

DÁIL ÉIREANN

AN COISTE UM CHUNTAIS PHOIBLÍ

COMMITTEE OF PUBLIC ACCOUNTS

Déardaoin, 24 Meitheamh 2021

Thursday, 24 June 2021

The Committee met at 9.30 a.m.

MEMBERS PRESENT:

Deputy Colm Burke,	Deputy Paul McAuliffe,
Deputy Cormac Devlin,	Deputy Imelda Munster,
Deputy Alan Dillon,	Deputy Catherine Murphy,
Deputy Neasa Hourigan,	Deputy Sean Sherlock,

DEPUTY BRIAN STANLEY IN THE CHAIR.

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

2018 Report of the Comptroller and Auditor General

Chapter 8 - Control of Humanitarian Assistance Funding

2019 Report of the Comptroller and Auditor General and Appropriation Accounts

Vote 27 - International Co-operation

Vote 28 - Foreign Affairs and Trade

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

Chairman: Apologies have been received from Deputy Verona Murphy. Deputies MacSharry and Devlin are tied up with some parliamentary duties but hopefully they will join us later.

I welcome everyone to the meeting. Due to the current situation in respect of Covid-19, only the clerk to the committee, support staff and I are in the committee room. 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 complying with that constitutional requirement. The Comptroller and Auditor General, Mr. Seamus McCarthy, is a permanent witness to the committee and is attending remotely.

Today we will engage with officials from the Department of Foreign Affairs. We will examine the following from the Comptroller and Auditor General's appropriation accounts for 2019: Vote 27 – International Co-operation; and Vote 28 – Foreign Affairs and Trade. We will also deal with chapter 8 of the Comptroller and Auditor General's Report on the Accounts of the Public Services 2018 - control of humanitarian assistance funding.

We are joined remotely from within the precincts of Leinster House by the following officials from the Department of Foreign Affairs: Mr. Niall Burgess, Secretary General, Mr. John Conlan, chief financial officer and director general of human resources, and Mr. Ruairí de Búrca, director general of Irish Aid. We are also joined remotely from outside the precincts of Leinster House by Mr. Brendan Rogers, deputy Secretary General, and Ms Barbara Jones, director general of corporate services. We are joined remotely from outside the precincts of Leinster House by the following officials from the Vote section in the Department of Public Expenditure

and Reform: Mr. Brian O'Malley, principal officer, and Ms Victoria Cahill, assistant principal. They are all very welcome. I thank them and the rest of the staff from the Department of Foreign Affairs for the briefing material they have supplied for this meeting.

When we begin to engage, I will ask members and witnesses to mute themselves when not contributing so no background noise or feedback will be picked up. As usual, I remind all of those in attendance to have their mobile phones turned off or on silent mode.

Before we start, I wish to explain some limitations regarding parliamentary privilege and the practices of the Houses as regards references witnesses may make to other persons in their evidence. The evidence of witnesses physically present or witnesses 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 their evidence remotely from a place outside of the parliamentary precincts and, as such, may not benefit from the same level of immunity from legal proceedings as a witness physically present does. Such witnesses have already been advised of this and may have thought it appropriate to take legal advice on this matter.

Members are reminded of the provisions of 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 the witness responding to state his or her name when first contributing.

Deputy Paul McAuliffe: I have to chair the housing committee later. I may have to give my apologies as I may not be able to take the slot I have been allocated towards the end of this meeting.

Deputy Colm Burke: I am also in a difficult situation because I have submitted parliamentary questions that are due to be taken at 10.30 a.m.. I may also not be present for my slot.

Chairman: I ask both Deputies to turn on their cameras when they return so that I will be able to see them. I will try to get everyone in before the meeting is over.

Mr. Seamus McCarthy: The key areas of responsibility of the Department of Foreign Affairs include foreign policy advice and co-ordination; promotion of Ireland's economic interests abroad; management of Ireland's development aid programme; and the provision of passport and consular services to Irish citizens.

The associated activities and running costs are funded under two separate Votes. Gross expenditure under Vote 28, Foreign Affairs, amounted to €266 million in 2019. Administration subheads accounted for 72% of that expenditure. The largest element of this was salary costs of some 1,745 staff which came to just under €102 million. Premises expenses of €35 million included costs associated with Ireland's network of embassies and missions abroad. The bulk of the non-administrative expenses comprised annual contributions to a range of international organisations and grants to support services for Irish emigrants.

Receipts into the Vote comprised mainly fees related to the issue of passports and visas, and other consular services. These receipts were about €10.3 million or 17% above the level projected for the year. This was primarily due to a higher than expected level of passport applications in 2019.

A net surplus of just over €15.3 million was liable for surrender to the Exchequer at the year end. I issued a clear audit opinion for the account but drew attention to a significant level of non-compliant procurement in 2019 under the Vote.

Vote 27, International Co-operation, is administered by the Department's development co-operation division. The Vote accounts for around 63% of Ireland's official development assistance, which has a particular focus on states in sub-Saharan Africa. The 2019 appropriation account for the Vote records gross expenditure of nearly €544 million. A surplus of nearly €1.4 million was liable for surrender to the Exchequer. I issued a clear audit opinion for the Vote.

Chapter 8 from my Report on the Accounts of the Public Services 2018 concerns Ireland's programme of official development assistance and, in particular, the controls applied by the Department in respect of the humanitarian assistance funding it provides. I ask members to bear in mind that this report was completed in September 2019 and primarily uses 2018 data. The Accounting Officer will be able to provide updates on any relevant figures.

Humanitarian assistance is distinct from other development aid in that it is often reactive in nature, for example, in emergency situations, such as earthquakes, droughts, wars or political uncertainty resulting in refugee displacement. Such crises can be protracted and there may be a continuing need for humanitarian assistance over an extended period.

In 2018, which was the year of focus for this report, Ireland provided nearly €186 million in humanitarian assistance. Humanitarian assistance accounted for almost a quarter of Irish official development assistance that year. Given the level of humanitarian assistance expenditure, as well as the acute needs of intended beneficiaries, robust control and assurance procedures are key to ensuring that funds are used for the purposes intended and that positive results are achieved.

The conflict in Syria, and the resulting refugee crisis in many neighbouring countries, have been the focus of Ireland's largest ever response to a single humanitarian crisis. The majority of the funding is channelled through various UN agencies, International Red Cross partners, the World Food Programme and non-governmental organisations working in the region.

Depending on the circumstances, the Department may be more or less prescriptive about how the humanitarian assistance funding is to be used. Elements of funding may therefore be referred to as "earmarked", "softly earmarked" or "un-earmarked". All of the Department's development aid is now allocated, monitored and evaluated using a standard grant management procedure. The examination team found that the majority of controls had been appropriately applied by the Department in respect of three funding interventions for refugees inspected in Jordan.

The critical controls over unearmarked and softly earmarked funding are those applied at the partner identification stage. Once such grants have been awarded, the Department does not control how the funding is used by the recipient. It will typically receive a retrospective financial statement showing how the funding was applied, but that-----

Chairman: There are some technical difficulties.

Mr. Seamus McCarthy: As unearmarked and softly earmarked funding-----

Chairman: Apologies, for a moment.

Mr. Seamus McCarthy: Sorry, Chair, is there a problem?

Chairman: Yes. You are back there now again.

Mr. Seamus McCarthy: As unearmarked and softly earmarked funding are generally applied by partner organisations to large programmes already in operation, it is often not possible to directly attribute results, for example, beneficiary numbers or specific outcomes, to the Irish Aid contribution.

For earmarked funding, the Department is in a position to exercise more control at project implementation stage and it is easier to evaluate whether expected project outcomes are actually being achieved. In such cases, the Department reserves the right to carry out an audit of original documentation in support of grant requests, held at the offices of the implementing partner. The Department has procedures in place for monitoring financial statements submitted by partner organisations. However, audits in funded agencies are only conducted in circumstances where this analysis of financial statements highlights problems or there are other indicators of concern. As a result, no such audits have taken place in Jordan and none were carried out in respect of any projects during 2018. I recommended that the Department should undertake a limited number of planned audits each year, to verify information reported by selected humanitarian assistance partners in receipt of earmarked funding and to check original documentation supporting financial returns received.

Overall, we found that the Department has a comprehensive control framework with regard to the provision of humanitarian assistance and that that framework had been relatively effectively applied in relation to the specific projects sampled.

Chairman: I thank Mr. McCarthy for that. The next speaker is the Secretary General, Mr. Burgess. Our time is limited with the Covid regulations. I see from the relevant invitation that Mr. Burgess has five minutes. Perhaps he can try to keep to that.

