

DÁIL ÉIREANN

AN COISTE UM CHUNTAIS PHOIBLÍ

COMMITTEE OF PUBLIC ACCOUNTS

Déardaoin, 8 Bealtaine 2025

Thursday, 8 May 2025

The Committee met at 11 a.m.

MEMBERS PRESENT:

Deputy Catherine Ardagh,	Deputy Aidan Farrelly,
Deputy Cathy Bennett,	Deputy James Geoghegan,
Deputy Grace Boland,	Deputy Eoghan Kenny,
Deputy Joanna Byrne,	Deputy Paul McAuliffe,
Deputy Catherine Connolly,	Deputy Séamus McGrath,
Deputy Albert Dolan,	Deputy Joe Neville.

DEPUTY JOHN BRADY IN THE CHAIR.

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

Business of Committee

An Cathaoirleach: No apologies have been received from members unable to attend. I will begin with a few housekeeping matters.

First, in accordance with Standing Orders, I wish to make the following declaration:

I do solemnly declare that I will duly and faithfully and to the best of my knowledge and ability execute the office of Cathaoirleach of the Committee of Public Accounts without fear or favour, apply the rules as laid down by this House in an impartial and fair manner, and maintain order and uphold the rights and privileges of Members in accordance with the Constitution and Standing Orders.

I remind members of the constitutional requirement that in order to participate in public meetings, they must be physically present within the confines of the Leinster House complex. Members of the committee attending remotely must do so from within the confines 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 Parliament has chosen to sit. In this regard, I ask any members participating via Microsoft Teams, prior to making their contribution, to confirm they are on the grounds of the Leinster House campus.

I welcome members to the first meeting of the Committee of Public Accounts of the Thirty-fourth Dáil. I am honoured to be selected as Cathaoirleach of this critically important committee, which focuses on ensuring public services are run efficiently and taxpayers' money is spent effectively. I welcome back Deputy McAuliffe, who served on the committee in the previous term, and Deputy Connolly, who served in the term before that. I also welcome the newly elected Members who have the honour of sitting on the Committee of Public Accounts. I acknowledge the contribution of Deputy McAuliffe to the committee in the previous term. I served alongside him and recall his contribution to achieving greater accountability and transparency in all public finances.

As members of the Committee of Public Accounts, it is our collective responsibility to ensure the committee is effective in fulfilling its remit. That remit, as delegated by the Oireachtas, includes accountability to the committee by the public sector bodies that are responsible for approximately 285 sets of accounts and financial statements that are audited by the Comptroller and Auditor General. There is a lot of good work done in the public sector and we should recognise that where it is evident. However, our focus must be on ensuring our citizens get the very best services and the best possible value for public money.

One of the most pressing issues I intend to prioritise is the massive profiteering in the provision of accommodation for those seeking asylum in this State. People have become millionaires by providing sometimes poor-quality accommodation in a deeply flawed system, while communities have lost vital local facilities, including hotels. The State has paid out billions of euro with very little transparency. There are increasing reports of companies with no track record being awarded substantial contracts. International protection accommodation services, IPAS, costs reached €1 billion last year and are projected to exceed €1.2 billion in the year ahead. This committee has a critical role in scrutinising how these contracts are awarded and

whether they deliver value for money for the taxpayer.

It is critically important that we examine expenditure related to the national children's hospital, the costs of which have soared to more than €2.24 billion. Deputy McAuliffe is aware of some of the challenges we had previously in terms of getting some of those critical bodies in before the public accounts committee and I will return to that later on.

As I said, there was deep frustration and disappointment for members of the previous PAC when key witnesses from the National Paediatric Hospital Development Board and Children's Health Ireland, CHI, were unavailable to come before the committee. I will move quickly to invite those bodies into the PAC to get some of the many very important questions answered.

