

DÁIL ÉIREANN

AN COMHCHOISTE UM THITHÍOCHT, PLEANÁIL AGUS RIALTAS ÁITIÚIL

JOINT COMMITTEE ON HOUSING, PLANNING AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT

Dé Céadaoin, 3 Aibreán 2019

Wednesday, 3 April 2019

The Joint Committee met at 9.30 a.m.

MEMBERS PRESENT:

Deputy Mick Barry,	Senator Victor Boyhan,
Deputy Pat Casey,	Senator Martin Conway.
Deputy Mattie McGrath,	
Deputy Darragh O'Brien,	
Deputy Eoin Ó Broin,	

In attendance: Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett.

DEPUTY MARIA BAILEY IN THE CHAIR.

Business of Joint Committee

Chairman: Apologies have been received from Senator Grace O’Sullivan. I propose that we go into private session to deal with some housekeeping matters. Is that agreed? Agreed.

The joint committee went into private session at 9.37 a.m. and resumed in public session at 9.48 a.m.

Update on the National Emergency Co-ordination Group: Discussion

Chairman: At the request of the broadcasting and recording services, members and visitors in the Public Gallery are requested to ensure that, for the duration of the meeting, their mobile phones are turned off completely or switched to airplane, safe or flight mode, depending on their devices. It is not sufficient to put phones on silent mode, as that will maintain a level of interference with the broadcasting system.

No. 7 on the agenda is an update on the National Emergency Co-ordination Group. From the national directorate for fire and emergency management in the Department of Housing, Planning and Local Government, I welcome Mr. Seán Hogan, Ms Maria Smith and Mr. Keith Leonard. Before beginning, I draw witnesses’ attention to the fact that, by virtue of section 17(2)(l) of the Defamation Act 2009, witnesses are protected by absolute privilege in respect of their evidence to the committee. However, if they are directed by the committee to cease giving evidence in respect of a particular matter and they continue to do so, they are entitled thereafter only to a qualified privilege in respect of their evidence. They are directed that only evidence connected with the subject matter of these proceedings is to be given and are asked to respect the parliamentary practice to the effect that, where possible, they should not criticise or make charges against any person, 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 Houses or an official either by name or in such a way as to make him or her identifiable.

I call on Mr. Hogan to make his opening statement.

Mr. Seán Hogan: I thank the committee for its invitation to attend the meeting. The National Emergency Co-ordination Group, NECG, is associated with our Department in its role as a lead Department for a number of emergency scenarios. While our Department has led the development of many aspects of emergency management and is perhaps most associated with the NECG because of storms Ophelia and Emma. However, the group is part of a generic emergency management system, which is used by any one of eight lead Departments, depending on the emergency scenario, and is not merely associated with weather events.

The Department’s functions in emergency management are delegated to the national directorate for fire and emergency management, NDFEM, in our Department, of which I am the national director. I am joined by colleagues Keith Leonard, director of emergency management, and Maria Smith, assistant principal in the national directorate.

The NDFEM was established in 2009 as part of a consolidation exercise and operates with its own management board structure within the Department of Housing, Planning and Local Government. Its mandate is to develop consistent, effective, quality local authority fire services to protect communities from fire. Its roles include developing national policies and national standards, and supporting and overseeing their implementation at local level.

Based on international good practice in the field of safety and emergency management, the national directorate uses a systemic risk management approach in managing fire risk and other emergency scenarios in Ireland.

Ten years on from its inception, the management board of the NDFEM has made significant progress in aligning national and local arrangements around common fire safety objectives. The national directorate supports the fire authorities through setting general policy, providing a central training programme, issuing guidance on operational and other related matters and providing capital funding for priority infrastructural projects.

National policy on fire services is set out in Keeping Communities Safe published by my Department's national directorate in 2013. This policy document sets out the overall approach, the methods and the techniques to achieve the objective of keeping communities safe from fire and sets out national norms, standards and targets against which local authorities can benchmark their services.

Over the course of 2014 and 2015, the national directorate's management board commissioned an external validation group, EVG, to visit each of the 27 local authority fire services. In April 2016, the management board published the first EVG report entitled, Local Delivery - National Consistency, arising from this work. The report concluded, *inter alia*, that local authorities benchmarked their fire services against the national standards and national norms, and a strong degree of consistency, linked to area risk categorisation process in fire service provision, and all local authorities are using, or are working towards, national norms as minimum standards.

Practically all fire deaths in Ireland occur in the home and there has been a strong focus on community fire safety initiatives over the past decade, primarily the fitting of smoke alarms in dwellings. There has been a consistent decline in fire fatality rates in Ireland over the past decade. We are at a point where, at a three-year average 5.3 fatalities per million of population, we are in the league of fire safe countries. This is less than half the death rate ten years ago.

Additionally, the directorate has played a key role in developing arrangements for emergency management at both local and national levels. The directorate has led the national level response across government services as lead Department for severe weather to events such as Storm Ophelia and Storm Emma. My presentation will focus on the work undertaken by the NDFEM in our role as chair of the NECG in recent severe weather events.

The group is not a standing committee. It is activated when the judgement of the lead Department suggests that it is both necessary and beneficial to activate defined national co-ordination procedures for situations which are, or may develop, into national emergencies.

It is a principle of emergency management in Ireland that response occurs and is led at the level closest to where the emergency occurs. For instance, we do not try to manage events in west Cork from Dublin, the people in west Cork will respond and do what they need. Hundreds of minor emergencies are dealt with every day by our principal emergency services. Not all

emergencies require a full NECG to be activated. Last summer for instance, we convened a cross-departmental group to manage the drought and water supply, rather than convening a full NECG.

A national emergency co-ordination group may be convened where a potential or actual national emergency situation is perceived to exist by the relevant lead Department. Emergency scenarios for which the Department of Housing, Planning and Local Government is the lead Department and may activate a group are severe weather events, flooding, major fires, water supply or water contamination, hazardous materials incidents, landslides, and building collapse or accidental explosions.

With the exception of the tsunami and nuclear accident at Fukushima, Japan, in 2011, when nuclear safety was part of the Department's brief, all of the Department of Housing, Planning and Local Government's experiences as a lead Department convening a NECG relate to severe weather and flooding scenarios. We work closely with our colleagues in Met Éireann, who are also part of the Department of Housing Planning and Local Government. Met Éireann issue weather-related advisories, alerts and warnings under a well-established traffic light and scaled system for severe weather events. In addition, Met Éireann is developing a national fluvial flood forecast and warning system in conjunction with the OPW.

In the national directorate we work closely with Met Éireann in assessing potential impacts of forecasted weather conditions, and liaise with them practically on a daily basis. Where we judge the situation warrants, the Department of Housing, Planning and Local Government will convene and chair the NECG to undertake the necessary additional co-ordination of services at national level. All Departments and a range of specialist agencies are required to attend a group when it is convened by a lead Department.

As lead Department, the chair will decide the mode of national emergency co-ordination centre, NECC, operation appropriate to the circumstances. This may range from one co-ordination group meeting per day to continuous, or 18-hour, operation within the centre or on a continuum between these.

The Department uses the NECC facility in Agriculture House on Kildare Street when it has called an NECG. This facility was put in place at the request of the Department in the mid-2000s and has proven invaluable as a hub for national co-ordination and communications with the public.

The national directorate team uses a simple but effective national incident management system to manage all emergencies. This involves four boards. The recognised current situation describes whether the emergency relates to snow, weather, fire or transport accident, for instance. Out of that we extract the key issues for our level of co-ordination. We then establish the objective or objectives and priorities against which we judge all our actions. It is a very simple generic system which is in use throughout the country by all local authorities, the HSE, An Garda Síochána and everyone. It is a simple system that has been bedded in over the last decade.

The NECG chair designates, and revises as necessary, our staff roles while in operation. We review information, decide actions and assign tasks. Depending on the circumstances, the national directorate team may be supported by members of the Department's management board and other Department staff as appropriate.

The NECG is the national hub for co-ordination of all activity relating to an emergency situation. At the initial group meeting, the chair will make appropriate introductory comments, and at this stage we have established working relationships among many of the participants around the table, which helps set the tone for the working of the group.

The co-ordination activity at national level is referred to as horizontal co-ordination, that is, we are co-ordinating equals among all 15 Departments and all the agencies. This happens at the National Emergency Co-ordination Centre. Several meetings may be held a day or it may be a single meeting, depending on the situation.