Mr. Niall Burgess: Go raibh maith agat, a Chathaoirligh. I will do that. I thank the committee for inviting me to assist the committee in its examination of the Appropriation Accounts 2019 and Chapter 8 of the Report on the Accounts of the Public Services 2018 – Controls over humanitarian assistance funding. The committee has already had a summary of the main areas of departmental expenditure and receipts in 2019, and I do not propose to introduce that orally. In many respects, the year under review, 2019, seems far removed from the year that has just passed yet I believe work undertaken then has served us well since.

We published a new framework for providing consular support to Irish citizens abroad after extensive engagement and attentive listening; we expanded our mission network; and brought our global network of honorary consuls home for consultation on how we could improve our service to citizens abroad. We could not foresee that within months we would assist the largest repatriation of Irish citizens in modern times and help protect the social infrastructure supporting Irish communities made newly vulnerable by the pandemic.

We also continued to invest in our passport service, increasing access to the online service and strengthening the safeguards for citizens in the process. The passport online service is now available for 97% of applicants worldwide and the investment of recent years has allowed us

to provide an essential service safely during lockdown and to accelerate the return to standard processing times as we tackle the outstanding Covid backlog.

In 2019 we entered the final phase of the process that ultimately saw Ireland take a seat on the UN Security Council and assume weighty responsibilities in January this year for issues currently affecting the lives of millions affected by political, humanitarian and climate crises. Following extensive consultation with the Oireachtas and the public, we launched a new policy framework for our development assistance. We also supported the restoration of political institutions in Northern Ireland. We sustained engagement in Brussels and scaled up the resources allocated to mitigating the economic and political consequences of Brexit.

I am conscious that the spectrum of programmes and activities covered by Votes 27 and 28 is a wide one. I will elaborate on two aspects, namely, the development and humanitarian activities provided under Vote 27 and the services we provide to citizens under Vote 28.

The scale of the challenges faced by our aid agencies and our development and humanitarian programmes is increasing sharply and rapidly. Last year we saw an increase of over 40% in those requiring humanitarian assistance, an increase of 15% in those facing hunger and food insecurity and the shadow of famine return to Ethiopia. This is against a backdrop of a decline in global GDP last year of over 5%, impacting most severely on the weakest economies. To respond effectively and in a timely manner to the unprecedented level of need, the allocation for emergency response and humanitarian assistance is likely to exceed €180 million this year. It is a source of assurance that the OECD last year concluded that, although Ireland may be small, we are a donor who does things well, channels our development assistance to where it is needed most, exercises leadership and makes a visible difference.

I referred to the investment in technology underpinning the passport service and to the role it has played in helping us to keep pace with demand, which has risen from 647,000 passports in 2014 to 937,000 in 2019, an increase of 45% in five years. While the pandemic reduced demand, the passport service was also required to adapt its service in compliance with Government and public health guidance. When the service scaled up operations in early May, we had some 89,000 passport applications on hand. Today, approximately 55,000 of these applications have been issued and 20,000 are awaiting further action from the applicant. I am happy to say that all of the remaining 14,000 applicants will have been issued with passports by next week.

I have also referred to the unprecedented consular operation to assist with the repatriation of Irish citizens last year. Our network of outstanding honorary consuls was critical to this operation. The service continued to respond to a high level of cases not directly related to the pandemic last year, assisting over 250 families following the tragic death of a loved one abroad as well as over 500 cases requiring complex medical, welfare or legal assistance.

I should mention the complementary work of the emigrant support programme in disbursing assistance to communities made newly vulnerable by the pandemic, especially in Britain, the US, Australia and Canada. A dedicated response fund was established, aimed primarily at protecting the elderly, mitigating the impact of social isolation, responding to individual cases of exceptional hardship, providing mental health supports and bereavement counselling and moving more services online.

As I will step aside from my current role this year, I take this opportunity to make a few brief acknowledgements to those whose support for my role as Accounting Officer has been invaluable. First, I acknowledge the Comptroller and Auditor General and his office and my finance

director, led by John Conlan, and internal audit and evaluation unit, led by Tom Hennessy, for their rigour and impartiality and the assurance this has provided to me. Second, I acknowledge our audit committee which plays a critical role in our oversight and governance, particularly its chair, Jim O'Brien, who will step down this month after five years of public service in this role. Third, I acknowledge the members of this committee, not least for the detailed work they have undertaken over recent years in examining directly our programmes in complex environments in both Africa and Asia. I am conscious that it has been three years since this committee had the opportunity to visit a partner country and see the programme in operation. As the pandemic recedes and we grapple with its legacy, I hope this aspect of its work can be resumed.

I am joined this morning by deputy secretary for global affairs, Brendan Rogers; director general of corporate and passport services, Barbara Jones; chief financial officer, John Conlan; and director general for development co-operation, Ruairí de Búrca. We look forward to working with the committee in further examining our two Votes and addressing any questions arising from the Comptroller and Auditor General's special report on humanitarian assistance.

Chairman: I thank Mr. Burgess for his opening statement and wish him well. He mentioned he was moving on to the next phase of his life. I wish him well with that.

The lead speaker from the committee today is Deputy Sherlock, who has 15 minutes, followed by Deputy Hourigan, ten minutes. I will give the Deputy a reminder when he has three minutes left. Deputy Sherlock, lean ar aghaidh.

Deputy Sean Sherlock: Thank you, Chairman. I hope you are picking me up, load and clear, there.

Chairman: There is very good reception.

Deputy Sean Sherlock: First of all, I will start by wishing Niall well. Forgive me, if I refer to you in an informal manner. I am a former Minister of State in that Department and I have worked with you in the past. We have all been tremendously impressed by the leadership that you have given in such challenging times. I note that you said you were retiring, but you are stepping down as Secretary General. We hope that you will stay within the service in some way, shape or fashion. Personally, I wish you well.

It is important that we acknowledge the role of the Department of Foreign Affairs, both for the work that it does at the bilateral level in terms of its bilateral relations with countries throughout the globe and also at the multilateral level where it deals with the United Nations and other such organisations. We are lucky to have a Department of Foreign Affairs that is staffed by what I would call the A team in terms of the work that it does as a Department throughout the globe. I note, in particular, the reference to consular services. For us, as TDs, and for Senators, our primary interface with the Department of Foreign Affairs is normally through either consular services or the Passport Office. I want to acknowledge that that often hidden and silent work is very significant and that it has helped so many of our constituents throughout the country, particularly where bereavements have occurred. I fully acknowledge that role because it is vitally important, and also that it would be resourced appropriately. Let me start with that.

On passports, where stands the foreign birth registrations process? That might be one that the Secretary General might want to defer to his colleagues.

Chairman: You are on mute, Secretary General.

Mr. Niall Burgess: I will give Deputy Sherlock a very brief answer on that. I am happy to bring Barbara Jones, who is managing the passport service, in on this as well. Essentially, we are prioritising the passport service and the passport backlog at present.

The processing of foreign births registrations is extremely complex and extremely time consuming and, therefore, we are not processing foreign births registrations, FBR, applications as a priority. We are, however, processing emergency foreign birth registration applications. By that, I mean where an application has been submitted which is critical to passing on citizenship to the child of an applicant, we will process that application as a priority. Otherwise, our intention is, in the autumn, as we overhaul the backlog and we return to normal processing times for the passport service, to tackle what is now an accruing backlog in the foreign births registrations. I am joined by Ms Barbara Jones who, with your permission, Chairman, may wish to add anything on this.

Chairman: We do not have Ms Jones there yet. Maybe we will come back to that question in a moment. Ms Jones seems to be having difficulty.

Deputy Sean Sherlock: I am happy to receive a note after this meeting, if that is possible, in terms of a real-time analysis of where the foreign birth registrations is at present.

I will move on. It is significant that today we have a British-Irish intergovernmental meeting here in Dublin. The organisation of that will consume a lot of the resources of the Department. Where are the priorities in respect of the reconciliation fund in the light of the challenges of Brexit and Covid and is there a clear earmarking of funds now to meet those challenges? I would like an understanding of where the thinking is on how those resources are deployed and if there is a pivot towards the challenges of Brexit, or not.

Mr. Niall Burgess: The reconciliation fund has been a critical component of our work in advancing reconciliation in Northern Ireland and in North-South relations as well. The fund has increased steadily in recent years. That is one response. Three years ago, it stood at €2.7 million and this year it is €5 million, inclusive of a contribution to the northwest partnership. That reflects a commitment made by the Government under the New Decade, New Approach agreement to increase funding for reconciliation fund activities. Funding has increased beyond the scope of that commitment.