I also believe that the PAC must look closely at spending by the Arts Council, particularly the €6.7 million invested in a failed IT system. Such a significant outlay with no outcome cannot go unchecked. Finally, we must give particular scrutiny to the extremely serious issue of bogus self-employment. This is a systemic problem in many sectors, not just in the likes of RTÉ or the gig economy. It is now a major issue for postmasters to name but one other key area. It not only undermines workers' rights but places an unjust financial burden on the State and I believe the PAC has a duty to expose how and why these practices continue and to assess the real cost to the public purse.

As a committee, I hope we will work together. We have a strong track record in the past of working in a spirit of co-operation and unity and I look forward to hearing members' views as we progress together on this very important committee. I open it up to members who have comments or who want to make contributions at this point.

Deputy Paul McAuliffe: First, I say comhghairdeas to Deputy Brady on his appointment as Chair of the public accounts committee. It is an incredibly prestigious position but is also one that carries responsibility; namely, the responsibility of holding the accountable officers to account here in a fair way that ensures this House's good name for investigating matters is not contested elsewhere in other parts of our democratic structures. It also carries the responsibility that those who come before us provide information to the public - information the public is entitled to know - and that people are held to account.

There are many new colleagues, which is particularly good to see. Some of them might be wondering why we are being so nice to each other but this committee is not one that discusses Government policy but rather one that holds accountable officers to account. Although we will have significant differences on Government policy, what unites us is that we want to see good value for money in how public money is spent.

I particularly welcome Deputy Connolly back because that experience of having worked on previous reports will be incredibly useful. I note in particular that some members of the previous committee, such as Deputy Verona Murphy and former Deputy Catherine Murphy, brought huge expertise and I certainly learned a lot from them over the time. I encourage us to go back and look at some of the reports from the previous PAC because there is unfinished work there. I encourage us to start to identify the outstanding chapters in the Comptroller and Auditor General's report from September of last year. There are accounts which have been filed that we need to look at immediately. For me, the particular area of the HSE is one of the many accounts that fall before us but in its scale and size, it is disproportionate in the amount of money that is spent. Often, we can only give it so much emphasis within our limited calendar but that is an area of such significant spending I want to see us giving some of our time to it.

I will not go on any longer than that but I congratulate the Chair and we look forward to working with him. As this committee is that little bit different, that tradition of us working together is important and I echo his comments.

Deputy Cathy Bennett: First, I congratulate Deputy Brady in his new role as the Cathaoirleach of the PAC. It is a very prestigious Cathaoirleach position to have taken up so I commend him, congratulate him and wish him well in the time ahead. I would also like to let Mr. Seamus McCarthy know that we are here to help in any way we can. We also ask that he helps us to ensure we get the very best value for public moneys going forward. I am delighted to be here on this committee with everyone else in the room. We are fortunate to be here and I intend to scrutinise public money and to ensure the people are getting the very best value for money.

Deputy Joanna Byrne: I echo the previous sentiments of my colleagues in congratulating the Cathaoirleach on his appointment as Chair of this committee. Everybody knows that this is probably one of the most powerful committees of the 28 political panels. On a personal level, I am particularly honoured to be appointed by our party leader to this committee, as I am sure is everyone around the table here. I assure the Cathaoirleach and Mr. McCarthy that we are all here to work in a collegial manner to ensure the business of the committee is as efficient and as diligent as it can be. The rest of us will probably be relying on Deputies McAuliffe and Connolly for a while until we find our feet but I have no doubt they will be there to guide us as we move forward.

Regarding a couple of items the Cathaoirleach mentioned, I am our party's spokesperson on media, communications and the arts and some of the big hitters in the headlines at the moment will probably cross over between the media committee and the public accounts committee. The IPAS issue is of particular interest to me as well. As a lot of people know, I am a proud Drogheda girl and recently we lost our only hotel - in the largest town in the country and realistically probably the next city of Ireland - to IPAS accommodation. There already are deficiencies in the usage and occupancy of that hotel and there is a lot to be explored as to whether the detriment outweighs the gains. I look forward to working with the Cathaoirleach and I wish to reassure him and Mr. McCarthy that we are here to aid the committee in its work going forward.

