

DÁIL ÉIREANN

AN COMHCHOISTE UM THITHÍOCHT, RIALTAS ÁITIÚIL AGUS OIDHREACTH

JOINT COMMITTEE ON HOUSING, LOCAL GOVERNMENT AND HERITAGE

Déardaoin, 12 Samhain 2020

Thursday, 12 November 2020

Tháinig an Comhchoiste le chéile ag 9 a.m.

The Joint Committee met at 9 a.m.

Comhaltaí a bhí i láthair / Members present:

Teachtaí Dála / Deputies	Seanadóirí / Senators
Francis Noel Duffy,	Victor Boyhan,
Thomas Gould,	John Cummins,
Emer Higgins,	Mary Fitzpatrick,
Paul McAuliffe,	Mary Seery Kearney.
Jennifer Murnane O'Connor,	
Cian O'Callaghan,	
Eoin Ó Broin.	

Teachta / Deputy Steven Matthews sa Chathaoir / in the Chair.

Statement of Strategy 2021-2025: Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage.

Chairman: This meeting has been convened to discuss the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage statement of strategy for the period 2021 to 2025. We are joined on video link by Ms Fiona Quinn, assistant secretary, and Mr. Damien Allen, principal officer. The opening statement has been circulated to members. I will first ask Ms Quinn to make her opening statement, following which members will be invited to put questions. I remind members that they have five minutes for questions and answers and I ask the witnesses to also stick to the five minute timeframe.

As Ms Quinn and Mr. Allen are attending remotely, I remind them that there are some limitations to parliamentary privilege and, as such, they may not benefit from the same level of immunity in legal proceedings as would a witness physically present. They are directed that only evidence connected with the subject matter of these proceedings is to be given and asked to respect the parliamentary practice to the effect that, where possible, they should not criticise or make charges against any person, persons or entity by name or in such a way as to make him, her or it identifiable. Members are reminded of the long-standing parliamentary practice to the effect that they should not comment on, criticise or make charges against a person outside the House or in an official either by name or in such a way as to make him or her identifiable.

The opening statement submitted to the committee will be published on the committee website following this meeting. I now invite Ms. Quinn to make her opening remarks.

Ms Fiona Quinn: Good morning, I thank the committee for inviting us to meet with the committee to discuss the Department's next statement of strategy. My name is Fiona Quinn and I am the assistant secretary of the Department's corporate division. I am accompanied today by Damian Allen, the principal officer who heads up our strategic business support unit.

In accordance with the Public Service Management Act 1997, each Secretary General is required to prepare and submit a strategy statement to their Minister within six months of the appointment of a new Minister. Work has, therefore, commenced on the preparation of the Department's new statement of strategy to cover the period 2021 to 2025. The statement will comprise the mission statement, strategic goals, key objectives and actions of the Department and will serve as a framework for the Department over the period. The Programme for Government - Our Shared Future, will be a cornerstone of the new strategy, but it will also take account of overarching national strategies and plans, including Project Ireland 2040 - National Planning Framework, and the climate action plan.

To ensure that relevant strategies and plans are considered and reflected in the statement of strategy, the Department undertakes a consultation process with stakeholders and interested parties, including the committee. Observations were sought from local authorities, relevant State agencies and other Departments. The consultation process also involved a public consultation. We have received a total of 36 submissions, the majority of which came from stakeholder bodies operating in the fields of housing, planning, water and heritage. In addition to the observations received from other Departments, these include extensive submissions on planning policy, housing policy and delivery from Age Action Ireland, An Bord Pleanála, Apartment Owners' Network, Community Law and Mediation, COPE Galway, the Disability Federation of Ireland, Inclusion Ireland, the Land Development Agency, Simon Communities of Ireland and the Society of St. Vincent de Paul. Observations regarding water policy were received from the Water

Advisory Board, the Commission for Regulation of Utilities, the Environmental Protection Agency, Ervia and Irish Water. A number of submissions addressed multiple areas within the Department's remit. Each of these will be reviewed and recommendations within the submissions will be considered for inclusion in the new strategy.