We prepare an agenda for distribution which reflects the key issues. The chair's job is to structure the meeting and ensure that things are focused on the key issues and ensure that each is dealt with adequately and efficiently as time is usually a pressure.

It is important to bear in mind that the NECG is a forum for sharing information which enables organisations to make informed and appropriate decisions about their individual areas of responsibility.

The existence of a national emergency co-ordination group does not take decision-making or other functions from any statutory body, Minister, Department, or agency. Attendees are expected to share relevant information, to contribute meaningfully to discussion of issues and to ensure that decisions for their sector are made in a timely fashion taking account of the information shared at the group.

Depending on the nature, extent and response required, the chair may designate subgroups, and subgroup chairs, to deal with specific issues or aspects of its work that have arisen, or are anticipated, in the event of the emergency. In my role as chairman I normally assign a member of our staff to work with the group to ensure issues are dealt with quickly and effectively. Some subgroups dealing with generic functions, such as public safety messaging and preparing communication messages, may be standing for the duration of a national emergency co-ordination group. Others come and go on a day-by-day basis as needed.

Part of the role of the lead Department is to liaise with and support those who work on the front line to manage the emergency. The task of linking with local services is referred to as vertical co-ordination. There are two levels of co-ordination. One is at national level, which is horizontal, and the vertical is where we link with people managing the emergency at local level.

A framework for major emergency management was adopted by the Government in 2006 and introduced through a two-year major emergency development programme. It underpins the co-ordination of local response efforts in an emergency. The national steering group for major emergency management is an interdepartmental body, which was also formed in 2006. It is chaired and supported by the national directorate and has an ongoing programme for further development of emergency management capacity at local and regional level. The national steering group is overseeing the final stages of the introduction of a framework for mass fatality planning. This a grim subject but we felt there was a need to do some work on it. The national steering group has developed and published an extensive range of guidance on different aspects of emergency management.

As we have seen from flooding in Donegal to snow in Wexford, the relevant local authorities lead the local response and co-ordinate the activities of the principal response agencies, be they the Garda Síochána or the HSE. Significant efforts have gone into developing a standard ap-

proach to this function and each event is reviewed with a view to learning. An initial experience of a local authority in using social media to provide information for the public on a developing emergency has become the norm after review meetings. For example, a presentation may be made on how something worked in Cork along with the issues that arose. This is how much of the development has happened over the past decade.

Provision of timely and appropriate public safety warnings and information for the public is one of the key roles of a national emergency co-ordination group. The chair of the group generally leads a Department's public information and communications work associated with the emergency, and the general approach is, if possible, to have a single voice for the duration of the emergency.

A further perceived strength of the Department's practice is that it is the crisis management process which is dominant. Communications is positioned as an important ancillary support function but not the central player of the National Emergency Co-ordination Group. While recognising the centrality of the group's public information mandate, with its focus on crisis management and general reliance on expert-led and delivered communications, the Department's experience is that the National Emergency Co-ordination Group has established credibility with the media and the public as the definitive source of warnings, advice and information. Widely accepted public communication is an indication of successful delivery of the national emergency co-ordination group's remit. Managing to preserve this positive perception of the group is a constant challenge. Overuse of the group or a misjudgment on an issue could damage its public credibility.

Communicating warnings and associated protective actions to the public is a significant function of the National Emergency Co-ordination Group. One of the values of establishing a national emergency co-ordination group during a crisis lies in its collective consideration of all the issues, while fine-tuning safety advice for the public, depending on the situation.

Delivery of public safety messages is achieved through a combination of traditional news media and social media. Safety messaging is a reasonably well developed function and, for example, relevant organisations begin disseminating selected messages in advance of weather emergencies. Experience suggests that communities and individuals will take the necessary protective action when provided with timely, credible and accurate safety information.

Since we first used the National Emergency Co-ordination Group approach for the major flooding in November 2009, the national directorate has reviewed the response to every emergency event where a national emergency co-ordination group has been activated. This has enabled a continuous cycle of reflection, learning and improvement in our co-ordination of emergency response. We have prepared a review report on the extraordinary series of weather events that affected Ireland in 2017 and 2018, including ex-Hurricane Ophelia and Storm Emma, which was a snowstorm, three flooding events and the drought and associated water shortages and wildland fires last summer. Our overall conclusion, based on the response across the range of events, is that our emergency management system at national level, when linked with a local response that successfully engages communities and provides adequate warnings and information for the public, is a comprehensive form of integrated emergency management in keeping with good international practice. However, part of the purpose of the review is to identify what we can improve. We have implemented recommendations within the national directorate's remit and we are working with the local government sector and the national steering group on major emergency management to implement recommendations within their respective remits. The Government's task force on emergency management is considering our recommen-

dations, which have national co-ordination and interdepartmental implications.

I hope I have been able to explain the National Emergency Co-ordination Group and I look forward to hearing the views of committee members. I hope I can answer the questions they may have on this area of work.

Senator Victor Boyhan: I thank the witnesses for coming before the committee. I also thank Mr. Hogan for outlining his work. It gives us a lot of confidence in many of the issues he outlined. There are other issues he did not touch on and I will raise them. I will begin with messaging. When Mr. Hogan spoke about the importance of communication and messaging he used the expression “a single voice”. The problem in an emergency is the media goes after it and it becomes the main story of the day. The line can be blurred between politicising an event and the co-ordinators, responders and people dealing with the event. I have noticed this and it needs to be guarded against. What are the media really interested in speaking about? They are in the business of news. Obviously, the news is factual and true but sometimes the media get bored of the same old face. I mean no disrespect to anyone here in saying that. There is a very fine line and it is something that needs to be looked at and kept constantly monitored. An event suddenly becomes about the response of politicians and Ministers, which is not necessarily the right approach in an emergency. I do not necessarily want to draw out Mr. Hogan on this, other than to say it is something I have noticed and I would like to think Mr. Hogan is keeping a close eye on it because we do need a single co-ordinated voice in a response.

My next question is on the National Emergency Co-ordination Group’s experience with local authorities, of which we have 31. As a former member of a local authority, I am not sure how well equipped they are to respond to an emergency. Are dry runs done? Are their systems audited? Are they robust enough? I suggest some of them are not but that is a matter for the witnesses, as the professionals. How does the National Emergency Co-ordination Group engage with local authorities and how does it monitor and audit their capacity and ability to respond? Does it go out to see how well equipped their response units are and how they relate to the group?

There are various needs and responses. One area Mr. Hogan did not deal with was major maritime emergencies. The response to somebody living in a port such as Dún Laoghaire may be very different from the response to somebody living in the midlands, County Laois or County Tipperary. We need to look at this. How well equipped is the National Emergency Co-ordination Group? Does it cover major maritime emergencies? We are an island nation and major maritime incidents could occur. We need to know about them. I am not sure how the National Emergency Co-ordination Group interfaces with major environmental challenges and emergencies.

With regard to the homeless initiative, we see when there is a major snow event that the agencies involved, particularly in Dublin, issue an alert asking people to contact them. How does the National Emergency Co-ordination Group interface with these organisations?

Mr. Seán Hogan: I thank the Senator for his questions and the points he raised and I will try to deal with them as best I can. With regard to the single voice, the role I have stepped into is chairing the National Emergency Co-ordination Group, which involves leading the media. We work very closely with traditional media. Our approach facilitates the traditional media. By timing our meetings, we can get our message out and the media have been very good at capturing and picking up on the safety messages we want to disseminate. I am not the only one involved. Images of a series of spokespersons will, hopefully, have been seen. Those include

people from the transport sector, the ESB, the communications sector, the Defence Forces and An Garda Síochána. The whole group is aligned around the message. That is part of how this system of public communication works.

Regarding politicisation, we live in a world where our mandate comes from the Taoiseach of the day. That has been the case since 2009 when the former Deputy, Mr. Brian Cowen, was Taoiseach. He was followed in that post by Deputy Enda Kenny and now we have the current Taoiseach. They give us our mandate and our co-ordination has been so successful because we have a strong mandate to do what we do. This ensures that all of 15 Departments are part of the effort and contribute at full tilt in doing what needs to be done. The political aspect is, therefore, very important. It is normal in our world for the Taoiseach, our Minister, as the lead Minister, and other Ministers to make statements at an early stage. Our role is to co-ordinate. Let us take severe weather events as an example. Those impact greatly on transport so we rely a great deal on our transport colleagues and their expertise. There are times, therefore, when it is appropriate for the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport, Deputy Ross, to comment on issues. It would be the same for the ESB in the context of power supply, which is always another major issue in these situations. It is generally in the early stages that statements are issued as a way of getting people's attention focused on a major issue. That is how we have worked. It is a constant issue as to who takes the lead, how things are led and where the balance lies in making decisions. It is important that we as public servants do not become the story. We have a message to communicate but we are not the story. The National Emergency Co-ordination Group is not the story. We want to get people focused on the weather event. I certainly take that approach.