We recently agreed a new strategy for the reconciliation fund. Much of what the fund has long been doing still needs to be done. It is doing work that other donors and assistance providers are not doing. One element of that work has been to increase its accessibility to applicants. Another element has been to increase the component within the fund for North-South activities, but also for east-west activities. Therefore, we are investing more of the total proportion of the reconciliation fund in activities that support British-Irish links or in activities within Great Britain.

Deputy Sean Sherlock: I thank Mr. Burgess. I will move now the Irish Aid programme. A number of conflicts have arisen in sub-Saharan Africa, particularly in Ethiopia where there is an Irish embassy and aid programmes. I refer to the Gambella and Tigray regions. I am concerned about Irish citizens who are working in those regions. I am concerned on the one hand that there may not be a sufficient deployment of resources to ensure the safety and security of Irish citizens and, on the other, that the programmes, in particular what are known as the safety net programmes to ensure food security, are being hampered by the conflict. Can Mr. Burgess reassure us that there is sufficient protection of Irish citizens, in particular embassy staff, Irish,

non-Irish and local, and of those working in NGOs in the conflict areas in order that they can carry out their work? What is their status? It would be helpful to know if increased resources have been deployed into that effort in real time.

Mr. Niall Burgess: I share the Deputy's concern. It is a concern not just for our embassy staff, but for Irish citizens who play a vital role in many of these regions. There have been two drivers of insecurity in the past couple of years. The first is the growth of humanitarian displacement and conflict in several of these areas, not only in the wider Horn of Africa, but across the Middle East and in parts of the Gulf region and large parts of the Sahel as well. It is apparent from our consular statistics that Irish citizens are to be found in all regions, including the most insecure, for many good reasons. The other driver has been the pandemic. This has been of real concern to us, including in regard to the protection of our staff also in areas that are not particularly subject to conflict or other forms of insecurity. We have extraordinarily dedicated staff across our embassy network in Africa, but many of them have been working in areas where the pandemic has taken a very significant toll through a period when they have not been able to benefit from vaccination. Many have been working in areas where the pandemic has taken a significant toll and they have not been able to benefit from vaccination. We have strict protocols in place regarding the safety of our staff. Safety comes first. Most of our staff in Africa have been working from home where they can. On the other hand, we have new responsibilities on the UN Security Council and we have taken a lead in its efforts to address the conflict in Ethiopia. Security and safety have to be balanced with the job that we do. We have visited Tigray a number of times. Our ambassador and head of development in Ethiopia have been to Tigray, always in close consultation with the UN and local authorities, and under strict security protocols.

Deputy Sean Sherlock: That is reassuring. That is the first time that we have heard that. We have read about the conflict in Tigray but it is reassuring that there are clear protocols for the safety of both embassy staff and those working on the ground. I cannot let the opportunity pass to ask about Bóthar and whether there was any financial exposure of Irish Aid or the Department to the recent Bóthar scandal. Can the Secretary General tell us anything about any exposure that the taxpayer has had?

Chairman: The Deputy can by all means ask the question. I remind him that there is an ongoing court case and he should not to veer into that territory. The Deputy will understand that we need to be careful not to prejudice its outcomes, but he can proceed.

Deputy Sean Sherlock: I am conscious of what the Chair is saying. I will put the question another way. Has Irish Aid ever funded Bóthar? That is a factual yes-no answer. I want to get a perspective without prejudicing any ongoing case.

Mr. Niall Burgess: The short answer is that we funded Bóthar but we have not funded it in recent years. We had some concerns and as a result, we did not respond positively to applications for funding in 2018 and 2019. I ask my colleague, Mr. de Búrca, to elaborate briefly and carefully on this.

Mr. Ruairí de Búrca: The Department historically funded Bóthar. We have no evidence to suggest that the funding that we provided was used in any way improperly. In 2016 and 2017, we raised a number of questions regarding Bóthar's corporate structures. It did not provide us with satisfactory answers. On that basis, we decided in 2018 not to agree to a request for additional funding because it had not progressed the governance changes that we asked for. Without wanting to go into any area which may be the subject of an investigation, this showed

the robustness of our controls and how we look at and assess the corporate structures of organisations that we fund. We took the best decision we could at the time. We have regular contact with the Charities Regulator which is in some ways a new operator. The Charities Regulator conducted its own investigation which is currently suspended pending other actions. We are at advanced stages of negotiating a memorandum of understanding between Irish Aid and the Charities Regulator, which will give us additional comfort in the future. We will be able to take advantage of changes in the past year to the rules and oversight role of the Charities Regulator.

Deputy Sean Sherlock: I wish to ask about the occupied territories and the disbursement of funding, the latest round of which is about €12.7 million but I am open to correction on that. Is the Department satisfied that this disbursement is going exactly where it needs to go? I know there is a particular emphasis on funding education within the occupied territories. Can Mr. de Búrca or the Secretary General provide a perspective on the importance of funding by the Department of Foreign Affairs and the Irish taxpayer into the occupied territories?

Mr. Ruairí de Búrca: This year we will spend about €16.3 million in development and humanitarian funding in the occupied territories and we will probably add some more to that. There is an assessment under way following the recent conflict to understand the nature of the destruction caused and we will be making an additional disbursement of humanitarian assistance once we have received that information from the United Nations. That will be followed up on by our representative office in Ramallah on the ground as well to make sure that it is targeted at the most needy.

Deputy Sean Sherlock: I wish to thank the people in Ramallah as well for the work they do on behalf of the Irish citizens. They do a great job there.

Deputy Neasa Hourigan: I also would like to begin by acknowledging the work of the Department of Foreign Affairs. Our ongoing commitment to humanitarian assistance and particularly to overseas development aid is one of the reasons I am most proud to be Irish. It is one of the most important things that we do on a global level.

I want to stick with the occupied territories now that it has been brought up. Is that €16.3 million an increase from last year in terms of a response to the recent unrest and the damage that has been caused? What controls does the Department have in place? While I am aware this is done in conjunction with the UN, the Irish taxpayer is possibly funding construction or structures that are then removed or bulldozed. What structures do we have in place or what kind of value for money reviews and follow-up work are we doing in instances where that is a concern?

Mr. Ruairí de Búrca: I will take that question. The €16.3 million is approximately the same as the allocation we started out with last year. We have made an initial response of just over €1 million, from memory, to the conflict. As I said in response to Deputy Sherlock, we are awaiting a UN assessment of needs and we will be making a further allocation based on that shortly. I would anticipate that by the end of the year, the total allocation to Palestine will be quite a bit higher than it was in 2020 but we want to do this in a sensible way and on the basis of need.

On the potential destruction of properties, we are part of the West Bank Protection Consortium, along with a number of EU member states and the EU itself, which, over the last decade, has collectively put about €15 million into various infrastructures, of which our share is approximately €1 million. At present, and this is without an assessment of damage done in the recent conflict, there are outstanding compensation requests for about €625,000, which have been

lodged and on which we are awaiting adjudication. Our *pro rata* share of that is about €12,500. We are active on that. The Minister has raised the question with the Israeli ambassador and directly with his Israeli counterparts in the region. Our ambassador to Israel has also raised this, as have our EU counterparts, and it is something on which Brussels and the EU ambassador to Israel are active. It is one of those things we are working hard on. I think its significance is possibly beyond just the financial value but we are very active on it, as is the Minister.

Deputy Neasa Hourigan: It is very welcome to hear there will be an increase this year because there is a desperate need in that regard. When Mr. de Búrca refers to adjudication, who is adjudicating that?

Mr. Ruairí de Búrca: The UN is performing a needs assessment in the occupied territories at the moment. On the basis of that, there will be a UN appeal to which we will respond.

Deputy Neasa Hourigan: I thank Mr. de Búrca. I want to return to the passport service and, more specifically, the visa service. Immigrants in Ireland who apply for re-entry and renewal are being blocked from making appointments with the Irish Naturalisation and Immigration Service by Internet bots or opportunists. I believe this matter was raised in 2018. I have had representations since Christmas that this is still an issue and people are still being required to engage with an outside actor, shall we say, to make an appointment for a visa. A visa appointment is often time-specific for the people who need it. They need to renew a visa or access something. I understand that things are more complex because of the pandemic, but where are we with that issue?

Mr. Niall Burgess: I cannot answer that question authoritatively. The immigration and naturalisation service operates under the framework of the Department of Justice. The Department of Foreign Affairs provides the platform globally through our embassy and mission network which allows for those who wish to come to Ireland and who need a visa in order to do so to make an application through an Irish Embassy. It essentially operates through a Department of Justice process so I am not sighted on the mechanics of that.