The proposed format of the new strategy will be similar to the current one. The main chapters will reflect the Department's high-level business functions or programme areas. These will correspond to the programmes in the Revised Estimates Volume, namely, housing, planning, local government, water, heritage and Met Éireann. This approach ensures that the statement of strategy complements the financial information in the Revised Estimates Volume. In keeping with the commitment in the programme for Government, all new departmental strategy statements must have climate action included as a core pillar. This will include, but not be limited to, how the Department intends to ensure delivery of the climate action plan and the increased climate action ambition in the programme for Government, as well as the ways in which the Department can lead by example in reducing emissions. We will also have particular regard to: cross-cutting priorities included in the programme for Government or agreed at Cabinet committees; overarching budgetary and policy frameworks including the national digital strategy, open data strategy, etc; public service reform plans; workforce planning; and obligations under the Irish Human Rights and Equality Act 2014 to assess and report on human rights and equality issues. Our intention is to have the final document ready to submit to the Minister at the end of November. We would welcome members' comments and suggestions regarding the statement of strategy.

Chairman: I thank Ms Quinn. I will now turn to members. If we could limit questions and answers to five minutes, we will get through it. I call first on Deputy Murnane O'Connor.

Deputy Jennifer Murnane O'Connor: I thank the representatives from the Department. Statements on strategy are important for the period 2021 to 2025. All of us have a role working with local authorities to provide the best service we can to people. There are many issues I wish to address in the Department's strategy to deal with local authorities.

I heard this morning that millions of euro worth of funding has been announced for Irish Water. I have concerns about Irish Water and local authorities. While Irish Water is an entity, local authorities play less of a part. There needs to be much more engagement between local authorities and Irish Water. There is an issue there. If a local authority wants to get a pipe fixed, everything has to go to Irish Water and then come back to local authorities. The timescale is long and plans are delayed. There needs to be more engagement with Irish Water and that needs to be a part of the strategy.

There was an excellent meeting of the Joint Committee on Disability Matters yesterday which heard about the concerns of the disability sector and how disabled people feel they have been forgotten in this strategy. They feel there is no strategy for accommodating disabilities in the local authorities and in general. That is an area to address. Mental health is another. We are going through the Covid-19 pandemic and there is not a designated person in each local authority equipped to deal with people who are presenting with mental health issues. In 2021, someone needs to be assigned to every local authority, or a training course given, so that local authorities can deal with the needs of people.

There are no criteria in respect of homelessness. I can only speak from my own experience but I know people in homeless accommodation. I have seen people on housing lists whose need was not as urgent get housed before the homeless. There are 31 local authorities. Do they all

have different strategies and do things differently? Are there absolute criteria?

Chairman: The Deputy has two and a half minutes left. She might want to leave time for answers.

Deputy Jennifer Murnane O'Connor: I also want to talk about the threshold to qualify for local authority housing. That needs to be changed, and I know the Minister is working on it. The tenant purchase scheme was never brought in - it has never been used. It was announced approximately two years ago and no one is able to use it.

The following is something about which I have a real bugbear. Do our guests feel that the general data protection regulation, GDPR, is sometimes used as a tool against obtaining information? We all welcome people's privacy and know that we have to be respectful but when one goes looking for certain information, one is told that it is not available under GDPR. It is a tool. Do we need to look at a local authority strategy to tackle that?

I again thank our guests. I have a lot more to ask but that is it for now.

Ms Fiona Quinn: I can see a strong theme running through the points the Deputy has raised. My colleague, Mr. Allen, and I are on the corporate side of the Department so we might not be able to answer the specific detail of some of the issues raised by the Deputy. I can reassure the Deputy about the relationship between the Department, local authorities and Irish Water. It is a key priority. The Irish Water reform programme will continue in the years ahead. That will become even more important and will absolutely be reflected in the strategy statement.

To make a general point that the Deputy will be familiar with, the programme for Government outlines over 200 actions for this Department to implement during the lifetime of the Government. Some of those actions will address many of the issues that the Deputy has raised. There is a continued focus on Housing First, which recognises the holistic support that people need, particularly on the mental health issue. The disability funding schemes that we run are also called out and will be reflected in the statement of strategy.