Another thing I will say about the political aspect is that the Taoiseach and various Ministers attend meetings of the National Emergency Co-ordination Group to see what is happening. There have been situations where we have been asked to brief the full Cabinet on various issues, as need be. There is a high degree of interaction. Media people from the various Departments also attend meetings of National Emergency Co-ordination Group. This means that when decisions are being made we do not have to go out of the room to discuss how messages are to be formulated. It is part of the formulation of the decision within the room. That is one of the strengths we have because it enables us to meet in an hour, cover our agenda, know what our decisions are going to be and what we are going to be stating outside.

In fairness to the media professionals in the room, they ask questions about what can be said on "RTE News: One O'Clock". I have experienced where such decisions occasionally need to be revised. It is very helpful for me, as an amateur working in the communications area, to have professionals observing and offering advice on how best to communicate the message. Does that deal with the question regarding the politicisation of communication?

Senator Victor Boyhan: It is clearly a challenge.

Mr. Seán Hogan: We face constant challenges in the world we are in and we have to balance them continuously. I put my hands up and state there have been situations where, in retrospect, I would have made an alternative judgement about these things. That happens, however, in these areas.

Turning to the local authorities, that is again an interesting point. The major emergency development programme was a two-year programme designed to embed this framework for major emergency management. That framework guides how local authorities in an area are to work with An Garda Síochána and the HSE. Those are the bodies charged by Government with

responding to situations. If there is a road traffic accident, a local authority's fire brigade, the Garda and the HSE's ambulance service will respond and they are used to working together. This framework was put in place in 2006 to enable those services to work together.

A defined set of steps was gone over. Part of our approach has been to work carefully with people. There may at times have been an approach of policy being set by the national Government and execution being done by those outside of national Government. We have stepped into the space of working carefully and closely with the local authorities, the HSE and An Garda Síochána. Our national steering group on major emergency management includes representatives from the Department of Justice and Equality, the Department of Health, the HSE and local authorities. We collaborate closely to ensure these people can work together. I have a fair degree of confidence in local authorities. I would actually be stronger than that: local authorities have taken emergency management and the local response onto themselves and have really made an effort in this area. They have realised how important it is. Whether dealing with flooding in Donegal, snow in Wexford or storms in Cork, they have risen to the challenge.

At the end of each event we gather in the 27 areas we deal with and reflect on events. There are 31 local authorities but some provide services jointly. I recall that after Storm Ophelia people in Cork spoke about how they did certain things and they were quizzed by their peers and colleagues. I am confident that the good practice evident in Cork can now be found in all 27 areas after everybody in that room went home and acted. There will always be small variations in how people do things but the local authorities have really taken that on board. I have already referred to doing what we term an external validation in the fire services. We stated national policy and what we wanted those services to do. A small group was then appointed to visit every authority. That was a very beneficial exercise. We have not undertaken that same exercise regarding emergency management but we have a slightly different way of doing that.

We are the parent Department of the local government system and the local authorities have stepped in and done the work necessary. They have spent money carrying out those responses and as a Department we have stepped in to support them. In the past decade we have provided an additional €90 million to local authorities for unbudgeted expenditure undertaken carrying out those responses. As part of that process, the money will not be forthcoming unless things are in order and the major emergency plans, flooding plans and severe weather plans are in place. It is a case of linking both elements. Local authorities, from my perspective, have undertaken their responsibilities. I have a strong degree of confidence regarding what will happen when I have to pick up the phone to deal with a particular local authority. There is a system in place and local co-ordination will kick in.

As weather events arrived this last winter, Mr. Leonard and his staff had practically weekly contact with individuals within the local authorities concerning their preparations for and awareness of what was coming. We have a high degree of contact and that can mitigate the worst effects of events. An example would be the flooding in Donegal in August 2017. There was a question of whether we should have convened the National Emergency Co-ordination Group. We had been in touch with Donegal, however. We knew the county had mobilised its services as we expected in accordance with the national system laid out. We were not going to add any additional value by convening in Dublin. The right people were in place in Donegal and they were doing what we had asked them to do. We convened in Dublin when we got into recovery mode two or three days later to ensure that all Departments were supporting Donegal County Council in restoring services and areas as best it could in the aftermath of that weather event.

That is the area where I work with the local authorities. In answering this question about

local authorities, therefore, I must state that I have a strong degree of confidence in the local government system. That is not just with the executive. My background is working in fire services and those services have led much of the work on emergency management within the local government system. Responding to emergencies is the day to day business of those services. They have learned how to do that and how to lead the process. That has been successful from our perspective. In the two months after Storm Ophelia, through the Association of Irish Local Government, AILG, we met about 300 local authority members to discuss the response, their place in that and the things they were doing.

It is not that the local authorities are accountable to us in the Department. The Donegal County Council executive is accountable in its own chamber first of all. The members of Donegal County Council met two days after the flooding and the Inishowen area met on the day. They are the ones to whom the response must first be justified. It is not that I am sitting in the Custom House thinking or wondering what will the local authorities in Longford, Louth or whatever county do. I know how the system works and I know that the local members will hold people to account. What we wanted to do in our effort was to set out the expectation of what people would do. Part of the job we have done is to present the expectation. It is not the case of saying that one has to do everything, anywhere, any time. We are stating what is reasonably expected of officials and this is what they should be benchmarked against. We have all the documents here that the local authorities are working to. This is what they are expected to do. By and large the staff get on with that. The staff know now at this stage that they will get the support from national level and they have received that support. That is a big help. They are not hesitant before they go forth and go out. From our perspective this has helped.

Local authorities have been particularly successful at engaging with communities. One of the strengths of Ireland is the way that communities respond. This is due to a number of reasons. People see that things are working at national level and at local level things are working and, therefore, communities are happy to do whatever they can to help themselves and their neighbours. That is one of the very positive aspects of the emergency management system. The local government system has been particularly strong. We have further to go, and there is a lot of work to do about the communities.

It is interesting that Senator Boyhan raised maritime emergencies. Transport emergencies generally come under the remit of the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport. If it is an aircraft incident, a train crash, a road traffic incident or whatever the nature of the event, the Department of Transport, Tourism and Sport will be the lead Department. They will convene an NECG.

We have a significant degree of liaison with our colleagues in the Irish Coast Guard in respect of maritime affairs. We have a framework for major emergency management and they have a framework for search and rescue response at sea. We have a protocol for the interface between the two because if a ship is coming close to shore, and that might involve pollution or rescuing lives, similar to the incident in Norway just a few weeks ago where hundreds of passengers on a cruise ship had to be evacuated. I could not talk about maritime emergencies *per se* because we are not the lead Department but I know that in the event of an incident, we would move in to support the Department of Transport, Tourism and Sport in the way it supports us currently if there is snow and a storm and the airports, rail or bus services are disrupted.

We do a lot of work with our colleagues in the Coast Guard. Our national steering group on major emergency management in the Department of Transport, Tourism and Sport and the Coast Guard are part of that group. We do a lot of “preparedness work” there. While members

tend to see the high-profile NECG, I would characterise the past decade as a decade of significant background work with people working together. That is the secret. People know each other. Ireland is a good size of a country and we know our colleagues in the Coast Guard very well. We work with them. They understand our system and we understand their system, which is governed by international practice. They would under International Maritime Organization rules. We have to understand that. I am sorry that I cannot give Senator Boyhan more detail on their system, but that is how we interface with that system. I expect that the very same system would be used in a maritime transport accident.