Deputy Neasa Hourigan: I will turn to the International Fund for Ireland, IFI. Perhaps it is not for me to call it “significant”, but there was an underspend in recent years. The Estimate grant provision to the IFI was €2.6 million but only €200,000 was expended in 2019. Can the witnesses speak to that and elaborate on why that might be the case? For people who do not know what we are talking about, the IFI includes initiatives such as the personal youth development and the peace impact programme across the island.

Mr. Niall Burgess: I was a director of the International Fund for Ireland in a previous incarnation and I know the value of the work it has done with disadvantaged communities in Northern Ireland, in particular, but also in cross-border work. The International Fund for Ireland, until very recently, was essentially scaling down its activities and working through its existing workload. One of the real values of the International Fund for Ireland has been the connection it made between the US, in particular, and other donors and reconciliation activities in Northern Ireland. We have been working with the board of the IFI for some years to allow it to sustain and maintain its activities, particularly with US support and possibly also with EU support. However, it was unable to secure matching funding or support until recently. The funds we had in our account were not ultimately deployed to the IFI because we did not have matching funds from other organisations. That has now finally changed because the IFI has secured funding support and a commitment to funding support for another phase of activities with a significant commitment of funds through Congress in the US and from the UK. We now believe its fund-

ing activities and programmes are getting back on track, as is needed.

Deputy Neasa Hourigan: May I delve into that a little? Does the governance structure mean that the €2.6 million cannot be accessed unless it has a partner fund from an outside source?

Mr. Niall Burgess: Yes, the IFI draws on sources from a number of funds and we believe it would not have been a good outcome if the IFI had been solely funded by the Irish Government. Effectively, it would have made it too closely associated with one donor and an arm of Irish Government funding activity, which I think would not have been good for the IFI or for the perceptions of its activities on the ground. From our point of view, therefore, critical to giving the IFI the role and the authority it needed was that it had a broader funding base.

In its very origins, the IFI received funding from the US, Australia, New Zealand and then subsequently from the European Union as well. We offered some modest support to help it scale up its activities and we have also been encouraging the British to give it support in order that it has a broader funding base and can operate in a way that is perceived as a wholly independent entity. The commitment to funding, by the way, is €20 million over the lifetime of its new strategy, which runs from this year to 2024. That is the context in which we are funding it this year.

Deputy Neasa Hourigan: I understand the joint initiative as a value and a goal in terms of the organisation. It seems extraordinary to have €2 million or so sitting in a bank account every year waiting and not being utilised, however. Having lived in Belfast for five years, I must say, when one is dealing with things like the peace walls, we have never needed it more and there is a lot one could do with that money. While I understand the intention, is waiting for the partner funding the best option? Does that not curtail the good work that money could do?

Mr. Niall Burgess: I will draw the broader context. Through that period, for some of those years when we were not drawing down the funding, which was allocated but not drawn down by the Department of Foreign Affairs for the IFI, we were also scaling up our reconciliation fund programming and we also had funding coming through from European Union sources. I cannot say that the IFI was knocking on the doors for a project that was critically in need of funding that could only be supplied through this route. I am not sure there were opportunities missed there. From our point of view, however, it would not have been helpful to the IFI if it had been in receipt of funding solely from the Irish Government. That is so much outside the kind of framework in which it is operated and that is the reason we did not draw those funds down for the IFI. They were earmarked for the IFI.

Deputy Neasa Hourigan: What were the challenges to finding those partner funds?

Chairman: The Deputy is over time. I will let her back in. Deputy Catherine Murphy has five minutes.

Deputy Catherine Murphy: We are getting into very short time slots now so I will ask a series of questions on one issue. Mr. Burgess might give me very brief replies, please. There is always a discussion about leasing versus ownership and trying to get the balance right. I want to focus on Ireland House in Tokyo. I understand that is still under construction. It is for the embassy and will obviously host State agencies such as IDA Ireland, Bord Bia and so on. I understand there was a significant discount from the Japanese Government. Mr. Burgess might tell us what the site initially cost and what discount was achieved. Were other sites shortlisted?

How was the site identified? Would, for example, IDA Ireland make a contribution or does it exclusively come from the Department of Foreign Affairs' budget? Has Covid-19 had an impact on the delivery of the embassy?

Mr. Niall Burgess: I am conscious of time. I will give the Deputy as succinct an answer as I can on that. First, I am acutely conscious of leasing versus purchasing. We know that where we have purchased before, in the long term, that has delivered much more value for the State. We have been looking for opportunities where we can save in the long term and provide a better platform for promoting Ireland through purchase. In a way, Ireland House in Tokyo is probably the best example of that on the ground at the moment. Construction has not yet begun. We are still in detailed discussion with IDA Ireland, Enterprise Ireland, Tourism Ireland and the other agencies and interested partners on the precise fit-out of that building and on the exact requirements they need for their own platforms in Japan over the next ten or 15 years. We are taking a long-term view here.

The site was purchased for €7 million and it is a premium site in Tokyo. It was a discount of 40% to 50% on the commercial value of the site. We hope to put that project out to tender in the early autumn and begin work on construction of the site in the spring. The timescale has fallen adrift but only by a few months. It has not been materially affected by Covid-19.

Deputy Catherine Murphy: Okay. I thank Mr. Burgess for that. I will also ask about Irish Aid and Palestine. The briefing cites a figure of €12.7 million for 2019 only. I am trying to address cases where medical supplies might be destroyed by conflict, for example. Does the Department seek reparations in such cases? Has it recovered anything from Israel in that year? Is that approach taken by the Department?

Mr. Niall Burgess: The answer we have given is that we seek compensation where funds have been destroyed. There has clearly been enormous destruction in the region over recent months. We seek compensation. I stand to be corrected by Mr. de Búrca but I do not believe we have received compensation.

Deputy Catherine Murphy: Has it happened in any years?

Mr. Ruairí de Búrca: I do not have the information in front of me. Over the past number of years we have not received any compensation but I could not give an accurate statement going back historically.

Deputy Catherine Murphy: Will the witnesses come back to the committee with a note on that please?

Mr. Ruairí de Búrca: Yes.

Deputy Catherine Murphy: How many properties does the State own abroad? Will the witnesses send us a list?

Mr. Niall Burgess: I have been told there are 35 from 167 properties in total.

Deputy Catherine Murphy: Are there plans to build where we are currently leasing? Is there a value-for-money process under way for that?

Mr. Niall Burgess: Yes. We have purchased over recent years where we see an opportunity to do so. We have been opening new missions at quite a rapid rate in recent years. By the end of this year we will have opened 14 new missions in total. The best way to establish a presence

on the ground and to understand the market well is to either co-locate with another partner, and in many cases that is done with EU partners or the European Union itself. Once established, we can then look for opportunities for purchase. For example, with recent missions opened in both Bogotá and Santiago and having been established there in the past two to three years, we are looking at purchase options to give us a more sustainable footing in both of those countries in the longer term. It is a part of our thinking and process.

Deputy Imelda Munster: I want to get back to the passport backlog. Responses to parliamentary questions indicate that at the end of April, there were approximately 89,000 backlogged applications, with approximately 16,000 processed by 4 May. The Minister stated last Tuesday week that the backlog was on track to be cleared by the end of June. Is that still the case?

Mr. Niall Burgess: Yes. The backlog of 80,000-----

Deputy Imelda Munster: Was it not 89,000?

Mr. Niall Burgess: Yes, the Deputy is quite right. It was 89,000 applications that accrued during that period. That included quite a number of applications where further documentation was required from the applicant.

Deputy Imelda Munster: Okay. Is the backlog on track to be cleared by the end of June?

Mr. Niall Burgess: To some extent that depends on whether we get the documentation from the applicant. Currently we have a further 14,000 of that backlog of 89,000 that will be issued by next week. I mentioned those numbers in my opening comments. Where the paperwork is completed by the applicant, they are being prioritised and being issued rapidly.

Deputy Imelda Munster: Did Mr. Burgess mention a figure of 104,000? How many of those are awaiting further information? I would imagine it is not a large percentage.

Mr. Niall Burgess: Some 20,000 applications are awaiting further documentation from the applicants.

Deputy Imelda Munster: That is less than one fifth of the backlog of 104,000, which leaves 84,000. I ask this question because the Minister stated last week that 37,000 of the 89,000 had been processed and would be cleared by the end of June. Given that the backlog is even larger now, I suspect that it will more likely be the end of July or August before the backlog is cleared.

Mr. Niall Burgess: That depends on when we get the completed applications from the citizens.

Deputy Imelda Munster: No, further information is awaited in only one fifth of the backlog. Is it more likely to be the end of July or August before the remainder are cleared?

