, plastic card, or whatever. They arrive in to pay by cash and discover they cannot to do so. Is that the case and can the Department do anything about this? While it may be a minority now who may wish to pay by cash, can this matter be looked into and followed up because it is an important issue?

Reverting to Mr Spratt, on the search and rescue business, to date and over a ten-year period, there are commitments of €638 million. Mr. Spratt clarified we will not own any choppers at the end of this period, but yet there is a capital element of €35 million that has been spent, according to my understanding of this. Briefly, what is that €35 million for?

**Mr. Ken Spratt:** I will ask Mr. Clonan to address that point, if that is okay.

**Mr. Eugene Clonan:** The majority of the standing and hourly usage charges are in or around €57 million a year. The charges the Chairman is referring to are the milestone payments at the beginning of the contract, of which there are about six and which amount to a total of-----

**Chairman:** No, what I am asking you, Mr. Clonan, is this. Of the €483 million that had accumulated to date, €35 million is capital costs and further commitments bring the total to €638 million. I thought the €34.5 million in capital costs might be for a helicopter or two helicopters. What is it for?

**Mr. Eugene Clonan:** From what I have here, they are milestone capital payments at the beginning of the contract to set up the-----

**Chairman:** For what? What special equipment?

**Mr. Eugene Clonan:** One was for the supply of a helicopter which was bought by CHC. The other four helicopters are leased. The main purpose of those milestone payments was for the setting up of the four bases in Dublin, Waterford, Sligo and Shannon.

**Chairman:** I find this unusual. We provided €34.5 million in capital costs, which Mr. Clonan said went towards the cost of helicopters, yet the State does not appear to own the door handles on any helicopter.

**Mr. Eugene Clonan:** At the beginning of the contract, we looked at buying everything and supplying it ourselves. That was not going to be feasible because of the additional costs so we went to the market and we got tenders in.

**Chairman:** I understand all of that.

**Mr. Eugene Clonan:** That was part of the tender process.

**Chairman:** As part of a contract with costs of €638 million to date, including a capital element of €34.5 million which the State provided, the State does not own one helicopter or even



the door handle on a helicopter. Mr. Clonan is confirming that to the Committee of Public Accounts today.

**Mr. Eugene Clonan:** That is correct.

**Chairman:** The Department has also clarified that consultants were hired to advise on aviation. This is not to cast aspersions on any organisation that has been hired but will Mr. Spratt indicate whether the balance sheet of a consultancy firm would be checked before it would be hired? A “Yes” or “No” answer will suffice.

**Mr. Ken Spratt:** I am not sure I understand the question.

**Chairman:** It is a very clear question. If the Department is contracting a consultancy firm to provide advice on a company with which it is entering a contract - not just for the search and rescue service - is the balance sheet of the contracting company normally checked, in terms of its financial standing? It is a “Yes” or “No”.

**Mr. Ken Spratt:** We have a tried, tested and trusted public spending code. We have rules around how we procure contractors and consultants. Whether or not there is a specific check on a balance sheet, I am not entirely sure, but what I can say is that this process serves us very well and ensures we get reputable contractors and consultants to supply us with the services we need in a way that is good value for money.

**Chairman:** I presume the financial standing would be checked as part of that.

**Mr. Ken Spratt:** It would be, yes.

**Chairman:** If a company is contracted for any purpose, not just for SAR, it would come with a portfolio and curriculum vitae, so to speak, of work it has carried out and the experience it has in various sectors. Would the Department examine that? Would it be the case that a company with a thin track record or level of experience in the work being undertaken would not be hired? Would that be checked out thoroughly by the Department?

**Mr. Ken Spratt:** It would be. This process has served us well. We check referees and the quality of work done previously. The process has served us very well in terms of the skills and expertise we have procured from consultants and contractors. I would be surprised if there were a suggestion that we were not getting good value for money or purchasing knowledge, skill, expertise, competence, capability that did not exist. To my mind, based on my experience of the last 20 years in similar situations, all the contractors and consultants, while their service is variable, tend to be very good value for money.

**Chairman:** Does the Department look at number of staff and expertise of each staff member employed by a company it engages to provide consultancy services and advice?

**Mr. Ken Spratt:** Yes. That is standard fare. When looking for contractors or consultants, we require them to set out the CVs of the teams that will be working on a project. From time to time, we check the referees on those CVs. “Yes” is the short answer but there is quite a process behind it as well.

**Chairman:** I will now allow members in for a second round of questions. They may ask only one question each. We went over time in the previous round because of the long answer given to the question the Deputy asked.

**Deputy Catherine Murphy:** On the public private partnership, PPP, contracts for toll roads, was there anything built into the contract? If there is not sufficient traffic, the State must pay the toll road operators compensation. Was there anything built into the contract that would have envisaged something like the unimaginable Covid scenario? Was there any safeguard built into the contract for anything like that? Separately, on road maintenance, can we expect to see an underspend in 2020 because of Covid? If so, will that underspend go back to the Exchequer?