I will now respond to the question on homelessness and severe weather events. I am particularly proud that as a Department we have a particular focus on this issue. I look back at the work that was done in the run up to Storm Emma and during the week from 26 February. We had put out the word that the storm was going to be bad and the homeless would be among the priorities of the Department. With the organisations work on the ground, significant work was done. An additional 100 people who would never normally come in and avail of shelter were successfully persuaded to come in and engage with the health service. Their medical needs were attended to. However, some ten or 12 people stayed out and as members will be aware, their circumstances are complex. They chose not to come in and to their credit the services checked on them on an hourly basis. I was pleased with the way we as a society responded and how the Department, the local authorities and the voluntary sector acted in these circumstances. I instance Storm Emma because we know the figures. More than 100 people who had not engaged with the services for a long time were successfully engaged. I cannot tell members what happened subsequently but it was a success and it was a case of transforming what could have been a disaster into an opportunity to engage with homeless people.

Senator Victor Boyhan: I thank Mr. Hogan.

Deputy Mick Barry: I thank the witnesses for their presentation, which was very informative.

My first question relates to weather emergencies. I imagine the number one policy priority in a national weather emergency is the protection and saving of life. There have been fatalities in weather emergencies. To some extent that is inevitable, but I agree with those who feel the loss of life could have been prevented in weather emergencies. A case that come into the public realm through his widow is the death of Mr. Fintan Goss from County Louth who lost his life in 2017 in Storm Ophelia when driving home from work. He was a private sector worker. Would he have lost his life had he been a public sector worker?

Chairman: I wish to stop the Deputy for a moment.

Witnesses are protected by absolute privilege and are asked not to identify anybody outside the Houses.

Deputy Mick Barry: I am only raising points that have been raised by Mr. Goss's widow. Essentially, there was no shutdown in the private sector. We do not have laws in this country that state that in a status red weather emergency workplaces generally must shut down and workers must be asked to stay at home in the interests of protecting life and limb. There should be legislation to that effect. Mr. Goss's widow, Ms Pamela Goss has spoken out publicly in support of that position. I am asking Mr. Hogan to comment on that. Does he think it would be of assistance to the work of the co-ordinating committee if such legislation were in place? Would it be a factor which would assist in the saving of lives?

My second question related to a topic that Mr. Hogan zeroed in on, which is homelessness. Mr. Hogan referred to the important role the organisations out on the ground played during Storm Emma. One of the organisations on the ground assisting homeless people in such weather emergencies is Inner City Helping Homeless. It went public regarding events during severe weather conditions in the capital on 29 January of this year. The temperature in Dublin dropped below zero that night. The picture presented by this organisation which works on the ground night in, night out and day in, day out was different from that Mr. Hogan presented to the committee five minutes ago. It was not a picture of ten or 12 people staying out for complex reasons best known to themselves in spite of being coaxed inside and beds being made available for them. Inner City Helping Homeless states that it counted 86 people in this city on 29 January for whom emergency accommodation could not be found during that period of very freezing temperatures. Its spokesperson stated, "We know for a fact there were no beds available when our teams tried to get them last night." He further stated that people were not told to call back later: "They were just told straight 'no'." He was responding to a claim by the Dublin Regional Homeless Executive that some people were told there were no beds available at the time but that they should ring back later, at which stage a bed would be available. Inner City Helping Homeless strongly contested that claim and stated that in addition to beds not being available later that night, people were told not to call back. I ask Mr. Hogan to comment on those claims by Inner City Helping Homeless. Obviously, this is a serious and vital question in terms of ensuring that the number one priority during a weather emergency, namely, the saving of lives, including those of people who are homeless, is to be attended to.

Mr. Seán Hogan: The Deputy raised several points. I deeply regret the loss of life during Storm Ophelia and the surrounding issues. However, I do not think I should comment on an individual case or circumstance. I am happy to comment on the overall issue raised by the Deputy arising from that in terms of statutory powers to close workplaces during a status red warning. Our clear priority is the protection of life and limb. The role of the national emergency co-ordination group during status red alerts has been about what we add to the weather information provided by Met Éireann. We provide additional public safety advice when there are real and definite public safety issues. We do not operate under legislation. Other countries take different approaches, such as declaring code red, closing certain locations and having statutory requirements. My view rather than that of the Department is that I am unsure that legislation would be of benefit in such situations. We would describe our system as integrated emergency management, which comes from international practice in this area. We want to get communities to respond to the advice and warnings rather than our taking a central command-and-control approach whereby we sit in Dublin and state that certain things will happen. The latter is not the approach we have promulgated for the past decade. I have question marks over whether it would be right tone or would work in this country. We have developed a system whereby we try to send out information and encourage people to react to it in an appropriate and sensible way. Although I do not wish to individualise the issue, it is all about people taking account of the warnings. The Met Éireann weather alert system is such that if it is a yellow alert, people need to be aware of it; if it is orange, they need to be thinking about it; and if it is red, they need to do something about it. It is a very simple and straightforward system. We do not have statutory powers. I would not be in favour of powers which would enable a person in a position such as mine to close certain locations, such as workplaces in particular.

One of the things we have learned from reviewing the response to severe weather events is that workplaces are complex and non-homogenous. We or I discovered that there is a series of essential services which must be kept going and for which necessary arrangements must be made. We were familiar with such requirements from the need to keep the fire service opera-

tional during emergencies. The experience of Storm Ophelia and Storm Emma brought home the need for a range of employment sectors to develop enhanced staffing arrangements to keep businesses such as bakeries and those involved in logistics operational. These are not high-profile jobs but they are essential to keep the country. Every employer needs to give consideration to this issue. Many have done so and others are doing so.

Advice and guidance is available. Our colleagues in the Department of Business, Enterprise and Innovation published guidance which has been updated that since Storms Ophelia and Emma. Obviously, individual employers must look at business continuity and what they need to do to keep their business going, particularly in certain sectors. Many employers alter working hours or arrangements. Within the emergency services, many fire services are provided by retained fire services. Various arrangements have been put in place by local authorities and other relevant bodies to ensure a continuity of fire services when an extreme weather event is forecast with a sufficient lead-in time.

On Deputy Barry's request for my comments on the issue, I am not convinced that legislation is the way to go and I do not wish to comment on individual cases.

On homelessness, I am unsure of the particular circumstances on the night of 29 January of this year to which the Deputy referred. From memory, the weather in February was lovely. I am trying to recall what happened on 29 January. It may have been below zero, but there are between 40 and 60 nights when temperatures fall below zero and a well-established system is in place for local authorities to react in those situations. I am not in a position to comment directly on 29 January. I reiterate that the Dublin Regional Homeless Executive and such organisations do not report directly to us. In the first instance, it would work with Dublin City Council. I am not in a position to comment on the events of that night. However, I assure the Deputy that homeless is an issue that comes before the national emergency co-ordination group and into which particular effort is put.

Deputy Mick Barry: I wish to come back in briefly on the question of legislation to insist on a shutdown of workplaces during a red alert. Emergency services need to work. There is no argument about that. That issue is not up for debate. Various employments can make alterations. Of course people can work from home. The hours can be shifted around, etc. Is it not the case that if we do not have legislation of this type, an employer has the right to call people into work if he or she chooses to do so? Given that people will not be able to walk or fly to work in these circumstances, is it not inevitable that people will use buses, cars or bicycles to travel on roads, highways and byways during red-level weather alerts? Surely that should not be permitted and action should be taken on it. I invite Mr. Hogan to comment on this matter again. I was somewhat surprised by his initial comments.

Chairman: The Deputy's question is relevant. I am interested in this matter. However, I do not know whether it falls within Mr. Hogan's remit. He is more than welcome to comment on it.

Mr. Seán Hogan: I will try to clarify and explain my view on this matter for the Chairman and Deputy Barry. The existing legislation with regard to people at work is not entirely as clear as it may seem. Emergency services are governed by health and safety legislation and have to make judgments. By and large, unless there is life at risk emergency services will not respond to significant numbers of incidents. No employer is going to put his or her employees at risk unless there is a reasonable possibility of saving life. That is something that cascades right across. I might draw out of the experience. One of the lessons we took from Storm Ophelia and Storm Emma is that conditions can vary across the country. I meet people who tell me we were very

worked up about something in Dublin even though it had no impact at all on them in Mayo or Donegal. It was an ordinary day for them. That is one of the difficulties with using a legislative approach. One of the learning points we have taken out of our experiences with Storm Ophelia and Storm Emma as red-level events is the need to mirror what we do at national level in our 30 local co-ordination centres around the country. We would like to move to a point at which the group that meets in Castlebar has access to the best information in Mayo, assesses the weather and issues the definitive local advice, just as we issue the definitive national advice. There were significant variations across the country in the two instances we are discussing. In the case of Storm Emma, southern counties like Wexford, Wicklow, Carlow and Kildare and places as far north as south Meath were significantly affected by snowdrifts, whereas counties like Donegal on the west coast were not affected at all even though they were covered by the red-level alert. It can be a bit of a blunt instrument. That is part of the difficulty we would face if a legislative approach were taken. At the moment, all employers are required by health and safety legislation to consider the conditions and whatever. Many of them have developed their arrangements since the experiences of Storm Ophelia and Storm Emma. I am not sure that legislating to insist on closures would necessarily be of benefit from the perspective of public safety, which is the area to which we are giving the most consideration. Along with the Department of jobs, we are pushing the possibility of additional guidance for employers where that is a possibility. The Department has certainly done that. A consensus on whether people consider that to be appropriate, relevant or effective will emerge in due course.