Mr. Niall Burgess: There is another figure, that being, the number of applications that we have received since the Passport Office returned to functioning in full, which is in addition to the backlog that accrued before the office reopened fully. The number received since then is in excess of 100,000.

Deputy Imelda Munster: Yes. Of the 89,000 from April, how many have been cleared? We are in the last week of June.

Mr. Niall Burgess: Some 55,000 of those applications have been issued as passports and another 14,000 will issue by next week.

Deputy Imelda Munster: It is likely that everything will be cleared towards the end of July, or at least mid-July, as opposed to the end of June as stated.

Mr. Niall Burgess: No. By the end of June, we will have cleared all of the completed applications that we have on hand. Some of the applications in the backlog were not complete and, therefore, we cannot issue passports in respect of them until we receive further documentation from the applicants. That is the source of the delay. In other words, the date of issue lies in the hands of-----

Deputy Imelda Munster: I am sorry, but for the sake of clarification, is Mr. Burgess saying that, by the end of next week, all of the outstanding 89,000 applications will have been cleared? This is a yes-no question.

Mr. Niall Burgess: No. I am saying that all completed applications will be cleared. We cannot clear applications where we do not have the documentation.

Deputy Imelda Munster: All completed applications will be cleared by next Thursday.

Mr. Niall Burgess: By the end of June, yes.

Deputy Imelda Munster: As of May, there was a separate backlog of more than 100,000 online applications. It is my understanding that the resumption of the passport express service, both North and South, is dependent on that backlog being cleared. How long does Mr. Burgess expect that will take?

Mr. Niall Burgess: With the Chair's permission, I might invite Ms Jones, the director general for passport services, to answer.

Ms Barbara Jones: I would make a significant distinction, in that the only correct use of the term "backlog" for the passport service relates to the Covid backlog of 89,000. As Mr. Burgess has clarified, we have issued 55,000 passports, with 14,000 more on track to be completed by Thursday. When we get the information for the extra 20,000 applications, they will be fast-tracked because we are keen to support the issuing of passports to those who have been affected by the pandemic. In the meantime, we have continued to meet our service target of a ten-day turnaround for all online applications. Therefore, there is no backlog in our system. In fact, it is a great tribute to the staff of the office, who must attend on site, that they have resumed. We have scaled up services, are clearing the backlog with great speed and are accelerating the return to normal service levels.

Deputy Imelda Munster: What is the backlog with online applications?

Ms Barbara Jones: There is no backlog with online.

Deputy Imelda Munster: Is there none whatsoever?

Ms Barbara Jones: There is none whatsoever because it is the most efficient way for anybody, North or South, or globally, to lodge an application for a passport. The investment we have consistently made in recent years in a modern, award winning, world-class passport service is now paying off as we scale up post-Covid. We have apologised to, and are very sorry for, those who have been delayed by any of the disruption in service, which was due to the

Covid-19 pandemic and not through any fault in our systems. I give a cast iron guarantee we will fast track those remaining applications once, as the Secretary General said, we receive all the outstanding documentation. They are top of the queue.

Deputy Colm Burke: I thank the Department of Foreign Affairs and all the people working there. I dealt with the Department when I was based in Brussels as a Member of the European Parliament. Its officials were always extremely helpful with anything we were involved in.

I raise the issue of non-governmental organisations, NGOs. We see that €91 million was disbursed, predominantly to Irish NGOs. Can the witnesses outline what the checks and balances are there when money is disbursed to an NGO? A colleague has already raised the issue of one organisation where funding was stopped in 2017. What kind of system is there for checking how that money is spent and making sure it is spent on the projects that are outlined to the Department?

Mr. Ruairí de Búrca: I will take that. There is a series of extensive checks. NGOs apply to a number of different schemes and, depending on the nature of the contract, the checks may vary but they are always thorough and rigorous. For very large NGOs, the household names such as Trócaire, Concern and organisations like that, we have predictable multi-year funding. We agree a set of multi-annual outcomes, which determine that funding. We do a very thorough investigation of organisational capacities, governance checks, etc., at the beginning of that multi-annual framework period, which then enables us to have a degree of satisfaction that this is an organisation in which we can have trust. Every given year, we have a secondary checking process, through our standard approach to grant management, which the Comptroller and Auditor General mentioned, where on the basis of audit checks, monitoring, reports and a series of other meetings, we agree to disburse.

Deputy Colm Burke: I will come back to the organisation mentioned earlier. Moneys were supposed to be allocated for projects. It appears those projects never got any funding of any description. How can officials be absolutely certain, with the checks and balances they have, that funding is allocated? We had one example of a fairly reputable organisation where it now turns out the funding did not go to the projects.

Mr. Ruairí de Búrca: I want to be careful in terms of that organisation given the-----

Deputy Colm Burke: I accept that. It is why I have not mentioned the name.

Mr. Ruairí de Búrca: We did not fund that organisation in recent years because it did not meet our governance checks. We raised certain issues with-----

Deputy Colm Burke: The point I am making is that it has now turned out that projects it had identified to give funding to, did not get funding.

Mr. Ruairí de Búrca: We have no evidence, and we checked, to suggest that our funding did not go to the intended-----

Deputy Colm Burke: I am not asking that question. I am asking about the organisations we are giving funding to. Do we make sure the money is going into the projects we are being advised it is going into?

Mr. Ruairí de Búrca: We do that on the basis of our standard approach to grant management. We do audits, management checks and monitoring visits. Our embassies also check. We

have regular meetings. We go and see, and we follow the money. We have quite a strong record of uncovering frauds where they occur and we follow them up. As the question arises in the context of a given organisation, we have no evidence to suggest that Irish Aid funding that went to that organisation historically did not go to where it was intended. However, our governance checks indicated that we were not happy so we decided not to continue funding. That shows that the checks are robust.

Deputy Colm Burke: I have been to a number of places, including Kenya, the Sudanese border and Gaza. In one of the areas I visited, I found two different organisations and both of them were getting the same level of funding. This was not from the Department of Foreign Affairs. One organisation was looking after and providing education to approximately 300 people and the other one, with the same amount of money, was providing education to 3,000 people. How does Irish Aid check that it is getting the results and the best value for the aid it is giving?

Mr. Ruairí de Búrca: It is difficult to answer that question in the abstract about organisations that we do not fund. One of the things we do with organisations we fund is take a detailed check, an organisational assessment, of their capacity to deliver. We agree a results framework, which is reported on regularly and also monitored and checked. One of the really important elements in that is to benchmark performance. We look at that and we make assessments, such as organisation A is better placed to do something than organisation B. One of the other things we bring into this is the fact that often we are not the only funder. We often fund in consortia. One of the very important elements in that is that the members of the consortium share information. A key element here is that we, through our evaluation and audit unit, also evaluate performance perhaps midway through big relationships or we do a joint evaluation, and those evaluations are shared among OECD donors. A very good suite of information is shared. We work with a relatively limited number of organisations. In those partnerships there is a sense of historical knowledge as well. Past performance helps us to determine and give a risk assessment in terms of future relationship.

Deputy Colm Burke: Can I ask a final question?

Chairman: Deputy Devlin is next and he has five minutes. I will let members back in for a second round.

Deputy Cormac Devlin: I welcome the witnesses and thank them for their opening statement. First, I wish Mr. Burgess well in his next endeavours. Starting with the positive, I pay tribute to him and his staff for the wonderful information they disseminate on social media. Mr. Burgess leads from the top in that regard. He is very active on Twitter and that applies across the various missions across the globe. I congratulate him on the work he has done.

I also pay tribute to the staff in the various diplomatic missions across the world for their support to Irish citizens in the face of the pandemic. From early 2020 all of us parliamentarians were engaging with the Department and the work it did and support it gave to citizens in need of sometimes just simple information, but also with regard to repatriation. On that point, does Mr. Burgess have a number? He may have said it in the opening statement and I did not catch it. Does he have the number of people the Department assisted in terms of repatriation from early 2020 and the cost associated with that? That is my first question.

Mr. Niall Burgess: I thank the Deputy. I also thank him for his comments about my colleagues in the mission network. We assisted some 24,000 people with phone lines during that period. We assisted directly around 8,500 Irish citizens in returning home, mostly during the

first six months of the pandemic. With regard to those 8,500 citizens, we operated three repatriation flights, one from Nigeria, one from India and one for our citizens in Peru, which was arguably one of the most complex of all the operations. In addition, towards the end of the year we activated our crisis centre and phone lines again to assist citizens who had been stranded in Great Britain. We assisted around 3,500 back then, some on flights and some on ferry connections.