Deputy Aidan Farrelly: First, I congratulate the Chair and I really look forward to working with him over the next few years. If members will indulge me briefly, I wish to take the opportunity as Deputy McAuliffe said, to pay tribute to the work of Catherine Murphy, who was a constituency colleague and has been a mentor to me over the past number of years. The work she did on the PAC was astounding at times and I look forward to bringing the same approach and bigger to the work of this committee.

What struck me when I was nominated was the idea of collaboration, and I wish to emphasise that I really look forward to collaborating with other members and to working together on some of these very important issues. I brought a list of the many things that I look forward to us sinking our teeth into collectively over the coming years but for now, I again congratulate the Cathaoirleach and I look forward to working with everybody else.

An Cathaoirleach: I thank Deputy Farrelly. I am sure we all bring lists and that is something we will return to because in collaboration, we will agree our work programme going ahead.

Deputy James Geoghegan: In the first instance, I congratulate the Cathaoirleach. As he has outlined, it is one of the most significant committees and always has been in the history of

the Dáil. To get the role of Chair makes it a very significant day for him.

Within our group, we certainly want to work collaboratively with the Cathaoirleach here and at an individual level, one of the reasons I wanted to join the public accounts committee was to build on that kind of collaborative work. In the case of those of us who have come from a local authority -and Deputy McAuliffe has been named a few times - I served under Deputy McAuliffe when he was Lord Mayor and I know that is the approach he adopted and that certainly is why I am on this committee. I have always been of the view that sunlight is the greatest disinfectant and if we can follow the money, we can bring transparency.

The public will be well served by the work we do here. Ultimately Deputy Brady has outlined a number of areas and like Deputy Farrelly has just said, I will not share my shopping list now but I will highlight one subject that is coming up in terms of timeliness, and that is in respect of personal injury guidelines and the impact the increase of those guidelines could have on costs as it relates to the State Claims Agency. Obviously the indirect effect of those costs for small businesses and insurance is a significant one. I look forward to working with the Cathaoirleach on the committee. I congratulate him. I also look forward to working with everyone else.

An Cathaoirleach: I thank Deputy Geoghegan for his kind words.

Deputy Joe Neville: I congratulate the Cathaoirleach on his new position. He worked hard in the previous term and has been duly recognised with his role in this one.

Looking to the years ahead, I am delighted to be appointed to this committee. I sought it out because it is something I have been very interested in and focused on in my career. I am an accountant by profession and have worked in some large companies, so looking into the spending of money has always been key for me. Having the opportunity now to do it from a State perspective is not only important, but also humbling in its own way. It is great to be in the position to do that because when many of us look to go into politics, it is to serve the people and the State. To be able to do so and utilise my professional background in this fashion is an honour.

I thank my party leader, Simon Harris, for putting my name forward. I also thank the Fine Gael group in the previous term. We had some very effective members at various times, such as Alan Dillon, Ciarán Cannon, Colm Burke, Damien English and Jennifer Carroll MacNeill. They all made a huge contribution in that time and I look forward to following in their footsteps and doing the work they did with my own colleagues.

Catherine Murphy was referenced. Catherine and I served on Leixlip Town Council from 2009 until 2011 when she left and came to this House. I have experience working with Catherine and know her very well. I have watched the work and contribution she has made, so it is nice to have someone from Leixlip continuing that on, if I am being parochial.

I am delighted to be here. Many of the items of public expenditure the Cathaoirleach called out, be it the children's hospital, RTÉ, IPAS or whatever, we will need to get stuck into as a group. More importantly, we need to work together effectively. I am delighted to hear Deputy McAuliffe talk about - in fairness, he spoke about it yesterday - the collegiality of the group and how working together is the best way forward. We have experts on this side and experts behind the experts. I look forward to getting information and my teeth stuck into it, and more importantly, working on behalf of the State and the people who elected me to be the best person I can be on this committee.

An Cathaoirleach: Thank you, Deputy Neville.