Deputy Pat Casey: I thank Mr. Hogan for his opening statement. When I contend that a more professional approach has come to the fore over the ten-year period since the establishment of the NECG, I am probably answering a question I intend to ask later in my contribution. I will begin by focusing on local authority fire services. Regretfully, there have been a few significant incidents in County Wicklow. Mr. Hogan has explained that the fire authorities are supported in “setting general policy, providing a central training programme, issuing guidance on operational and other related matters and providing capital funding for priority infrastructural projects”. How much progress has been made since this work started to be done at national level as opposed to at service level in individual counties? Mr. Hogan went on to say that local authorities are “benchmarked against the national standards”. Has that benchmarking been made publicly available to enable us to see how each local authority is progressing? How far from reaching the minimum standards and the national norms are the local authorities?

The second matter I would like to raise has probably been addressed, as I said in my opening remarks. I assume that after every event, the NECG conducts a review to analyse what happened and learn lessons from it. It is clear as every event progresses that a different and more professional approach is being taken. I acknowledge and welcome that.

Reference has been made to Met Éireann’s system of issuing red, orange and yellow status warnings. How does Mr. Hogan feel this system is working out? County Wicklow had a yellow warning for snow and frost last night.

Mr. Seán Hogan: That is right.

Deputy Pat Casey: Such conditions did not materialise. I ask Mr. Hogan to make a general comment on how the system is working. I fully understand that it is very hard to make a call for the whole country. Every county is different.

I would like to pick up on an issue mentioned by Deputy Barry. As an employer, I am probably coming at it from the other point of view. If I insist that my workers come to work even

though a red-level warning has been issued, to what extent am I exposed if something happens? Am I liable in relation to that call?

Mixed signals were sent out when the question of footpath liability came up a number of years ago. It was suggested that if someone slipped on a footpath which had not been cleared correctly, the person who attempted to clear it would be liable. I think that has been cleared up now. Perhaps Mr. Hogan can give the committee some clarity in that regard.

I would like to mention some specific issues in my own county. The question of who has the authority to order a road closure is a continual concern. The Sally Gap road in County Wicklow becomes a tourist destination, particularly among those with four-wheel drives, when the snow comes. When this results in people having to pick up the phone to make an emergency call, the Glen of Imaal Mountain Rescue and the Dublin-Wicklow Mountain Rescue, both of which are voluntary organisations, are sent out to take them off the roads. In some cases, the people who are being rescued are upset and annoyed when they are told that their vehicles are being left behind on the mountain roads. A number of years ago, we tried to put a barrier on roads like the Sally Gap. It seemed that no one was in a position to make the final call about putting up the barrier and stopping vehicles from going up there. The plan fell by the wayside. Now we are back in the same situation with snow tourists, as we call them, going up in cars. What is Mr. Hogan's view on that?

We are beginning to work towards a more co-ordinated approach to the clearing of roads after events like last year's severe snow event. I am thinking especially of local roads that are not kept clear of snow, rather than regional roads. Is there a need for a national policy that each local authority can roll out? Such a policy would allow local authorities to engage with the farming community and other communities that have suitable equipment to clear these roads as soon as possible. When three days have passed, a council could announce that it needs help in clearing roads that it might not be able to clear in the short term. We are working on a county-wide policy in County Wicklow. It has been hit and miss, but it is beginning to work. I wonder whether we need something at national level. Local authorities are never going to have enough equipment to clear all the roads. We have to find some other way of ensuring they are cleared. In County Wicklow, we have gone some way down that road by engaging farmers. However, we could do with national legislation in this area because some farmers feel they will be exposed if they damage the road.

Senator Boyhan referred to political interference or political love bombing, as I sometimes describe it. Perhaps we would all appear on television wearing a hard hat and a high-visibility jacket if we could do so. Sometimes this takes away from the key message, however. While I fully accept that Ministers are entitled to appear in the media but sometimes we see them a little too often and they are love bombing the whole process. I await Mr. Hogan's response on that.

Mr. Seán Hogan: The Deputy stated he had seen a professional approach taken after each event in the past ten years. I concur with his view on that. We take something from the experience after each event. If we look back to the first cold weather events, of which there were two in 2010, we have come a long way. Back then, we were deciding on the day what roads were a priority. Now, a list of priority roads is published in each local authority. We also have 200,000 tonnes of salt in storage, which I regret to say we did not have in 2010. Things have certainly moved along. We learn something new from each event because all of them have different dimensions. There is still a degree of judgment involved in all situations and that is part of the difficulty. Local services are, by definition, almost overwhelmed in emergencies and prioritisation and everything that goes with it are necessary. Those are important factors to bear

in mind in the management of events. Sometimes we expect our lives to go on but nature can have a huge impact on society, including in ways that we may no longer be used to. People in rural communities look outside every day to check the weather. There is a level of uncertainty associated with severe weather events. We rely on Met Éireann's forecasts and Met Éireann relies on international systems to find out about global weather conditions. We have seen storms crossing the Atlantic suddenly track a little to the right or left, which can have a major impact. The Deputy referred to snowfall in Wicklow last night. Snow is notoriously difficult to forecast and be precise about. They are the kinds of difficulties we face.

The Deputy asked about progress with fire services in the local authorities and stated that each local authority should use a benchmark. This has been done. The purpose of the external validation group was to ensure that each fire service had benchmarked itself against national standards and norms. The group's report was published in 2016. We did not publish it in league table format. The report addressed particular themes. The Deputy's reference to the fire service in Wicklow brings to mind the tragic loss of fire fighters in the county in 2007. A firefighter and a garda were also killed responding to a road traffic accident in Foynes in the same year. These incidents are on all our minds and a great deal of work was subsequently done on health and safety in the fire service. The external validation process checked that all the statutory requirements in the area of health and safety had been met by all 27 services. I am pleased to note that one of our fire services was the national winner of the National Irish Safety Organisation, NISO, safety award, based on the system that we put in place and developed. That report is public and the work done in the fire service on this is on the record.

The Deputy referred to carrying out reviews after each event and mentioned Met Éireann. Met Éireann has also made significant changes in the past ten years. The introduction of the colour-coded advisory alert warning system has brought home the importance of weather events. We probably have a much greater consciousness about weather than we did a decade ago. Events might have come and gone and we were not so sure about them, unlike now. In terms of public engagement, we believe the Met Éireann system is much advanced. We work closely with Met Éireann, which constantly reviews its system, the approach it takes and the warnings it issues. A question was asked about confusion caused by multiple warnings being issued in the case of a storm, for example, a rainfall warning and a wind warning and a yellow alert in one place and an orange alert in another. It is all about communicating with the public. I believe the new warning system has been a significant step forward. Met Éireann is probably working to refine the messages and judgments around the system. However, it should be borne in mind that the forecasting of snow is particularly problematic, difficult and hard to get right. Events occur and we consider our approach afterwards. If an event is in red warning territory, our approach is straightforward, as it is when it is in yellow warning territory. However, if it is in orange territory and approaching red, it could go either way. There is an element of judgment involved in all this. We try to draw on all our experiences. Do we get them right all the time? No, we do not. We miss certain things and probably over-call in other areas, which creates its own problems.

Deputy Casey referred to his concerns about liability and so on as an employer. Far be it from me to discuss or give the committee legal advice on liability issues. Working with colleagues in the Department of Business, Enterprise and Innovation, we saw that a great effort was made to provide advice to employers' organisations. Ultimately, employers must make a judgment as to what they need to do and how essential certain things are. The last thing anyone will want is for an employee not to make it home safely to his or her family. That is a universal position. I could not give the Deputy the kind of legal advice he seeks.