On the total cost of those repatriations, they were handled in very different ways. The flights we organised were mostly reimbursed through EU sources and many of our citizens came home from other parts of the world on flights organised by other EU partners. A basic reimbursement system was put in place for that. In some cases, the operators took direct reimbursement from the citizens and in some cases we brought the citizens home but asked them to reimburse us later. The amount outstanding to our own account is in my report. The actual cost so far is €147,000.

Deputy Cormac Devlin: I thank Mr. Burgess for that information. He mentioned the Peruvian repatriation. Constituents of mine needed to avail of that and it was quite complex owing to the location in which they found themselves. The support and information available to them and the assistance given to them on the ground were exemplary. I want to put that on the record.

On the passport service, I note what Ms Jones said about the volume of renewals and new passport applications. We are all being contacted by constituents at this time. The online service is working excellently. The point was correctly made that people need to provide correct information in order for a passport to be issued. However, there are some anomalies in that regard and where these are brought to the Department's attention, they are generally dealt with very quickly. I thank the Department for that. Is there a figure for the number of renewals expected before the year end? A large number of people have not looked at their passport because they are not planning to travel abroad.

Mr. Niall Burgess: There is a difference between the number of passports that are due to be renewed and the number we believe will be renewed before the year end. Our projections have held fairly firm so far. Our planning is based on the assumption that whereas in 2019, the last full year of operation, we issued just under 1 million passports, the largest number we have ever issued in a single year, next year, in 2022, we will probably issue 1.5 million passports. Many of those not renewed over the previous two years are likely to come back to us for renewal next year. Our current experience is that some people whose passports are due for renewal are not renewing them at present because they are not planning to travel this year.

Deputy Alan Dillon: I welcome the witnesses and thank them for their time and what they do in the Department. On the Appropriation Accounts 2019, I will start by looking at the diplomatic consular offices abroad. The capital assets are listed in note 2.1 on page 11. The total net capital assets at December 2019 was €169 million, with €159 million accounted for by land and buildings. Is there a schedule for all the properties which account for that €159 million?

Mr. Niall Burgess: We have a schedule which we can share. I do not have it in front of me, but I would be happy to do so.

Deputy Alan Dillon: Is there a breakdown to hand of the number of properties held in Ireland and abroad? I would like to get an understanding of the Department's plan to expand the diplomatic footprint, especially following Brexit. Recently, I heard the Minister speak about plans to set up more than a dozen new missions in locations across the globe in places like Latin

America, India, Africa, the Middle East and New Zealand. How are the plans in this regard progressing?

Mr. Niall Burgess: We do not have any capital assets in Ireland, they are all held abroad. The figure is 167 properties in total, of which in the region of 35 are owned by the State.

We have been asked to increase our footprint by 25 or 26 new missions by 2025. That is set out in the Global Ireland programme. Broadly speaking, the idea is to double Ireland's global influence in the period up to 2025. Stepping onto the UN Security Council was one very immediate measure of how we are trying to do that. Essentially, we are trying to increase Ireland's influence on outcomes that matter to this country and to our citizens. By the end of this year, we will have opened 14 new missions. We have already opened 11 missions this year to date. Last month we opened a new embassy in Kiev and next month we will open a new mission, a consulate, in Manchester. In the autumn we will open new embassies in Morocco and the Philippines. The new embassies are one measure of that. We have also scaled up several of our existing embassies. For example, our embassy in London has significant new resources not only from the Department of Foreign Affairs but from across the Government. Our properties essentially provide the platform for a whole-of-government presence. We scaled up our presence in Berlin, in Paris, in several EU missions, in China, Tokyo, in the US and Washington and in the UN. There is another dimension to the scaling-up which is less visible. In that context, we expect that we will open in the region of another 12 missions over the course of the next four years, at about three a year, but the decisions on where those will be have not yet been taken. That is a matter for the Government.

Deputy Alan Dillon: In terms of the impact on appropriation accounts for 2020, what will happen?

Mr. Niall Burgess: Is that the impact of the cost of new missions?

Deputy Alan Dillon: Yes.

Mr. Niall Burgess: The average cost of new missions is somewhere between €500,000 and €1 million per mission per year. That is the running cost. There are also the lease, if we are leasing, operating and salary costs, with some back-up salary costs at HQ too.

Deputy Alan Dillon: I thank Mr. Burgess. What type of effect has Brexit had on the operations of the passport office? I would like an understanding of the impact of Covid on the production of passports. For the benefit of the committee, I would also like to understand and receive an explanation as to what the passport service reform programme entails, what the overall expenditure to date as part of this has been and when it is due to be completed?

Mr. Niall Burgess: With the leave of the Chair, I will ask Ms Jones in to talk about the reform programme. We are approximately halfway through the passport reform programme and have another couple of years to run on this before it is finally concluded.

On the impact of Brexit, most of the Covid-19 backlog of passport applications are from citizens on this island. The number of applications from citizens in Great Britain is a relatively minor portion of that. An area where we are seeing the impact of Brexit is our foreign births registration. For example, the growing number of foreign birth applications that will need to be processed in the autumn, when we can come to that, contains a very high proportion of applications from Great Britain, possibly in excess of half. I will bring Ms Jones in if she wishes to add anything on this point and on the reform programme.

Chairman: Ms Jones might keep her reply brief, as I have a number of speakers to bring back in to the discussion.

Ms Barbara Jones: I will focus on the passport reform programme. We are making a highly ambitious and necessary move to continue the programme that we started in 2016. We started out with a very significant investment of €21.5 million. Our completion date is September 2021. We are now moving towards a final delivery phase of a programme called the passport issuance and processing system, PIPS, not orange pips but a programme for identification, passport and foreign birth registration. We will deliver the final phase of the project of taking traditional paper-based processing and streamlining and re-engineering the service for delivery in 2023.

Deputy Alan Dillon: What has been the expenditure to date?

Ms Barbara Jones: As to the expenditure and PIPS, we are just going out to tender on that project so I will not speculate on the value of the tender. The request for tender is in the final stages. I will send the Deputy the detail on that, if I may, once we have finalised the legal processing on that. Basically, we are at the final stage of the programme we started in 2016 with this envelope of €21.5 million.

Chairman: I call Deputy McAuliffe.

Deputy Alan Dillon: I believe Deputy McAuliffe may be chairing another committee at present if he is not in attendance now.

Chairman: We will allow him to join in should he return.

I have some questions myself now for Mr. Burgess. I want first to recognise the work of the Department on Brexit, including the work of the officials in Brussels, Belfast and Dublin, Their work on behalf of the State and the Oireachtas was to ensure that the worst of all Brexits and its worst effects on this country and on this State were mitigated. This should be recognised.

To return to the Passport Office itself briefly, does it have plans to open a passport office in the North? There have been requests for such an office and I am aware that a substantial number of passports have been sought by people, particularly in the years since the Brexit referendum and I note that a majority of the people in the North voted to stay within the European Union. Obviously, the vote unfortunately went a different way and there was an upsurge of applications for passports from the Six Counties. Does the Department have any plans or has there been any discussions around opening an office in Belfast, Derry or anywhere else in the North?

Mr. Niall Burgess: The short answer is “No”. Our focus on the passport service essentially has been to put the passport office on one’s own desk. In other words it is to bring it directly to the citizen in order that one can apply in one’s own home for one’s passport where it can be done quickly, with an increased assurance around one’s identity and where we can then process and return that passport to the person within days. That has been the objective and it has really narrowed if not disappeared the space between somebody here in Kildare Street who wants to apply for a passport - the Passport Office used to be around the corner in Molesworth Street - and a citizen anywhere else in the country or in the world. This should shorten the processing times for all of them and this has been the overwhelming focus.

Chairman: Perhaps Ms Jones may wish to answer this question. On the passport services, the cost of the booklet I understand in 2019 went from €800,000 to in the region of €7 million.

Was there a particular reason for that?

On counter services, I am aware that we have discussed this and it is good that it is happening online. She has outlined where the office is turning passports around online now in ten days, for the time to fully complete and issue an application. I commend the office on that. On that point, there is a section of the population that do not use computers and 15% to 20% of people is the figure generally given. What is the situation in respect of counter services for such people and what is the position regarding the increase in the passport booklet costs in 2019?

Mr. Niall Burgess: The cost that we pay for passport booklets has not increased. In fact we will need to design a new passport booklet, which is part of our passport reform project over the next number of years. The volume of booklets purchased may have increased in that year and I will defer to Ms Jones, who may have that information or perhaps our chief financial officer, but the passport booklet itself has not increased in cost. Does Ms Jones wish to elaborate on that point or deal with the Passport Express issue?

Chairman: I also seek a reply on the question of counter services. Are they available at present?