**Mr. Ken Spratt:** I will be as quick as I possibly can be. We have two concession PPP contracts. One is for the M3 from Clonee to Kells and the other is for the N18 Limerick tunnel. They provide for variable operational payments to the operator when traffic volumes fall below specified levels. Variable operational payments continue to be payable on both of these contracts and estimates of future liabilities are based on observed traffic data, forecasts of traffic growth and inflation. Inflation indices are derived from the forecast consumer price index on the assumption that toll charges will rise in line with that index. Where return traffic growth and-or inflation differ from the forecast, this impacts on the variable operational payment amounts provided for. Such payments were included in PPP contracts for these important groups, which are less trafficked than those on which such payments are not provided for, to ensure an appropriate balance of risk between the commercial operators and the Exchequer. They were subject to scrutiny before contracts were signed to ensure they deliver value for money and the economic and social benefits they bring. That is a long way of saying there is a risk to be balanced and there are compensation payments provided for in those contracts.

**Deputy Catherine Murphy:** I am not sure whether I got an answer to the question I asked. Was there anything built into the contract in relation to unforeseen circumstances like the loss of traffic last year because of Covid? Is there a get-out-of-jail clause for 2020 or does the State carry all the risk?

**Mr. Ken Spratt:** The State does not carry all the risk. The PPP side of it has to take some risk as well. In those two contracts, they do require compensation which we were contracted to commit to and we have done that.

**Deputy Catherine Murphy:** Okay.

**Mr. Ken Spratt:** On Deputy Murphy's second question about roads maintenance, I will ask Mr. Mullaney to take it.

**Chairman:** Very briefly, Mr. Mullaney, because three Deputies want to get back in.

**Mr. Dominic Mullaney:** Sorry, will Deputy Murphy repeat the question?

**Deputy Catherine Murphy:** Can we expect to see an underspend on roads maintenance in 2020 and, if so, will it be returned to the State or will it be used in 2021?

**Mr. Dominic Mullaney:** There was no underspend in 2020.

**Deputy Catherine Murphy:** That is fine.

**Deputy Colm Burke:** The witnesses may not be able to answer my question immediately. If so, they can drop me a line afterwards. I note that the Department is responsible for the Coast Guard and search and rescue services. My question is about an agreement in Castlefreke, west Cork, that Coillte would transfer land for a new base to be established there. Contracts were

furnished to the Chief State Solicitor's office over 18 months ago and there is still no progress. Perhaps the witnesses will get back to me with an explanation as to why that has occurred. I know the OPW is dealing with the matter but ultimately it falls within the Department's remit. It is not acceptable that contracts furnished by solicitors for Coillte have still not been responded to by the Chief State Solicitor's office. Can Mr. Spratt give me a written reply to that?

**Mr. Ken Spratt:** I will and I will contact the Chief State Solicitor before I come back to Deputy Burke, to see what the hold-up is. There has been quite a bit of Covid-19 interruption, because of lack of access to files remotely, but I will check that out and come back to him.

**Deputy Colm Burke:** The State's solicitor's office is not the problem, it is the Office of Public Works, OPW, which has not responded.

**Mr. Ken Spratt:** I will talk to the chairman and I will come back to Deputy Burke on it.

**Deputy Colm Burke:** I thank Mr. Spratt.

**Deputy Cormac Devlin:** I will not have time to get verbal answers, so can Mr. Spratt or Mr. Clonan come back to me or the committee in writing? Staying with programme C, in terms of the volunteer use of vehicles, if I am a volunteer, the vehicle has to be stored at the base, but is not practical for me to get from my home to the base. Can Mr. Clonan drop a note to clarify the use of those vehicles? It is important we get more vehicles for our stations, but also that they are able to be used.

Is there a strategic plan for the Irish Coast Guard? If there is, can Mr. Clonan furnish me with a copy? The national oil spill contingency planning is under the remit of Department of Transport. When was the last time that was undertaken or practised? I ask the witnesses to come back to me in writing.

I thank Mr. Spratt for the information. What subheading does the marine casualty investigation board come under? I could not find it in the accounts.

In March, I put a question on the transfer of Dún Laoghaire Harbour, among five harbours included. I am sure Mr. Spratt and his Department are delighted to have all that handed over to a different Department. I am inquiring about the funding. I have asked about the funding which was given to local authorities on the transfer of that. It seems funding was given to certain local authorities and not to others. My main concern was Dún Laoghaire-Rathdown not getting a penny. Can Mr. Spratt do a review of that and furnish the committee or me with that?

**Mr. Ken Spratt:** I am happy to come back to Deputy Devlin on all of those things and we will do that as quickly as we can.