From the Department's perspective, we have a role as data controllers under GDPR. We have a role whereby we are joint controllers with local authorities. That arises in respect of many of our housing schemes in particular, as the Deputy can imagine, and we must ensure that the GDPR requirements are implemented. From all of our perspectives, even though it has been in place for a couple of years now, it is still a relatively new requirement and many things are still bedding down. It is important that we recognise our responsibilities in that regard.

Chairman: I would ask Ms Quinn to finish there because we have a five-minute limit. I will turn to Sinn Féin and Deputy Ó Broin.

Deputy Eoin Ó Broin: I apologise for being late. I suppose, in some senses, today's discussion is less about policy because that is really for the Minister and the programme for Government. This is more about how the Department sets out those policies in a strategic statement. I will restrict my questions to those areas rather than policy areas because that is for another meeting.

Many of us are interested, in the first instance, to know what is the status of Rebuilding Ireland as the framework within which the most recent strategy was set. Is that to expire at the end of 2021? Is it to be replaced next year? Can Ms Quinn give us a little bit of information about that? That is about the strategic context but also the messaging context. There is a separate

website and communications strategy and all of that for Rebuilding Ireland.

Data protection is the other big issue. One of the roles of this committee, as our guests know, is to monitor the implementation of the commitments and strategies in the programme for Government. We have had many disputes around data over the past number of years. We are aware that the Department deals with phenomenal volumes of data but sometimes the way in which data are presented or the timing of data can make it genuinely difficult for the committee to properly scrutinise. Is that something the Department is reviewing? Do our guests have thoughts on that in the context of the strategy?

Monitoring is exactly the point. One of the best reports the Department produces is the social housing construction pipeline report. It is a very detailed piece of work that lets us all know, per project and local authority area, where construction is in the pipeline. It would be really great to have the same report for, for example, the Traveller accommodation programmes or other key aspects of delivery such as affordable housing through the serviced sites fund. Is that possible?

The other challenge that many of us have is obtaining data. Many of us are really interested in the Rebuilding Ireland home loan scheme. The Department publishes data but not always in ways that allows us to compare the number of applicants with the number of approvals and drawdowns, etc. How is the Department looking at reviewing and rethinking the presentation of that data? I know that there has been increased involvement with the Central Statistics Office, CSO, and the Economic and Social Research Institute, ESRI, in some of the research. If we had better, cleaner, simpler data, it would allow us to properly track all of those things.

Ms Fiona Quinn: I thank the Deputy. The data piece is one of my areas of responsibility. It is three or three and a half years since we established a statistics and data analytics unit in the Department. Many of the improvements that have been seen in recent years have come from the availability of experts to help us manage the data. The volume of data with which we deal has grown exponentially. As our activities grow, the volume of our data grows. We absolutely recognise that there is a need for continued improvement in that area. The Department is currently working on a data strategy to drive continued reform. There has been much improvement but we certainly acknowledge that there is further to go on that journey and the statement of departmental strategy will call out the focus on a data strategy for the period ahead.

The Deputy asked about Rebuilding Ireland and its future. There is a good 13 months left in the strategy and much delivery to come in that time. We will be turning our minds to that early next year. The programme for Government, as I said, calls out a considerable amount of objectives and actions for the Department but we will have to turn our minds to the specific status of Rebuilding Ireland early next year.

I think that is probably all I have to say. As I noted in my opening statement, there are also overarching data pieces. We are engaged with and embedded in the open data strategy and the Government's data strategies. The importance of delivery on each of those will be reflected in the statement of strategy.

Deputy Eoin Ó Broin: The Department in its previous form, as the Department with responsibility for the environment, used to produce an annual book of statistics. It was normally produced at the very end of the year or the start of the subsequent year. It provided a great deal of statistical data on outputs from the Department and from local authorities. I highly recommend that as a practice that could be returned to, because it was really useful.

One of the frustrations faced by all Deputies on the committee is that when we look for data on outputs from local authorities in respect of policies funded and driven by the Department, we are told the Department does not collate that information. For example, I wanted to know the total number of social housing units that were wheelchair accessible, but the Department does not keep that information. Interestingly, neither do the local authorities.

Chairman: I am sorry, Deputy, but we are just out of time. I ask the witnesses to note those comments and respond to the Deputy in writing.