The issue of footpath liability goes back to 2010. I accept there was some initial confusion in this regard. However, the Attorney General at the time gave us a form of wording which I should be able to recite but I am afraid I cannot do so. In essence, it stated that not only could people clear the footpath outside their home but they should do so. Moreover, there is no liability attached to doing so, unless someone does something that creates a particular risk that will injure somebody. We have moved on from that. I think that position also applies with respect to the scenario the Deputy outlined.

Deputy Pat Casey: The condition that one should not do something that creates a risk is where the doubt comes in. Clearing snow leaves ice behind. Does that create a risk given that it is safer to walk on snow than on ice? That is the issue.

Mr. Seán Hogan: Yes, that is the issue. Should one do nothing rather than something? We all make a judgment on these matters. I live in an area where we go out and clear the footpaths in front of our own houses and those of our elderly neighbours and take our chances with liability. That is just a personal perspective. One of the positive features is how society has come together in response to some of the weather events, with people helping each other and their neighbours. From an international emergency management perspective, achieving that societal response is where one wants to be, although I am not sure that we can take credit for that.

Deputy Pat Casey: These events bring communities together and one sees a great community response. As a country, we should be proud of that.

Mr. Seán Hogan: I fully concur. The question on who may call a road closure is very interesting. That is a very interesting question on which I am sure officials in the Department of Transport, Tourism and Sport could advise much more than I can. I have great sympathy for the Deputy on the issue of tourists and those who do foolish things to draw attention to themselves during weather emergencies. It is galling for people who work in the emergency services, especially those in the voluntary services. From working with Mountain Rescue Ireland, we learned more about how to do co-ordination as opposed to command and control. My experience of working with Mountain Rescue Ireland over the years when we were developing our framework for major emergency management was a classic lesson in how one cannot impose on groups. It is awful to see how the services provided by people volunteering to go out and do rescue work are being abused. This also applies in the case of people who do foolish things and expect emergency services to assist when they get into difficulty. A judgment has to be made on the response and rescue. These are not situations that should arise but, unfortunately, there is always a handful of people who do these kinds of things. We regret that. I am very familiar with the point the Deputy makes regarding snow tourists who want to test out four-wheel drive vehicles.

Deputy Pat Casey: Sometimes they are not four-wheel drive vehicles.

Mr. Seán Hogan: Yes. The Deputy and the volunteers in the Glen of Imaal Wicklow Mountain Rescue have my full sympathy on that particular issue.

On clearing snow from roads, our national policy is that local authorities should engage with farmers and encourage them to clear roads. We saw this during Storm Emma and we did some detailed studies in some counties. The local authorities and their contractors cleared approximately 50% of the roads and in some counties roughly 50% of the roads were cleared by farmers using their own gear. That would be our approach in the policy. In particular areas, the local authorities have made small salt dumps available on hills and these are now in use. There

have been improvements in many such areas since 2009 and 2010. We did not have enough salt in 2009 and 2010 to leave small salt dumps but we do now. The position has improved greatly as a result of this and the work done with farmers and the machinery available to them. We see this in all sorts of weather events. During the storms, for example, many roads were cleared by people taking out chainsaws and moving fallen trees. The local authorities will focus on the main roads first to ensure they are cleared and this requires a lot of work.

Deputy Casey also referred to the political aspect. From my perspective, the activity he described is not interference. It is more the case that we take our mandate from the political system to do what we do. It is always a balance but from working with various taoisigh over the years I believe this approach works well. The political system supports us and finds out what needs to be done, what Departments are needed, what is happening and if particular issues need addressed. It also gives us direct feedback. We hear very directly about the issues confronting people. Part of our role in emergency management is to pick up on emerging issues. Our political people are frequently among the first to pick up on issues. We are very glad of their feedback and I would not underestimate this aspect of the political dimension. It happens at local level with councillors in the local authorities and at national level with Ministers and other Deputies who provide us with a sense of how things are. If we get that sense, we can start to address the issues. If we carry on blithely unaware, we are missing the point. Part of good emergency management is picking up those emerging signals.

Chairman: Does Deputy Casey wish to come back in?

Deputy Pat Casey: I am okay for the moment.

Deputy Eoin Ó Broin: We are often critical of the people who appear before the committee and we give them a relatively hard time.

Chairman: That is not always the case.

Deputy Eoin Ó Broin: It is done in a good way and is part of our job. My experience of emergency service workers on the ground and the emergency co-ordination team leaves very little room for criticism. I agree with some of the comments made by previous speakers, but they are primarily criticisms or questions for the Government around legislation or politics. Looking back at the handling of the most recent two or three major weather events, certainly in South Dublin County Council, the interaction between the National Emergency Co-ordination Group, NECG, the fire and ambulance services and the local authority was pretty exceptional.

It is very encouraging to hear Mr. Hogan say there are some things that, in hindsight, he would do differently. That means that the group is learning from its experience. Mr. Hogan's emphasis on co-ordination rather than command and control is very welcome. I commend the NECG and all of the emergency services in all of the divisions Mr. Hogan works with, and I am sure all members would share that sentiment. While there have been fatalities - and unfortunately in extreme weather events they cannot be avoided - I have no doubt that we have far fewer fatalities as a result of the work of Mr. Hogan's team and the workers on the ground. I commend Mr. Hogan and encourage him to continue the work he is doing.

Chairman: I do not know if Mr. Hogan will be able to answer this question. On securing supplies of grit and given that the head of meteorology is in Reading just outside London, will Brexit have any impact in this regard for us in Ireland? We were racking our brains about whether it would have an impact. Mr. Hogan is the best person to ask about the issue.

I concur with Deputy Casey on the Sally Gap. People were swimming in the sea off Salthill in Galway during a recent storm. Some people do stupid things at very dangerous times and put other people's lives at risk. All one can do is warn people.

Deputy Pat Casey: I have a quick follow-up question. From my time as a councillor, I am aware that when it comes to reacting to severe weather events, it is important to know if funding will be available when making decisions. The costs of engaging in some responses can be significant and sometimes a delay arises. When I was a local councillor we always provided for winter maintenance in the budget. Sometimes we would have a good year and the allocation would not be used. Is there a case to be made for the winter maintenance budget to be ring-fenced and kept? This goes back to the idea of use it or lose it, which is madness. I always felt that the winter maintenance fund should be rolled over if it was not used. The local authority would have money in reserve and when a severe weather event hit, it would have the resources needed to call in the emergency services and whatever extra expenditure it needed.

Chairman: It is unbelievable how far we have come. To draw on personal experience, in 2010, I had been home from the National Maternity Hospital, Holles Street, for three days and there was a shutdown in November until two days before Christmas, which was followed by another shutdown. It is unbelievable how far we have come in those eight years. We have learned from each event, including in the messaging and warnings that have been issued. I will take my political hat off and put on my parent hat. We were told well in advance of the most recent severe weather event that the schools would close. It helps families to know in advance as it allows them to plan ahead for the day with childcare and work. Sometimes it is not possible to inform people at an early time, but it was very beneficial to be informed on the afternoon before the most recent event that schools would not open.

Do we look at best practice around the world? I understand a text messaging service is used in Australia. Has the co-ordination group examined that? The messaging and communication around weather events are very good and everybody will be glued to the television, radio or online sources to find out what is happening. Is text messaging another tool that could be used to get the message out?

Mr. Seán Hogan: I thank Deputy Ó Broin for his comment. The group has had the privilege of leading a huge effort, not only at national level. I highlight the work of the Departments of Transport, Tourism and Sport and Communications, Climate Action and Environment, the ESB, with our colleagues in the Departments of Health and Justice and Equality who row in with us and the Department of Education and Skills. The lessons were learned in that Department. Decisions taken on the closing of schools were classic examples of how things should be done. The Department of Education and Skills makes the decision but we present information, for example, in respect of what was happening in Cork during Storm Ophelia and information provided by the ESB on the situation around the country. We might say that a decision needs to be made before 2 p.m. in order that members of the public are informed. This is how our system works. The Department of Education and the Skills and the Minister for Education and Skills can make the decision and do that. That is how it works. I assure Deputy Ó Broin that it is a huge effort by the full panoply of not just central government but the local government system and our front-line services. We have put in a lot of work over a decade in trying to develop those services. There is a judgement issue in this regard and inevitably when there is a judgement issue, in retrospect, we will get that wrong somewhere. We generally put our hands up if we do.