Deputy Albert Dolan: I sincerely wish the Cathaoirleach the very best of luck in his role as Chair of the public accounts committee. It is probably not the easiest committee to chair but I sincerely wish him the best. He can be assured that my Fianna Fáil colleagues and I will work with everyone in this room for the betterment of this country and our public finances.

I am honoured to be appointed to this committee as a chartered accountant and as someone who served in practice and audit. I sincerely thank our Comptroller and Attorney General and everyone at the office for the work they do to allow us the opportunity to scrutinise. At the end of the day, preparing 285 sets of financial statements and ensuring they are audited effectively and efficiently is not an easy job and I thank them for that.

What is disappointing for us as a committee is that it is always after the fact. We are always here to scrutinise and criticise potentially ill-thought-out decisions or systems that have failed. Our role is more important now than it has ever been. We are in a time of huge global uncertainty and while our public finances remain strong, what could lay before us is incredibly concerning. Our role to ensure value for money is vital.

There is a fantastic website called *wheremy money goes.gov.ie*. A quick glance at it would show that, in 2019, €77 billion was expended by the State. In 2025, we are set to spend €120 billion. I was elected to Galway County Council in 2019 and I cannot say that, five or six years later, we are spending the money much better. I understand that inflation takes its toll but we have spent more on consultants and outsourcing decision-making in the past five years than on getting actual projects done. I firmly believe that, collectively, we need to push for action, speed and delivery and to ensure that people in positions to make decisions are not outsourcing their decision-making but are taking these decisions on.

I look forward to putting together the programme for work. I am excited to be on this committee. I hope that we can impact the future of this country and the trajectory we take.

Deputy Catherine Ardagh: It was an honour to serve with the Cathaoirleach on the foreign affairs committee. I offer him my congratulations on his important role. The late Jim Mitchell from Fine Gael and my father, Seán Ardagh, served on the public accounts committee during the DIRT inquiry. It set the stage for the public accounts committee and its importance since that time. We have had some great members. I was not a member of it during the previous term, as I was in the Seanad. The work that the public accounts committee does is important, and it is probably one of the most important committees. It is great to see the Cathaoirleach at the helm of it.

We each would have a little shopping list of various State accounts we would like to shine a light on, as my colleague stated. Deputy McAuliffe referred to the HSE. Regarding it, the State Claims Agency and the money spent on legal costs by families seeking assessments of need, we need to examine whether all of that is cost effective. There are other accounts, such as the State savings accounts. We need to look at accounts we might not have examined in the past to ensure they are working properly, accountable and have the right systems in place.

I look forward to working with the Cathaoirleach. I do not know how it works in terms of whether we put forward our shopping lists, but I am sure he and his secretariat will help us navigate our way through this committee.

Deputy Eoghan Kenny: I echo everyone's words about putting politics aside in this room.

Although we might not all share the same political view, being the watchdog of public accounts is important. I am delighted to see Deputy Brady as Chair. He is someone with experience. I am delighted to see Deputies McAuliffe and Connolly, who I hope will provide all of us with some sort of guidance on what this committee will actually do for the public. In the Thirty-third Dáil, it acted as a serious talking point on a number of occasions. I am hopeful that the work we do will provide the public with assurance. When we went to the doorsteps in the general election, where our money was actually being spent came up a number of times. That is important to realise. When one calls to a doorstep and a person questions where our money is being spent, it is important that one has an answer for that person. Being part of this committee gives us the opportunity to be that watchdog, and the next time we meet a member of the public, we will be able to give them assurances as to where the public's money is being spent. That is the job of the committee. Working alongside each other will be important. It gives us an opportunity to look at where the public's money is being spent. At the end of the day, that is the most important part of this committee. People want to see value for money in the taxes they are paying and to know where their money is being spent. That is the most important part of this committee. We are about representing people, and if people come to us looking to know where their money is being spent, the opportunity could be there for us all to give them that answer.

Deputy Catherine Connolly: Go raibh maith agat, a Chathaoirligh. Déanaim comhghairdeas leat. Go n-éirí leat. Is ról thar a bheith tábhachtach agus tromchúiseach é seo, agus is pribhléid é a bheith ar ais ar an gcoiste seo. Congratulations.