Ms Barbara Jones: Our interface at this moment is the telephone and this new modern service which is called WebChat where one can interface directly with the customer service agent, one of my colleagues in the passport service, and get detailed support on the application process. Of course, people who have difficulty accessing this very digital online framework can pick up the old-fashioned telephone and speak to a person and get support through the process.

One thing I want to emphasise regarding that category of people who have a vulnerability is that the people from the National Adult Literacy Agency who helped us to simplify all of our business processes have commended us on the ease of access, that is, the simple supportive way we go about delivering our service. That means, therefore, if somebody in the category that the Chairman rightly has concerns about were to have an urgent need for a passport or support as to travel, they can pick up the old-fashioned telephone, call one of our colleagues, get support, lodge with us and signal their need for a passport, for example, for God forbid, a death in a family, a need to travel to the UK for a funeral, or some such event, and we can then fast-track such an application.

Chairman: To clarify, is a counter service available today at the Passport Office?

Ms Barbara Jones: What does the Chairman mean by a counter service? Is it that people can physically come in to our office?

Chairman: Can people walk in and is there a front counter service available at the Passport Office today?

Ms Barbara Jones: The building is open and a person can come in and leave their application but we are operating that customer interface primarily by telephone and this more modern WebChat service. From the point of view of the Chairman and the needs of his constituents or those of any of his colleagues on the committee we will, of course, respond to citizens' inquiries through constituency offices as well.

Chairman: I thank Ms Jones for that reply as I wished to clarify that point. Ms Jones mentioned vulnerable people and there are many people who would not be vulnerable who still do not use computers for a number of reasons.

Moving on to Palestine and the situation there, it was mentioned by one of the officials that €16.3 million is being allocated for Palestine this year. That is welcome. The village of Khirbet Humsu has been raised to the ground by Israeli forces no less than three times. It has been reported, included in photographic evidence, that some of the material used to construct that village had Irish Aid labels on it. We are speaking in this regard about vulnerable people in the West Bank. It was mentioned that the matter has been taken up with the Israeli ambassador here and that the Irish ambassador in Israel has also taken it up with the Government there. It is good to hear that. What is happening at EU level in terms of turning the screws in relation to the Israeli Government and these types of what can be only described as war crimes? These are totally illegal actions by the Israeli Government. Is much effort being made to put pressure on the Israeli Government in respect of the actions it has carried out against innocent civilians in these areas?

Mr. Niall Burgess: Before I answer that question, I would like to respond to an earlier question from the Chairman. I have been looking at the figures for the Passport Office. We purchased an additional stock of passport booklets in 2019. I wonder if that is the figure referenced by the Chairman. We purchased it as a buffer against Brexit, in anticipation that passport demand would increase in 2020. That may show in the accounts as an increased cost for passport booklets.

On the destruction of these villages, we have said repeatedly that that is unacceptable. We have said that to the Israelis at all levels. We have spoken about the efforts we make to recoup and seek compensation for assets that Ireland has contributed directly or indirectly. Ireland is one of the most vocal members of the European Union in discussions on these issues. The Chairman asked what more we can do to exert influence. We are influential but there is a significant body of opinion within the European Union that does not agree with us. It strikes me that while the Minister for Foreign Affairs, Deputy Coveney, said recently that what is happening in the occupied territories amounts to *de facto* annexation, not many other EU partners have joined us in that assessment. That is the issue within the European Union. I believe we are as vocal and influential as we can possibly be.

Chairman: The statement from the Minister, Deputy Coveney, is welcome. The Dáil recently passed a motion brought forward by Sinn Féin in regard to the annexation of that part of Palestine. It is welcome that Ireland is vocal. I take on board Mr. Burgess's point that we have to bring others with us.

On compensation from the Israeli Government, have we ever received compensation for damage caused by Israeli military actions to equipment, buildings or any other type of aid supplied by the Irish Government?

Mr. Niall Burgess: Not directly. We work through a consortium. I am not sure if the consortium has received compensation. I will have to check that and come back to the committee on it.

Chairman: A great deal of work is ongoing North-South. On the funding of NGOs, what type of organisations are funded by the Department? On the Loyalist Communities Council, does it receive funding from the Department directly or indirectly?

Mr. Niall Burgess: The Loyalist Communities Council does not receive funding either directly or indirectly but we do work closely with community organisations in loyalist areas. For example, the Shankill Women's Centre is an organisation that we have long supported and

worked closely with. We do not allocate or apportion funding according to the geographic area or community. We consider funding applications on their merits and we fund them accordingly. Within the framework of the reconciliation fund, we fund a number of projects that have a cross-Border dimension and projects in respect of which there are links between communities on either side of the Border. Each application is considered on its own merits. That has been a really valuable part of our overall work on reconciliation in Northern Ireland and on North-South work because it connects the work of the Department in a deeply rooted way to work that is happening at community level. That is where the expansion in the reconciliation fund and the additional resources behind it will make an impact over time.

Chairman: Will Mr. Burgess clarify if we have received any compensation from Israel to date?

Mr. Niall Burgess: I have just been told that the consortium has not received any compensation to date.

Chairman: How many claims have been made against the Israeli Government relating to incidents such as the one I mentioned earlier in recent years?

Mr. Niall Burgess: I will have to come back to the committee on those figures.

Chairman: I appreciate that.

We move now to a second round of questions. The first questioner is Deputy Catherine Murphy. I ask that other members who wish to contribute so indicate by raising a hand signal.

Deputy Catherine Murphy: I compliment Mr. Burgess and the Department on the online passport system, which is very efficient. I presume the issue of cybersecurity was foremost in the minds of people when it was being designed. Has there been a review in that regard and is it an ongoing consideration?

On the missionary organisations, have any of them been identified as not capable of meeting their long-term development programmes? If so, in 2019, did funding cease to any of them?

Mr. Niall Burgess: I will ask Mr. de Búrca to respond to the question on the missionary organisations and I will come back to the Deputy on the other point.

Mr. Ruairí de Búrca: We do not fund missionary organisations directly. We fund an organisation called Misean Cara, which works with missionary organisations to vet projects. It is not that missionary organisations are funded. Projects proposed by missionary organisations that are members of Misean Cara are funded on the basis of project applications, which are assessed against a set of criteria. Some of those applications pass and others fail. It is not orders that are funded; it is projects in different parts of the world. From memory, missionary projects in more than 100 countries were funded in 2019. I do not know if that answers the Deputy's question, but that is the model that we use to fund missionaries.

Mr. Niall Burgess: On cyber, we are acutely conscious of the risk. I consider cyber to be a significant operational risk across our operations. We take extensive measures to protect passport data. Our passport data are kept separate from the rest of the Department's data and they are encrypted. We take continuous actions to upgrade our measures to deal with cyber. We can see the activity. We are subject continuously to phishing attacks at the Department. In addition to technological measures, we also take human measures. We do a lot of training and testing of

our measures across the Department to increase awareness of the risks of these attacks but it is something we are very keenly aware of.

Deputy Cormac Devlin: I have three brief questions. I heard Mr. Burgess say that there were 259 families impacted or requiring repatriation due to citizens who had died abroad. I know this is a sensitive issue for those impacted. I am also aware of the Kevin Bell Repatriation Trust, KBRT, which I am sure the Department is as it works closely with it. Are there any plans on behalf of the Department to re-examine the support for families that have been impacted by bereavement abroad and that require that service?

If the witnesses do not have time to come back on my second question they might send me a note on it. On expanding the Irish footprint abroad with our diplomatic missions, I understand the witnesses said that missions in Morocco and Philippines will be opening in 2022. My understanding was that would take place in 2020 and a further 13 missions were anticipated to be open by 2025.

On our diplomatic missions, particularly in the more challenging areas and regions, Deputy Sherlock referred earlier to physical security reviews for both the diplomatic missions themselves and our staff. How often are they conducted? I note that there was a saving of €897,000 in that arena in 2019. While that is welcome and I compliment the Department on making savings, it is important that we spend wisely and that we ensure we have the best and most robust security system.

Mr. Niall Burgess: The work we do with families with bereavements is some of the most difficult and sensitive work we do. It is in the nature of things nowadays that Irish people are travelling further, staying longer, travelling at an older age and travelling at a younger age. That means that the number of assists with bereavements has been increasing. The number of cases where families have genuine financial difficulties with repatriation are a modest proportion of those cases. That is where organisations such as the KBRT play a vital role and provide support. We take a human and flexible approach to how we work with citizens and that approach has stood us in good stead.