To respond to the other questions on Brexit and its impact on Met Éireann, I do not want

to speak for the organisation. I know it is part of our Department. Met Éireann is part of the European Centre for Medium-Range Weather Forecasts system. It is not dependent on the UK and Reading for all the pieces here. Met Éireann is well ahead. Regarding the developments that have taken place in forecasting, there is a high degree of confidence in the ten-day forecast. It is the main forecast on which we rely. Weather is a global system. It does not depend on country boundaries so the modelling is done on that global system.

I can assure the committee that our colleagues in the Department of Transport, Tourism and Sport keep a huge stock of salt so we will have a whole year of preparation. We know multiple sources are used for the delivery of salt stocks. From our bit of research on this, we are happy that we are okay there for the time being. Brexit will not impact hugely in those areas.

Deputy Pat Casey: There will not be a tariff on it so that will make it too expensive.

Mr. Seán Hogan: I do not want to comment on that now.

With regard to funding in general, the Deputy raised a question about the delays. We must again put our hand up on that. Sometimes there is no dedicated fund on which we draw on so we must look around the Department to try to find money. This can be significant. One year, the maximum amount we had to find was €17 million, which is a significant sum. We have had to come back before this committee to seek additional funding at the end of the year so sometimes we hold things until the end of the year to see how things pan out. We would put our hands up regarding some of the delays but we have succeeded in getting that. A series of debates have taken place about how one funds extraordinary events like this. Nobody likes to have a budget lying around unspent coming to the end of the year. If a budget is available, people think, "Can we not use that for something else?" There have many debates about that. We have succeeded in establishing a norm and being supported. I am referring to a very low level involving us as the Department supporting the the local authorities. Our system has a little rhythm about it. It may not be perfect but we are fairly sure we will get there. We will get the money to them. There may be some delays, which is less than ideal in that if something happens at the beginning of the year, local authorities will have spent their money and there may be budgeting and balancing issues there but that is where we go.

Regarding the questions about best practice, I emphasise that everything we do and have done is based on a systemic approach to risk management. That is something that is international and derived from the space programme. We have taken that risk management approach for both fire services and emergency management so everything we do is based on that. There has been a master's programme in emergency management in DCU for the past decade, which has produced graduates who are now dispersed across the system so when we talk about systemic risk management, we have a significant understanding of it. That is a significant benefit. Part of the success involves trying to look ahead and anticipate. It is not just about looking at what happened the last time but trying to look ahead. Putting the systems in place and establishing the NECG were all significant steps that involved looking ahead based on international good practice.

Regarding text alerts, technology changes, as a person from a certain generation, this is new. Bodies like ESB Networks and Met Éireann report that the difference in how people access their information compared to five years ago is huge when it comes to the use of social media. I sit in awe looking at bodies like Met Éireann and ESB Networks regarding how they manage social media but that is how people communicate. Moving on to text alerts in certain areas, I know work is ongoing. All emergency services use the terrestrial trunked radio, TETRA,

system so steps are being taken all the time. I know our colleagues in the Department of Communications, Climate Action and Environment are certainly progressing work in that area.

Chairman: Could Mr. Hogan address gorse fires and the fatality report the NECG is working on? Can he allude to this in more detail?

Mr. Seán Hogan: Last summer was certainly an interesting experience for us. We had drought conditions for an extended period that developed into a significant wild land fire issue. That was not the only issue. We were managing water supply issues with Irish Water over an extended period. Fire services were dealing with approximately 150 gorse fires per day at one stage. We had fantastic support from the Air Corps during that period. Deputy Casey will know that gorse or forest fires such as those that occurred in Killarney are almost impossible to extinguish. They are self-extinguishing. One controls them a bit whereas the helicopter provided the opportunity to actually impact. Serious damage was done on Bray Head and in that area. It is a significant issue. Our job was to manage the available resource, which was the helicopter at national level. Does it go to Laois or Wicklow today and how do we manage all that?

Deputy Pat Casey: The Chairman raised that issue. The other issue that came out-----

Chairman: Can I just finish on this point? I commend Mr. Hogan on the drone footage used with regard to gorse fires. I know they are probably more prevalent outside Dublin but there were significant issues last year in the Dublin Mountains around Ticknock and places like that. The fire services were unbelievable in that area.

Deputy Pat Casey: The Chairman mentioned drones. They caused problems in Bray in respect of the operation of helicopters.

Mr. Seán Hogan: They had to be stood down.

Deputy Pat Casey: Yes. While we all accept technology, there is another side to it that can impinge on the services getting there, which is something we probably need to look at.

Mr. Seán Hogan: Wild land fires are not strictly issues for rural and mountain areas. We would have very grave concerns about urban areas where if fire breaks out, there will be smoke and people with health issues will be badly affected. We did quite a bit of work with our colleagues in public health on that issue at the time anticipating that this might happen. Members may recall an extreme forest fire in the Cloosh Valley in Galway that affected Galway city. The smoke was coming in the right direction, came into Galway city and affected people there so it is not a remote and dramatic thing at night time out in the country. This can affect a population. These issues must be managed.

This is a general approach to this. This is not just the fire service working on its own. For wild land firefighting, the people involved have been led by the fire service, NPWS, the OPW, our colleagues in the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine, who issue the warnings, and our colleagues in the Department of Defence so there is a multi-agency approach to this. That is the beauty of co-ordination. One brings people together. One can then say, "This is what we are going to do about this", and everybody knows that. This co-ordination approach may not always hit national level but it is embedded in many emergency response areas. It shows the times and it works well. The biggest and best example was after Storm Ophelia when more than 300,000 customers were left without electricity supply. Water supplies also went down. ESB Networks and Irish Water working together with the Defence Forces and local authorities to respond to that is probably as good an example as any of co-ordinated response, prioritising

and getting things done. They were able to adhere to their expected response times. We never heard of these response times ten years ago, whereas now they have become the norm. When the electricity supply network is down, the expected response time for a given area will be two days, three days or 12 hours, depending on circumstances. This is the kind of progress being made in this area.

Chairman: I thank Mr. Hogan. Senator Boyhan wanted to come back in.

Senator Victor Boyhan: I wish to ask a supplementary question to my earlier questions. Mr. Hogan might talk to us briefly about his Department's engagement with the Radiological Protection Institute of Ireland, which now operates under the umbrella of the EPA. This is a particularly important area in any risk or crisis. How does the Department relate to the Radiological Protection Institute of Ireland? I ask him to share his views on this with us.

Chairman: Does Deputy Boyd Barrett wish to make a contribution?

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: Yes. An absolutely critical part of effective emergency services is having the fire services properly equipped. I have received shocking representations in the past ten days or so from firefighters who told me that the Dublin Fire Brigade fleet is substandard and the vehicles are way too old and would not be put on the road by fire services anywhere else in Europe, where there are very strict standards as to how old fire appliances can be. The standard in most of Europe is that a fire appliance should be on front-line service for five or six years and then in reserve for another five or six years, after which time it should not be used. I understand, however, that many of our vehicles, possibly half of the fleet in Dublin, are older than that. Firefighters told me alarming stories and showed me shocking video footage of leaks from pipes near electrics at the back of fire trucks; of lights, including side lights and strobe lights, not working - apparently, these vehicles are still on the road; and of compartments at the sides of the vehicles with broken locks springing out. In one instance, the firefighters told me how these broken locks could have killed a cyclist. They told me that drivers who raise these issues and refuse to drive these trucks, because they are personally liable if there are any accidents, are being disciplined, intimidated and so on and essentially told to shut up and drive defective trucks. I do not know whether this coincides with a Deloitte report that came out earlier this year, which stated there were major criticisms of the procurement policies of the Dublin Fire Brigade in terms of money being spent on second-hand vehicles in England. Apparently, quite a few of the vehicles we have in the Dublin fleet were bought second-hand in England, rather than new and are not up to scratch. Deloitte was very critical of the procurement policies of Dublin Fire Brigade in its report.

Is Mr. Hogan aware of any of these concerns and problems? Does he have any comment to make on them? If our fire equipment and fire appliances are seriously substandard and defective, the best laid plans for emergency responses and emergency co-ordination could come badly unstuck. I am interested in hearing any comments Mr. Hogan may have on this.

