

DÁIL ÉIREANN

AN COMHCHOISTE UM FHORBAIRT TUAITHE AGUS POBAIL

JOINT COMMITTEE ON RURAL AND COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT

Dé Céadaoin, 31 Eanáir 2018

Wednesday, 31 January 2018

Tháinig an Comhchoiste le chéile ag 11 a.m.

The Joint Committee met at 11 a.m.

Comhaltaí a bhí i láthair / Members present:

Teachtaí Dála / Deputies	Seanadóirí / Senators
Seán Canney,	Maura Hopkins,
Michael Collins,	Grace O'Sullivan.
Michael Fitzmaurice,	
Carol Nolan.	

I láthair / In attendance: Deputy Danny Healy-Rae.

Teachta / Deputy Joe Carey sa Chathaoir / in the Chair.

Pobal: Review of Past Performance, Current Issues and Future Strategies

Chairman: I have received apologies from Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív. I remind members and witnesses to turn off their mobile phones, as they interfere with the broadcast system. During this meeting, we have an engagement with Pobal representatives. It is proposed that this session will conclude not later than 1 p.m. and will be followed by a two-minute sos, after which we will resume in private session. Is that agreed? Agreed. On behalf of the committee, I welcome Mr. Denis Leamy, chief executive officer, and Mr. Jerry Murphy, deputy chief executive officer.

This is a new committee. We had our first meeting on 29 November 2017. Rural development support is the second pillar of the Common Agricultural Policy, CAP, and the committee is interested in several elements of the policy. The EU plans to spend almost €100 billion on rural development policy in the period 2014 to 2020 through the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development, EAFRD. In Ireland, we plan to spend €4 billion of public money on our rural development programme, RDP, during this period. The committee met members of the EU Court of Auditors recently and examined their special report: Rural Development Programming: less complexity and more focus on results needed. I welcome its recommendations and conclusions to reduce complexity and the focus on performance and results. However, the future is unknowable and unforeseen shocks to the system can undo the best laid plans. We need only mention Brexit or recent threats to international trade and the effects of climate change.

The committee has an oversight role in respect of the Department of Rural and Community Development and the following bodies come under its remit: Pobal, Western Development Commission, Irish Water Safety, and the Charities Regulator. Pobal is the first body to appear before the committee. The organisation disbursed €615 million directly to beneficiaries in 2017, up from €257 million in 2011. Given Pobal's importance, the committee is interested in hearing about its past performance, current issues and future strategies.

I draw the attention of witnesses 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 on 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 they 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. Any submissions, opening statements or other documents the witnesses have supplied to the committee will be published on the committee's website after this meeting.

Members are reminded of the long-standing parliamentary practice to the effect that they should not comment on, criticise or make charges against a person outside the House or an official either by name or in such a way as to make him or her identifiable.

Mr. Denis Leamy: I thank the Chairman and members of the committee for the invitation to meet them today to discuss our work in Pobal. I am joined by my colleague, Jerry Murphy, who is deputy CEO.

Pobal, formerly known as Area Development Management, was established in 1992 by the Irish Government with the European Commission to manage an EU grant for local development. We work to support communities and local agencies towards achieving social inclusion

and development. Our activities and priorities are shaped by the context and policies laid out in several reports, including the programme for Government, the Action Plan for Jobs, Pathways to Work, the Action Plan for Rural Development, the framework policy for local and community development in Ireland, Putting People First, and EU 2020. We are in the process of developing a new strategic plan for 2018 to 2021 which will form the basis of how Pobal responds to the needs of communities and our funders over the next three years. We will ensure that our new strategy takes account of the principles contained within the national planning framework when it is finalised later this quarter.

Pobal's work supports the delivery of valuable services to marginalised communities in Ireland. Some of the groups supported by Government through Pobal include the long-term unemployed, young people, farmers, fishermen, families, Travellers, older people and ex-prisoners. We have formed alliances nationally and internationally to advance our service delivery model, including close working relationships with the OECD and ESRI. Our day-to-day work involves assisting on programme design, assessing grant applications, proposals and plans, managing contracts, distributing funding, monitoring progress, and auditing beneficiaries. We provide good practice case studies, evaluations, and demographic information that support Departments in making policy decisions. We make tools such as Pobal Maps and the Pobal HP deprivation index freely available to allow policymakers and communities respond to needs identified by these sets of tools.

Through our work, Pobal supports collaborative approaches to planning and decision-making. We work to promote good relationships between the community sector, State agencies and other stakeholders. In keeping with our goal to operate a balanced regional approach to service delivery, we operate from office bases in Dublin, Monaghan, Sligo, Clifden, Letterkenny, Galway city, Limerick and Kilkenny. The Department of Rural and Community Development is our lead Department and I will later discuss some of the governance and regulatory mechanisms under which we operate.

In 2017, Pobal managed 23 programmes, primarily for four Departments. The full list of programmes is detailed in the supporting information provided to the committee. In managing these programmes, Pobal distributed almost €615 million to beneficiaries. We had contracts with almost 5,000 groups throughout the country, channelled funding to 4,360 child care providers which support 162,848 children, and supported 24,780 people in employment and enterprise programmes in 2016, with an additional 7,960 supported into employment or self-employment through the social inclusion community activation programme, SICAP. This activity was achieved with an average of 356 staff, 45% of whom are based outside of Dublin.

Our total administration spend for 2017 was €26.4 million, or 4.1% of programme costs. This is down from 5.68% in 2008, 4.60% in 2015 and 4.44 % in 2016. Pobal's work has grown significantly in recent years, with the amount of funds disbursed rising from €257 million in 2011 to the current level of €615 million in 2017. Significant amounts of that growth have taken place within the early years sector, as support to parents and child care providers has grown.