Deputy Eoin Ó Broin: I just want to emphasise the need for greater data on local authority outputs to be collated by the Department as well.

Chairman: Is Deputy Higgins next? Or perhaps it is Senator Cummins? They can share time.

Deputy Emer Higgins: That is fine. I thank Ms Quinn for her presentation. It was very interesting. Many people on the employee wage subsidy scheme, in particular, as well as the pandemic unemployment payment are facing challenges in accessing the Rebuilding Ireland home loan scheme. They feel they are getting caught up in red tape and there is a lack of clarity on whether they are still eligible.

I would love to learn more about the national digital strategy and the national open data strategy. I am particularly interested in plans for digitalisation in areas such as making and paying for planning permission submissions online. I refer to streamlining that process and allowing for more online interfacing. Last week, we had other officials from the Department and from An Bord Pleanála before the committee regarding strategic housing developments, SHDs. The witnesses referred to planning and building in our regions and communities as being fundamental to what the Department does. I would love to hear the views of the witnesses on whether that scheme has worked.

Moving on to Irish Water, I would like some information regarding the role of the Department and the local authorities during periods where water needs to be shut off in an area. This happens for us in Lucan more than it should due to issues with the local water treatment plant. I would also like some more information regarding the role of the Department in helping Irish Water to grow its workforce. Perhaps the officials can clarify whether people are likely to be redeployed and, if so, it will be done voluntarily.

I noted the Department's briefing note referred to its important role in supporting and enabling democracy. My local council, South Dublin County Council, has been pioneering online activity in this area and an online portal is used to allow people to vote. Maynooth Students Union this week called for that to be rolled out further and I would love to know if that is in the pipeline.

Ms Fiona Quinn: I am afraid I will not be able to give detailed answers to the Deputy's questions in some areas, but we can provide that information to her separately. On the Rebuilding Ireland home loan and difficulties accessing it, I will have to get my colleagues on that side of things to follow up on with the Deputy.

There is a major Government agenda in the area of digitisation. The interesting thing is that with all the challenges Covid-19 might have caused across the State, one of the potential benefits has been the acceleration of activity in digitisation. We have seen that ourselves. Almost overnight, we managed to move the majority of our staff off site and seamlessly continued to

provide services. It is an area on which we will see a huge focus, and there is a commitment to that in the strategy statement.

I will link that aspect in with the Deputy's question on the electoral register because that is a key project we will see coming up. Regarding our engagement with the committee, the programme for Government commits to several reforms in the area of electoral policy, including the establishment of an electoral commission and the modernisation of the electoral registration process. Those are two issues we are progressing well. It happens to be my area of responsibility as well, so I know the detail. We expect in early December to provide the committee with a general scheme of a Bill to effect and implement some changes in this area. We look forward to detailed engagement with the committee on the initiative. One of the parts of the electoral registration modernisation programme is that it is much bigger than just the online reform aspect; there will also be an optional online element to the project. It will be very much about learning from the experience of the Dublin local authorities and their use of

www.voter.ie. We have engaged with those authorities to try to learn from that experience. We hope we will be able to build on that and roll out that capability across the country. It is a big IT project, as the Deputies can imagine. I do not want to waste too much time on this topic today because we will be in to talk to the committee about this in detail before too long, hopefully. A roll-out of an IT project of that nature will take some time, but it is certainly in our sights.

Turning to the role of the Department in the area of water provision, again I will get some of my colleagues to respond to the Deputy in more detail. The Department, however, has a role that is similar to the role it has with the rest of our agencies and local authorities. I refer to setting policies and supporting, engaging and overseeing activity in our areas of responsibilities.

Chairman: I thank Ms Quinn. We are just out of time. I call Senator Boyhan.

Senator Victor Boyhan: I thank Ms Quinn and Mr. Allen for presenting before the committee. I do not have any questions. I am just going to make some comments regarding this subject. The outgoing strategic statement was excellent. Its layout was excellent, as was the way it was possible to measure its delivery. I greatly appreciate the Department and its engagement with this committee in the last four years. It was exemplary and much talked about across all the Oireachtas committees, and I hope that will continue. We had strong engagement and a strong professional working relationship with the staff of the Department. I also acknowledge and thank the outgoing Secretary General, John McCarthy, and all his assistant secretaries for their work and engagement. It really contributed to a positive attitude in this committee and in the Department. I must state that point.