Mr. Seán Hogan: I will respond to the question about radiology first. I have a keen personal interest in the issue of nuclear safety and so on. I would go so far as to say the system we have in place now derives from our experience of the national emergency plan for nuclear accidents and its development. The idea of a national emergency co-ordination group first emerged from this national emergency plan. That became part of our Department's remit at a certain stage. The national emergency co-ordination centre was put in place at the request of Ms Renee Dempsey from our Department. She was the principal officer at the time dealing with the national emergency plan for nuclear accidents. We have strong links in this regard and

we undertook a review of the plan. It was recently passed to our colleagues in the Department of Communications, Climate Action and Environment and the EPA. We work very closely with the Radiological Protection Institute of Ireland, RPII, as it was formerly titled, and which is part of the EPA now, on the issue of radiological protection. We have our own guidance on dealing with radiological emergencies. One guide is developed under the national steering group for major emergency management. There is a guide for the principal emergency services in dealing with such incidents should a nuclear event occur. Our colleagues in the Department of Communications, Climate Action and Environment, I have no doubt, would convene a lead Department, as we do for severe weather events. In March 2011, when the Fukushima nuclear disaster occurred, we used the National Emergency Co-ordination Group to deal with issues arising. Despite the event occurring on the far side of the world, there were issues for us here that we needed to deal with at the time. As I said, I have strong and fond memories of this work, and much of what I have learned I learned from the national emergency plan for nuclear accidents and the experiences arising from it. Some of them were very bad experiences in the early days but they certainly provided the basis for what we have now.

I refer to Deputy Boyd Barrett's questions about fire services, specifically Dublin fire services, and the fleet there being substandard compared with European standards. He referred to alarming stories and mentioned the Deloitte report undertaken on procurement. I am aware of some of the comments made on this because they were made publicly. I do not necessarily agree with them. Everything we do in our field we do for a particular reason. We ask people who work in the fire services and other emergency services to do a difficult and sometimes dirty and dangerous job on behalf of society. Everything we do to co-ordinate and develop the service is designed to support these people in undertaking these roles. This is the main motivator of the people with whom I work closely and the people who lead the fire service across the country. We have our 218 fire stations and they typically respond to approximately 30,000 incidents per year, or perhaps slightly fewer. The number of incidents they attend is falling. There is a steady downward trend in this regard. As I said, our service and all the issues and aspects of it are described in the various fire services reports that have been done over the years.

Regarding procurement of fire engines, our Department supports local authorities in the purchase of fire engines. The typical fire engine that can be seen driving around is called a class B fire engine and would typically cost somewhere between €350,000 and €400,000. There is a programme in place. I do not have exact figures for Deputy Boyd Barrett but I would suggest that under each of the programmes relating to the Dublin fire service, there would typically be 20 front-line fire appliances in Dublin. The service would get three in each of the programmes and would have got three in each of the past two programmes. We are part of an Office of Government Procurement, OGP, framework in place for the procurement of fire engines. Specialist fire appliances such as turntable ladders are extremely expensive not just to purchase but also to maintain and operate, depending on the crewing arrangement. They are infrequently used. Firefighting in high-rise buildings is generally done from the interior now, as distinct from the exterior. We have a fleet of aerial appliances used for firefighting. I would not have information on particular appliances in Dublin at present. Normally, there would be two aerial appliances in Dublin, and probably two spares available if needed. One does not just wait for these appliances to break down. The hydraulics in them are subject to routine maintenance problems so they are taken off the run routinely. They are like aircraft so they are taken off the run routinely, serviced and maintained.

With regard to stories about appliances and difficulties with drivers, Dublin Fire Brigade will manage its own side. I would not be aware of the detail of what goes on. Management

difficulties and issues sometimes arise in fire services, not just in Dublin but right across the country, but we are not involved directly in those.

We use such grants as we have available to support the priorities of the authorities themselves in terms of what they want to purchase. We do not purchase everything everybody wants. Authorities need to prioritise periodically what they want to buy. We rely on the judgment of the management teams of Dublin Fire Brigade and Dublin City Council regarding their priorities for their area.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: I have a supplementary question. If it is the case, as has been alleged to me, that the Dublin Fire Brigade fleet is very significantly substandard relative to the fleets across the rest of Europe, it is very alarming. The firefighters gave me very specific details on the age of fire appliances. They were literally naming the fire appliances and stating how old they were. They said such fire appliances would not be used for front-line service anywhere else in Europe because of the standards applied. They stated many of the fire appliances we are buying are second hand. They are already starting quite far down the road. I was shown video footage of significant defects. Another story concerned a device that rises up and in which a firefighter sits. I do not know the exact technical term. An extra seat had been bolted onto it in an *ad hoc* way. These were very worrying points. I have no doubt about the professionalism of the firefighters. I am amazed by the professionalism, seriousness and commitment of the front-line firefighters. They take their job very seriously and they are saying to me that many of the vehicles are unsafe or not up to standard, and that the general standard of the fleet is way below what one would expect elsewhere. The Deloitte report states there is no competitive tendering in much of the procurement by the Dublin Fire Brigade. It states there is equipment being bought second hand and that there are no paper trails. These are worrying reports.

I call for a full audit of the standard of the Dublin Fire Brigade fleet. That is what needs to happen because the reports are too serious. The firefighters I was talking to told me they contacted everybody and have been in touch with Dublin City Council and so on about their concerns. When they say they are not willing to get into certain vehicles, it must be borne in mind. They told me stories about brakes not working properly because, as Mr. Hogan stated, there are complex hydraulics. These are very significant concerns I wished to raise with Mr. Hogan. A full audit and investigation are needed.

Chairman: It is exceptionally relevant but it is off the topic we are here to discuss today. It is relevant to the delivery of services, however.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: It is not off topic. It is the preparedness-----

Chairman: What I am saying is that it is relevant to the delivery of services. I want to give Mr. Hogan an opportunity to respond.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: It is very relevant to emergencies.

Chairman: I did say it was relevant.

Mr. Seán Hogan: We take very seriously the ability of emergency services, particularly the fire services, to respond. Through the political system, we receive comments and feedback in certain circumstances but I certainly would not be aware of a view such as that expressed by the Deputy on the fire fleet in Dublin or in any other county or local authority fire service. In the run-up to the difficult financial times, we had achieved a very significant improvement. Improvement comes in waves over the years. If one examines the trend over the decades, one

realises our fire fleet was in very good order before the difficult times. Thereafter, we did not have the money to buy on the scale at which we had been buying but we are back purchasing.

Regarding the Deloitte report and the purchase of second-hand equipment, everything we grant aid is subject to Government procurement procedures. This is now done through the Office of Government Procurement framework. There are those who will say we are being too bureaucratic in setting too many standards and creating too many hoops for people to jump through in terms of the tendering process on which we insist when we are grant aiding appliances. We grant aid the new appliances. I am not aware of the Dublin fire service buying second-hand appliances on a large scale. Occasionally equipment is bought second hand. I refer in particular to aerial appliances that become available. People are aware of what is available on the market. If there is an economically sound proposition, purchases are made.

On fleet management, the fleets are not being used as much as they would have been traditionally. There are probably fewer than 30,000 vehicle responses per year now whereas there probably would have been 50,000 ten years ago. Dublin Fire Brigade has its own in-house vehicle maintenance system. It will know and work with its vehicles and maintain them. I am sure that work is to the highest standard. Vehicles will break down, particularly where they are in 24-hour use across shifts and where different drivers are driving them. In the retained service, there is a tendency to have drivers who look after the vehicles. On the 24-hour shift, it is a different system and more issues arise but I can inform the Deputy, without having the detail for him, that Dublin Fire Brigade has its own internal system. Many other counties have an external arrangement now; it is all contracted out. Dublin Fire Brigade is managing it internally.

Chairman: I thank Mr. Hogan, Mr. Leonard and Ms Smith for attending. I do not know about the other members but I found the meeting exceptionally informative. I commend the witnesses on the work they do. Emergency services staff are out when we are at home and when we are told to stay at home. They put their own lives at risk, which we appreciate greatly. It is a matter of operating in the interest of public safety and keeping the country going during emergencies. I hope we will be able to have ongoing engagement with the witnesses.

A letter was issued that I forgot to put on the correspondence list. It is from the Department and states it has published a policy paper on directly elected mayors with executive functions and detailed policy proposals approved by the Government on 20 March. It is now available.

The joint committee adjourned at 11.40 a.m. until 9.30 a.m. on Thursday, 9 May 2019.