**Deputy Verona Murphy:** I will follow suit with Deputy Devlin by posing some questions to the witnesses. Maybe they will come back in writing and I can forward that to the clerk. I would like to know how the Department assessed the efficiencies and effectiveness of the agencies under its remit. What programme of assessment does it carry out to ensure they are operating? I have huge difficulty with some constituents contacting me, who have been waiting for a walk around check for nine months. Without that they cannot move on to take their artic licence. It is a significant issue. I cannot understand it. It is not similar to the theory test. It is carried on outside. I will submit some more to Mr. Spratt, but how does he measure the effectiveness of the agencies under him?

I want to come back to the roads. It is a significant issue. County Wexford has a deficit of €68 million, accrued in a shortfall over the past ten years, in road maintenance moneys. We have approximately 5,600 km of roads in the county. One councillor recently said due to the state of the roads in County Wexford, it is similar to trying to keep the tide out with a fork, in terms of performing maintenance at the level of funding which is given. It is difficult to see a 500% increase in commercial traffic on roads which are underfunded. I want to make the point on the €68 million deficit accrued over a ten-year period. We are firefighting all the time. It just maintenance, maintenance, maintenance. There is no resurfacing.

On the national oversight and audit committee, in terms of roads, we have the worst roads in the country, second only to County Donegal. I would be looking at how roads funding is allocated. I do not believe for one minute it is of benefit to the Exchequer to be funding through the kilometre system, on the basis some of our counties have good roads. As Deputy Murphy alluded to, if maintenance does not need to be carried out, that money should be disbursed into other counties where the roads are significantly worse. That is according to National Oversight and Audit Commission, NOAC, not my opinion.

I thank the members of the Department for coming in.

**Chairman:** I have a couple of things to mention to Mr. Spratt before we close up. I do not want Mr. Spratt to give me an answer now, in terms of the roads in County Offaly. There is a special case for north County Offaly, because the roads are over peat. Mr. O'Leary is nodding in agreement. There is a serious issue there, in terms of road safety. Can someone please have a look at the R400? The engineers and councillors need the money for it. The local population needs it. There are road safety issues with the R400 in the area where the old Derrygreenagh works were. There is a serious situation in north Offaly, because it is going over peat.

The other thing I wanted to briefly mention was the 1951 CIÉ pension scheme. I do not want to go into it in detail. There are people there for 40 years who have paid into a pension scheme and are left in a precarious situation. The trustees have made a High Court application. There should be no further discussion of the 1951 scheme, until that happens. Another member of the committee has already raised this. The Department needs to keep an eye on it, because there are people who have paid into that scheme throughout their term of employment with CIÉ.

The last thing I want to raise with the witnesses is the issue of bus shelters. I have had to write, as a member of a local authority and as a Deputy, to the chair of the National Transport Authority, about bus stops for Mountrath, Castletown, Borris-in-Ossary, Doonane, Crettyard and Ballylynan. It is crazy stuff. There is provision under the local authority Act brought in by the former Minister, Mr. Phil Hogan, whereby that power is given to local authorities. I did not agree with him on many things, but one of the things he did was the provision in that Act.

There is huge frustration at local authority level, because they feel there is significant micromanagement by the Department of Transport. Local authorities have excellent engineers. There are good local authority members. There are good management systems in place. I know it is a matter for the Minister of Transport more than the witnesses, but I do not want to let the opportunity pass. We need to allow the local authorities to breathe. We need to breathe a bit of life and democracy back into local authorities.

Can the issue of bus shelters be delegated back to local authorities? If one goes over the Border, into the Six Counties, there are bus shelters all over the place. There are bus shelters at every half-mile point on the road, including for school buses. We cannot seem to get them

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in counties Laois or Offaly and every other Deputy here will concur with me on this, in terms of their counties. It is too bureaucratic. It is the local authority. Give it the money. Let it do it. It will do it cheaper as well. I ask Mr. Spratt to come back to me with a note on that. I am saying that in a constructive way.

It is good news about the driving tests. I welcome that staff numbers are being increased. We look forward to that being expedited.

We are out of time. I thank all the witnesses for joining us and the Department for the information it provided on a wide range of issues. I also thank the Comptroller and Auditor General and his staff for attending and assisting the committee. It is agreed for the clerk to seek any follow up in the information and carry out any agreed actions arising from the meeting? Agreed. Is it also agreed we publish any opening statements and briefings provided for us today?

I remind members of the committee that directly after the meeting there will be a photo shoot outside, on the Plinth, so they should have their best suits on. I remind members also that we will launch a report on our engagement with the Office of Public Works at 12 o'clock and that the launch will be published on the Oireachtas website. I thank everyone. Go raibh míle maith agaibh. The committee is adjourned. On 9.30 a.m. next Tuesday, 1 June, the committee will meet in private session.

The committee adjourned at 11.31 a.m. until 9.30 a.m. on Thursday, 3 June 2021.