Moving on to some key issues, I note that Ms Quinn spoke in her presentation about climate action. There must be a strong emphasis on the sustainable development goals. That is an important feature, and it recognises the three-legged aspect of this Government, namely, Fianna Fáil, Fine Gael and the Green Party, and their priorities. It also ties in with the agreed programme for Government. I would now like to leave some comments on key issues with Ms Quinn.

We should not lose sight of Oireachtas engagement. I would also like to see great emphasis in the strategy on that aspect. I refer to legitimate engagement with this committee and with the public representatives who represent their constituents across the country. It is important that we keep sight of the need for timely responses to representations.

Open government is and should always be to the fore. I would like to see an emphasis in the strategy on how the Department and its officials will promote open government because that is an important part of any democracy. I would also like to see greater emphasis and focus on freedom of information, and how people can see it. That needs to be clearly stated in the strategy. We need to facilitate and not frustrate people seeking clarification or freedom of information, and that happens from the top down. It is not that people are agitators, objectors or asking questions for vexatious reasons. It is important that we support openness and transparency in local government.

I would also like to see an emphasis on and stronger clarity regarding language concerning protected disclosures. It will be recalled, and known, that there is an obligation on every Department to keep a register of protected disclosures and have an open process to facilitate access to those open disclosures. A freedom of information log is required in every Department as well. In the last few days, I took the liberty of looking at some Departments, and some have not posted that information for two years. There is a statutory obligation on every Department to have a freedom of information log on its website. I would like a focus to be kept on that area. I am not suggesting anything about the witnesses' Department, because it is one of the better ones.

I also want to address the issue of what is in a name. For some reason the Department, the civil servants, the Government or someone else took a decision to drop the word "housing" from the name of the Department. It is a key word in the work. As I still have time, I ask for some background on this. We used to have the Department of Housing, Planning and Local Government. I did not see why we could not have added "heritage" to it. It is very important. I ask the powers that be to look again at incorporating the word "housing" into the name of the Department. These are just comments and I am not asking the witnesses to feed back too much. I thank the witnesses and the staff in the Department for the very positive engagement they have had with the committee.

Chairman: I thank Senator Boyhan for those observations. To clarify, the Senator has a concern around the word "planning" being dropped.

Senator Victor Boyhan: Sorry, it is "planning". Housing is planning.

Chairman: There are approximately 30 seconds left if the witnesses want to speak about why the word "planning" was dropped from the title of the Department. It is still a function of the Department.

Ms Fiona Quinn: I thank the Senator for his acknowledgement of all of the engagement. Certainly we very much value it and certainly from the Department's perspective, it is a key priority to continue this good engagement in the time ahead. The Department's name is a matter for the Taoiseach and the Government. At the time of the announcement of the Departments' names, we were assigned the title of the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage. We have responsibility for many more areas, including planning, water and Met Éireann. It is difficult and we cannot reflect all of the various parts of the Department in its name but it does not in any way suggest there is less emphasis on any of these areas. They are equally important and we absolutely see this reflected in the statement of strategy. I reassure the Senator on this.

Senator Victor Boyhan: I thank Ms Quinn.

Deputy Francis Noel Duffy: I thank Ms Quinn for the briefing and I look forward to seeing the strategy. Ms Quinn noted it is the intention to have it ready to give to the Minister by the end of the month. Will it be available to us at the same time or will it come to us afterwards? She said the strategy comprises the medium strategic goals and key objectives between 2021 and 2025 and that the format mirrors the current strategy. With this in mind, did the projections of the previous term on housebuilding meet the objectives? Is Ms Quinn privileged to tell us what the projections are for this term in the context of what we are trying to build in the next four years.

Ms Fiona Quinn: I will ask Mr. Allen to speak about the strategy as it is his area.