We have to continually review the suite of consular services and the way we provide them. That was something we did when we brought our honorary consuls back to Ireland in 2019. On expanding the footprint, those two missions in Morocco and Philippines will open this year and not next year. We will have them open in the autumn. That will leave us with a plan to potentially open another 12 missions over the following four years. The average we are working towards is about three per year.

On the physical security reviews, we are putting more time, care and attention into physical security than ever before. We are working on this jointly with other partners to some extent. I was involved, for example, in the collocation of our embassy in Cairo with another EU partner, where we were able to significantly benefit from their security systems, and that brought particular assurance to our staff. We carry out a rolling programme of security reviews with the support of An Garda Síochána. Security is fundamental to the way we are opening new properties and we have built that expertise into our property management unit as well.

The simple reality now is that one might have held security as a primary consideration in more fragile parts of the world but some of the most difficult security issues I have had to deal with as Secretary General have been in response to events in Paris and Brussels, where we have large numbers of staff. The old assumptions around security and how it operates simply no

longer apply, which means we have to step up our support.

Deputy Imelda Munster: I want to touch on the registration of foreign births, which Deputy Sherlock asked about this at the beginning. If we take 2019 as a baseline year, there were 32,000 applications for FBR in total to be processed by the Passport Office. To the best of my knowledge, that has risen from 6,000 pre-Brexit in 2015. What is the current backlog?

Mr. Niall Burgess: Between 2019 and 2020, we received 50,000 applications for FBRs. There were 30,000 approvals and the arrears stand at 30,000 applications.

Deputy Imelda Munster: Going by 2019, that would be the equivalent of a full year of applications. Is that approximately correct?

Mr. Niall Burgess: Approximately, yes. Maybe even a little more.

Deputy Imelda Munster: Am I correct that this particular type of application takes 12 to 18 months to process?

Mr. Niall Burgess: The only ones that are being processed at the moment are applications where the acquisition of citizenship for a child is at stake. For example, if an applicant tells us that he or she is expecting a child and that acquiring citizenship through FBR is essential to passing Irish citizenship on to his or her child, then we will pick that application out and work with him or her to make sure there is no loss. The numbers of FBR applications have been increasing as a result of Brexit but for the greater part, these applicants have another citizenship and are carrying the passport of another country. Therefore, for the time being that is where we have prioritised resources for passport applications from Irish citizens and the processing of FBRs. We hope to address this backlog in the autumn.

Deputy Imelda Munster: That is what I was asking Mr. Burgess. He said earlier that the Department is prioritising emergencies and that is fine. However, it takes between 12 and 18 months to process applications, there is a backlog and the Department will only start to look at it in the autumn. He can correct me if I am wrong on this but I understand that photographs for passport applications are only valid for six months.

Mr. Niall Burgess: That is right.

Deputy Imelda Munster: Given that and the backlog, does Mr. Burgess have any idea of the number of people who believe that their applications are being processed at the minute and who are unaware that they are not? If six months have expired since they first applied, they would have to apply again. Is that correct?

Mr. Niall Burgess: An FBR applicant would not need to apply again. The time limit on passport applications is that there is a requirement that the photograph be a current image. Therefore, that requires the photograph submitted to have been taken within six months. That does not apply to FBRs.

Ms Jones was talking about the passport reform project and the intention is that as this project concludes, we will bring FBR applications online as well. It is not sustainable that one waits 12 or 18 months for an application to be processed. The intention with the reform programme is to bring it online so that it is issued with the kind of efficiencies with which passports are issued.

Deputy Imelda Munster: That is great. With regard to the photograph and the requirements relating to the six-month period, do the witnesses know the number of applications that

would have been cancelled since the onset of the pandemic because of those requirements and the backlog? Perhaps they do not have that information. The applications may have gone past the six months so people would have to resubmit and get a new photograph. Do the witnesses have any idea how many people were affected by that?

Mr. Niall Burgess: I know we have a dedicated team working with all these applicants in order to try to address the question and fast-track applications when we get a revised image.

Ms Barbara Jones: I think we are looking at a group of people in that category numbering in the order of 3,000. As I outlined to the Chairman earlier, the focus of our work is on prioritising dialogue with the affected applicants in the group identified by the Deputy as the most disadvantaged because they must resubmit the application. There is a process for the refunding of the fee and the operation is quite elaborate. We are in direct contact with all those affected persons. It is not where we want to be, which is where we can give them the passport they need, but the customer service support is very intensive around this right now.

Deputy Imelda Munster: That is great. I thank Ms Jones.

Chairman: I have one or two other questions. There is a secretariat in Belfast and it came from the Anglo-Irish Agreement in 1983. What is the level of staffing that the State has in Belfast for that secretariat? What other staff are there and where are they in the North?

Mr. Niall Burgess: We have nine staff in our office in Belfast, including Department of Justice staff as well. I may not have an exact number for the Deputy for our office in Armagh as well, which supports the North-South ministerial secretariat. I have been told there are nine staff.

Chairman: The administration of the North-South Ministerial Council is in Armagh. Are there half a dozen staff involved?

Mr. Niall Burgess: It is nine. There are 18 staff in all.

Chairman: Are the officials from the Department of Justice included in the nine staff in Belfast?

Mr. Niall Burgess: Yes.

Chairman: What is the role of the Department of Justice with that office in Belfast?

Mr. Niall Burgess: Mr. de Búrca is a former head of our office in Belfast so I will bring him in on that.

Chairman: I am just looking for an idea.

Mr. Ruairí de Búrca: There are two officials from the Department of Justice. One provides secretarial support but the primary function of the other is part of the secretariat to the independent reporting commission, which was established subsequent to the Fresh Start agreement. There are three commissioners, one of which is nominated by our Government. These form the secretariat with the British official. The personnel support the general work of the Belfast secretariat in with outreach and secretarial support to the British-Irish Intergovernmental Conference, which is meeting today. The Ministers for Foreign Affairs and Justice are the Government representatives. That probably answers the question.

Chairman: In countries where we do not have an embassy we have consular services. I have come to realise in dealings with the Department over the past few years that there is a representative. In how many countries do we have such consular representation where we do not have an embassy? How does that operate? Is it a part-time role and would the person be funded by a stipend, for example? What way does that work?

Mr. Niall Burgess: We have a network of 90 honorary consuls. Many of our embassies are also accredited to adjoining countries, so many of our embassy staff would cover an area and some practically cover a region. That gives us a group of officials whose footprint is much wider than the 92 missions we have.

In addition, we have a network of 90 honorary consuls. Some of them are honorary consuls in countries where we do not have embassies and some of them are honorary consuls in cities where we do not have consulates. It is hard to overstate the role they play in helping us repatriate our citizens. There is an honorary consul in Perth, Lagos and Lima in Peru, where we do not have missions and where we were not able to travel as we would have wanted and they were absolutely critical in organising repatriations. Our honorary consul in Lima in Peru met our citizens coming in on buses from different parts of the country and ensured they were put on a plane safely and returned home. They work for a modest stipend, which I think is in the order of approximately €1,000 or €1,500 per annum. Some of them provide a high volume of consular products, such as a visa service, and they retain some of the processing fee in order to cover their costs. Some of them maintain offices and a secretariat to help provide services to Irish citizens.

Chairman: They receive a stipend of €1,000 or €2,000 per year.

Mr. Niall Burgess: Yes.

Chairman: I welcome that. I had direct experience of that service, on behalf of a constituent, in recent years. One of these honorary consuls, in a place where there is no embassy, dealt with the matter in a very satisfactory way. I often wondered how that is managed. They should receive some recognition of their work. I had direct experience of one of the consuls providing very valuable assistance and contact with somebody in the Department. I thank the Department for that.

My final question relates to Shannon Airport. Is there a cost to the Department of Foreign Affairs in facilitating the American military with its use as a kind of staging post or stopover, mainly for missions to the Middle East? What is that cost per annum?

Mr. Niall Burgess: There is no cost to the Department of Foreign Affairs whatever.

Chairman: Okay. Thank you for the reply. I thank the witnesses for joining us today, the work involved in preparing for the meeting and the very detailed information supplied. I thank the Comptroller and Auditor General and his staff, as always, for attending and assisting the committee today. I also thank the clerk and secretariat.

Is it agreed that we note and publish any opening statements and briefings provided for today's meeting? Agreed. Is it agreed that the clerk will seek any follow-up information? Agreed. Before adjourning, I remind members we will launch a report on last November's engagement with the Revenue Commissioners at 12.30 p.m. today. A photograph to accompany the press release will be taken on the Plinth at 11.45 a.m. so please attend. I hope some of the members can join us.

PAC

The witnesses withdrew.

The committee adjourned at 11.30 a.m. until 9.30 a.m. on Tuesday, 29 June 2021.