There were 295 sets of accounts and 19 reports during the time of the previous committee. I do not think we will get to read any of those with the amount of work that comes up every Wednesday night for Thursday. In a sense, the people who have been on the committee before are being set up a little bit, and I take all the goodwill, but there is no way out of just reading the stuff for this committee. It is an onerous task. That is really what is about – reading and asking the questions.

I pay tribute to the Comptroller and Auditor General. He might not realise it, but on my bad days in politics, I thought about him, his office and the integrity of his office. It is one of the few things I have up on a pedestal, and I hope, in my lifetime, it does not fall off that pedestal. I pay tribute to the Comptroller and Auditor General. When I was there, it was Billy who kept us all sane every Wednesday before Thursday morning. More generally, I despair sometimes because the same topics keep coming up. We have Limerick, for example. I was not a member of this committee between 2016 and 2020. The seven presidents from the seven universities who came before the committee were the least educated of the people who came before it. I say that with the greatest of respect. They were arrogant and had no interest in changing. Limerick continues to come up. I say that for what it is worth. Very good people came before us, including one particular group from what I still call the VEC in Kilkenny. The person from that entity shone with their honesty and openness. That was the case with most of the people who came before us, but then we had the others.

Bord na gCon comes to mind. What happened there was barking mad. We were treated to semen counts and all sorts of topics that we knew nothing about. It was hilarious. We also went to Tanzania during that time with the committee, which was extremely important. They were amazed that we held our meetings in public because their meetings are not held in public.

My interest, which is technical, is in procurement. I remember when it came up. I do not think matters have progressed very much since then but I am not sure. Perhaps I missed out on the reports. The accountants will know much better than me, but procurement was brought

in to make things a lot more open and accountable. However, sometimes it works the opposite way, especially for local industry. It has come up repeatedly in the context of the VECs, such as, for example, Galway and Roscommon Education and Training Board. Local people and businesses are losing out. That is something I would love to follow up on. Sin é.

The contribution of former Deputy Catherine Murphy stands out for me. I shared one and a bit committees with her. She came in and worked quietly and steadfastly. She did her work from 9 o'clock on a Thursday morning onward. Gabhaim buíochas. Go n-éirí leat, a Chathaoirleach.

I am sorry, but I also wish to refer to the National Asset Management Agency. I remember the sustained pressure the Comptroller and Auditor General and the staff of this office came under. The relevant report related to Project Eagle, but there were other reports. It was a measure of the difficulty of the job. We talk about public bodies not being accountable. The Government, through its agencies, came down on the Comptroller and Auditor General. He would not say that, but I saw it happen. It was because of the report, which was very moderate and mild and pointed out that money might have been spent a little more effectively. I just wanted to say that. Thank you, Chair, for sticking with me.

An Cathaoirleach: That is no problem. I thank Deputy Connolly and call Deputy McGrath.

Deputy Séamus McGrath: Like the other members, I congratulate Deputy Brady on taking up the position of Chair. It is a very onerous and responsible task. His opening remarks set the right tone for us. This committee is like no other. From what I hear, we try to leave the politics at the door. That is important. We have the shared aim of getting the best value for public expenditure. Unfortunately, in recent times we have seen plenty of examples which resonated in a poor way with the public in terms of the misuse of public expenditure and of wasteful expenditure. Our job is to try to highlight that, expose it and make sure it does not happen again.

This committee is like no other. Those who went before us set a very high bar. Deputy Ardagh mentioned the DIRT inquiry and other inquiries over the years. I was outside of politics looking at it on the television and looking at the work done by the Committee of Public Accounts. We have a very onerous task ahead of us. I feel the weight of responsibility, as I am sure we all do, in ensuring that we, as members of this committee, fulfil our mandate insofar as we can. We are all busy and we have time constraints but we will give it our best shot and work in a collegiate and collaborative way to try and ensure we fulfil our mandate and put the best possible scrutiny on public expenditure.