Mr. Damian Allen: The process is that by the end of this month we expect to have draft to hand to the Minister. The Act states it should be provided six months from the formation of the Government. The Government was formed on 27 June so officially over Christmas we are obliged to have the process finalised. We hope to have a draft for the Minister by the end of this month and we hope to have it finalised before Christmas. At that stage, it will become available once the Minister is happy with it. It will be made available and published on the website.

Ms Fiona Quinn: The question on Rebuilding Ireland targets and outcomes is a big one. There has been huge exponential delivery in the years since Rebuilding Ireland was introduced. This year has caused some challenges with regard to Covid and there was some slowdown in the earlier part of the year. The Department is absolutely committed to trying to deliver, and between now and the end of 2021 will be important. From the point of view of what targets we will set ourselves for the future, the programme for Government will be very instructive in this respect. The committee received regular updates on Rebuilding Ireland throughout the lifetime of the previous Government and this is something it will absolutely be able to request this time also.

Deputy Francis Noel Duffy: Did we meet the objectives of the previous strategy?

Ms Fiona Quinn: In terms of many of the objectives set out in it, a lot of them came from the overarching national strategies and the programme for Government. The Department has delivered very strongly on the vast majority of them. There are probably some where the focus may have changed for whatever reason during the lifetime of the previous Government but in general terms we are very happy with our delivery and very happy with the output we achieved. We produce an annual report each year that reflects all the work done, and our annual report for 2019 was published over the summer. Our annual report for next year will set out what we achieved in 2020. If the Deputy looks back at the annual report he will see very strong delivery on all the objectives that we set out in the statement of strategy.

Deputy Cian O'Callaghan: I thank Ms Quinn. With regard to the strategy and submissions made, I know Community Law and Mediation's submission asks about the referendum on the right to housing. Will part of the strategy be to lay out the timeframe and work that needs to be done to prepare for the referendum on the right to housing?

Ms Fiona Quinn: The statement of strategy by its nature is higher level but with regard to the timing of referendums, a number of referendums are set out in the programme for Government and a few of them are relevant to the Department. The Government will need to decide on the timing of the holding of all these referendums. It needs to be managed over the lifetime of the Government in between any of the other electoral events due to happen. It is unlikely the statement of strategy will set it out unless it is called out specifically in the programme for

Government, which in this case I do not think it is.

Deputy Cian O’Callaghan: The National Parks and Wildlife Service is coming under the Department’s remit. According to Ms Quinn’s opening statement, a key part of the strategy will be about the climate action plan. When we look at the climate crisis and the biodiversity crisis, the agency at the forefront, in terms of biodiversity, is the National Parks and Wildlife Service. From my experience, it is hugely committed and has capable staff with great expertise and passion in the area but it is heavily under-resourced. With regard to what we need to do in terms of biodiversity, it is absolutely critical that the National Parks and Wildlife Service is much better resourced. Some of the NGO commentators have the view it should have something in the region of between four to eight times the amount of funding and resources it has. When we look at the work done, for example, by the Environmental Protection Agency, we see that today it has been able to call out Irish Water on wastewater discharges. The National Parks and Wildlife Service is not able to do this type of work. It does not have this type of public education role to be able to hold people to account and be capable of stronger enforcement. Will part of the strategy be to look at how to strengthen the role of the National Parks and Wildlife Service with regard to biodiversity?

Ms Fiona Quinn: There is a specific commitment in the programme for Government to review the National Parks and Wildlife Service during the lifetime of the Government. This is where we will see space for these reflections. With regard to the generality of the arrival of the heritage function and the National Parks and Wildlife Service, it is a significant function. Interestingly, it has increased the number of staff in the Department by more than 50%. It is a very big function to move into the Department. We are working really well with it and there has been a very good beginning with regard to settling it in and integrating it into the Department. From our perspective, we are very much working with the assistant secretary, Niall Ó Donnchú, on workforce planning and the needs for the future. We have already started this process.

Deputy Cian O’Callaghan: It is vital that the review of the National Parks and Wildlife Service happens quickly because we are very far behind on the biodiversity crisis. We cannot wait for several years for a review to strengthen it.

Senator Mary Fitzpatrick: I thank Ms Quinn for her presentation and for coming before the committee. It is very important that we get this strategy document right and that the strategy for the Department reflects the significant challenges facing the country in terms of Covid, climate action and Brexit but also reflects the fact we have a new Government made up of three very distinct parties. Significant effort was put into agreeing a programme for Government with shared objectives. The Department’s strategy must reflect it so it is important that we do not just have a business as usual approach and a refreshing of the previous strategy document but instead have a new departure and a new strategy that reflects the shared objectives of this Government. It is critical that it reasserts the State’s role in the provision of social infrastructure, the protection of our natural resources and serving our communities in terms of local democracy.

When I go through the last strategy document, and I presume the witnesses will attempt to mirror somewhat the sections, in terms of housing, there was a specific question about the referendum on housing. While I accept that this is a strategy document so it will not call out a date for a referendum on the right to housing, it must mention the very clear actions that have been identified in the programme for Government. There are over 200 of them that, as was noted by the witnesses, this Department will be responsible for delivering so the strategy must reflect that level of that responsibility and also reflect that level of commitment. In terms of housing, the strategy must state that the State is going to reassert its role in the provision of housing, a

referendum on housing, the provision of public housing on public land and the provision of affordable housing. The previous document spoke about renting and improving the rental sector. We need something much more ambitious than just saying we are going to improve the rental sector. We must say that we are going to deliver affordable rental and secure tenure in sustainable homes. If this strategy is not ambitious like that, delivery will fall far short of what people demand of us.

The planning section needs to call out significant important planning objectives around planning for the marine and wind energy. We have all collectively agreed that the SHDs have failed to deliver housing. They did deliver accelerated planning decisions. We welcome that but the planning section needs to talk about not just achieving efficiency but also quality in planning decisions.

In terms of local government, a number of referenda are mentioned but local government is key to local communities and citizens so we must champion local government in the strategy. The Department must do so over the next four years in terms of its strategy and its ability to deliver for its citizens, housing and planning. Our local authority members are the hardest working public representatives in the country. The Department's strategy must call out a commitment to supporting our local authority members and working over the next four years to do that.

We all know that water is a precious and finite resource. We need to very much call that out in our strategy and identify how we are going to ensure that is asserted. I appreciate that heritage is a new Department but it is a 50% increase in the Department's staff so I am really interested in seeing how we will incorporate heritage in the next draft strategy.

Was an evaluation of the previous strategy carried out that identifies achievement against objectives and if so, can we get a copy? What are the next steps? There is a target for a strategy to be agreed within six months so the clock is really ticking. Will we get a draft of it before it is published? Will it come back to the committee? How will that work?

Ms Fiona Quinn: I wish to reassure the Senator that the programme for Government will be the cornerstone of the statement of strategy. While we will give the report to the Minister by the end of the month, it will not just involve the Minister. It will also involve the three Ministers, who, in our Department, reflect Government partners so there will be a space for us ensuring that they are happy that it reflects the ambition of the programme for Government.

I noted all of the various issues raised by the Senator. As she is aware, many of them have already been specifically called out in the programme for Government. In respect of the evaluation piece, as I said to Deputy Duffy, our annual report is our annual statement on our success in implementing our strategy so we can provide the Senator with the annual reports that are relevant to the previous statement of strategy. Mr. Allen might correct me but I think the previous statement of strategy was a three-year plan.

Mr. Damian Allen: Yes, from 2017 to 2020. Each annual report is a report on the previous year's implementation of the strategy objectives.

Ms Fiona Quinn: We can arrange that.

Chairman: I thank Ms Quinn and Mr. Allen for their presentation. Members have many more questions to ask about this strategy. Unfortunately, we are tied with regard to the time we can spend in the committee room because a select committee is meeting after this. I know members will be keen to see the draft publication on 26 December. We may not be reading it

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on that day but I think that is the target. It is up to the members to decide whether we want to have further engagement on the strategy, the draft and final one and review it during the lifetime of this committee. I think members may be open to that and we will discuss it as a committee. I thank the witnesses for their time here this morning. I apologise to members for the fact that we did not get to everybody. We were very tight on time and all parties got to make a statement.

The joint committee adjourned at 9.46 a.m. until 10 a.m. on Tuesday, 17 November.