As Deputy Dolan said, there are now record levels of expenditure, which presents its own challenges in terms of the various arms of the State, some of which are under more scrutiny than others. As has been mentioned, there is the HSE, Uisce Éireann, local authorities and so on. The State has a vast array of arms that use public money. Our task is to try and have as much oversight of it as possible.

I endorse everything that has been said. I want us to leave politics at the door, work as a group with the shared aim of ensuring that we put the best possible scrutiny on public expenditure and work with Mr. Seamus McCarthy and the team in his office and with the committee's administrative support team as well. I look forward to the work. There is a steep learning curve. I asked Deputy McAuliffe what kind of items we can or cannot bring up and whether Uisce Éireann, etc., came within our remit. We will all learn and I am sure that will happen quickly enough. I want to play the most active role I can as a member of this committee. I look

forward to working with the Chair and all of the other members.

Deputy Grace Boland: I congratulate the Chair on his appointment. It is great to see so many new Deputies around the table. I am comforted by the fact that we also have some experience around the table and will work collaboratively together.

It is important that our public service is scrutinised. The work of the Comptroller and Auditor General is really important in ensuring we deliver value for money in our public service. With my family history, I grew up very aware of the value of public service and the importance of delivering transparency in an efficient public service. I feel very privileged that I get to sit on this committee and work with all of the members.

I hope that the scrutiny carried out by the committee drives better processes and efficiencies in our public service. When I speak to people having knocked on doors and in coffee shops and train stations, I find they are not giving out about the amount of money they pay in tax. Rather, they give out to me about the value of and the waste they see in the public service. It is the waste that is always highlighted. Unfortunately, the good work is not highlighted as much. I would welcome whatever we can do to try to drive better efficiencies and value for money in our public service. I very much look forward to working with all members and to understanding how we set that work programme.

An Cathaoirleach: I thank all of you for your contributions. We are all united in our approach, focus and what needs to happen in terms of the fiscal oversight that is required. A number of Deputies mentioned specific areas in which they have an interest and wish to bring attention to and shine a spotlight, sunshine, etc. on . We will deal with that in our private session in terms of how we move forward on agreeing a work programme.

Mr. Seamus McCarthy: If I may respond, I first congratulate the Chair on his appointment as Chair. I look forward to working with him. I congratulate all members on their election. For very many of them, this is their first Dáil. I and my office want to be here to support members in getting to understand and know the public service. I also congratulate those members who have been re-elected and with whom I have worked previously. I very much look forward to continuing the good working relationship with all of them.

I thank members for the words of support for the work of my office. It is important for me to make it clear to the committee that our office is here to support the accountability process. That is really what is necessary. That is the job of the committee and we exist to ensure that it is able to get away from the technical stuff and focus on the delivery and accountability. We want to do anything we can to help the committee to do that within the remit that we have.

We also see ourselves as serving the public bodies because we try to help them by giving them feedback. The existence of a strong committee that holds the feet to the fire and ensures there is accountability is a help to us in our relationship with them. It drives change and stops things from happening that would otherwise be to the detriment of the taxpayer. The deterrent effect is really important. As I said, I look forward to engaging with all members of the committee and supporting them in whatever way we can so that the Committee of Public Accounts of the Thirty-fourth Dáil will be as effective and will add as much value as it can to the delivery of public services in Ireland.

An Cathaoirleach: I thank Mr. McCarthy. Before we proceed with the rest of the meeting, members are reminded of the long-standing practice and ruling of the Cathaoirleach to the

effect that they should not comment on, criticise or make charges against a person outside the House or an official by name or in such a way as to make him or her identifiable. Members are also reminded of the provisions within Standing Order 226 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.

I now propose that we go into private session to discuss the way that the committee will operate and function in the time ahead. Do any members wish to make a comment before we go into private session? No member has indicated. Is the proposal to go into private session agreed? Agreed.

The committee went into private session at 11.35 a.m. and adjourned at 1.05 p.m. until 9.30 a.m. on Thursday, 15 May 2025.