In preparing for today, we decided to focus in detail on those programmes which we administer on behalf of the Department of Rural and Community Development. Members should have a separate briefing paper detailing these programmes. If members of the committee have any questions on other programmes, I and my team would be happy to furnish them with the details at a later stage.

Over the course of our 25 years, Pobal has evolved in response to Government priorities.

We are dedicated to supporting communities and civic society in responding to local needs. Our board and staff are committed to supporting Government in its work to make Ireland a fairer place to live for all of our communities. We are also aware of the need to ensure that our procedures are fair, not overly burdensome and are appropriate to the size of the funds being allocated. This is not easy in a world where there is a need and expectation for increased governance, oversight and financial prudence.

It is company policy to identify the minimum data requirements needed for the effective administration of a given scheme. However, issues such as European level data requirements must be factored into this design process. Key achievements over the past 12 months have included reducing by more than one third the non-financial annual reporting requirements under the scheme to support national organisations, SSNO, significantly reducing the minimum participant information required under the new SICAP programme for 2018 to 2022 as of 1 January 2018, and reducing some of the contractual obligations on seniors alert scheme community groups.

We recognise that there is significantly more work to do on this area and it will be an important element of our new strategic plan. We are increasingly using online platforms as a measure for reducing red tape while at the same time ensuring sufficient checks, balances and audit trails are in place to protect taxpayers' money. The seniors alert scheme is a good example of a technical solution that was delivered by Pobal and the Department to reduce administration and delays in getting personal monitored alarms fitted in vulnerable older people's homes. We can turn requests for personal monitored alarms around within a 24-hour period, or shorter in the case of emergencies.

In recent years, Pobal has established a formal feedback and engagement process, which ensures that the voice of beneficiary organisations are factored into operational decision-making. As part of this project, an independent organisation was recently commissioned to undertake a series of workshops to identify areas for improvement in Pobal's administration of grants on behalf of Government. This report, currently in draft stage, has highlighted a number of successes as well as areas for development and improvement. The report finds that among beneficiaries in the social inclusion sector, 85% believed that Pobal provides clear guidance and information on the application process, 76% reported that Pobal provides good customer service, and 78% reported that training events are useful and helpful. The issue of the level of information required by Pobal was identified as an area for possible improvement and, as I have mentioned, a number of steps have been and continue to be implemented to reduce the administrative burden on beneficiary organisations.

A commitment to social inclusion is at the heart of Pobal. While there have been improvements in Ireland's social and economic landscape, there are still a number of key issues requiring attention, funding and collaborative solutions. A few key findings from our 2016 deprivation index are that affluence is highest in the urban peripheries and gradually declines as one moves towards rural locations. Dublin has fared the best over the past ten years, being less impacted by the effects of the recession, as well as disproportionately benefiting from the recent years of recovery. Small towns of 1,000 to 5,000 people have been the worst affected over the past ten years, having been disproportionately hit by the recession and benefiting less from the recovery than the most urban and the most rural areas. We would also attest to the need for further targeted initiatives and responses for those on the margins of our society.

Pobal operates on the basis of a framework agreement with the Department of Rural and Community Development and programme-specific service level agreements with individual

Departments. Each year a programme of work is agreed with each Department for any work Pobal is requested to undertake.

Key features of Pobal's governance structures include that members of the board work on a voluntary basis and are appointed at the discretion of the Government. The State board appointment process is utilised by the Department of Rural and Community Development for the initial selection of interested and suitable parties to be appointed to the board. The term of office of our current chairperson, Mr. Seamus Boland, is due to conclude in 2018 and I expect a new chair-designate will be before the joint committee later this year.

Pobal is responsible for adhering to all relevant legislative provisions, Department circulars, guidelines and public financial procedures issued by the Government. We are subject to the 2016 code of governance for non-commercial State bodies and audited by the Comptroller and Auditor General annually. Pobal is registered with the Charities Regulatory Authority and is fully compliant with all its obligations in that regard. Pobal reports to Departments through regular governance meetings and delivery of programme reports and data and is subject to regular audits by Departments.

Over time, Pobal has adapted its skill sets and competencies to respond to the changes and challenges in the socio-economic landscape. We are in the process of developing a new strategic plan, while also undertaking a leadership review of the organisation. It is hoped both processes will ensure the organisation is lean, fit for purpose and responsive to the future needs of communities and government.

It goes without saying that the unsung heroes of the work in which we are involved are the boards, committees and volunteers that work to make their communities better places to live. A great strength of community development is that it emerges from communities. The State relies heavily on community groups to deliver services. Pobal, with 25 years of experience, supports the continued sustainability of these services in towns and villages throughout Ireland. As the chief executive officer of the organisation, I am confident in the work Pobal delivers daily. As the company continues to grow and adapt to the requirements of Government, we have the expertise and people needed to support communities in future.

I thank the Chairman and members for this opportunity to appear before the joint committee. Mr. Murphy and I will be please to answer questions members may have.

Deputy Michael Collins: I welcome Mr. Leamy and Mr. Murphy. Having been involved in many boards and committees on a voluntary basis, I would have liked an opportunity to review the 23 programmes being rolled out by Pobal because I would be able to connect to many of them.

Some years ago, a new social inclusion programme was introduced which focused initially on farmers and fishermen. It subsequently changed, however, and in west Cork it became more focused on Roma and other sections of society that have nothing to do with my area. This was a serious blow because farmers and fishermen, especially those on low incomes, lost a great advisory service provided under the programme. While I do not know what form the new social inclusion programme will take and I do not seek to discredit anyone, there are no Roma in Goleen, Bandon or anywhere else in west Cork. I do not know why discussions on the ground did not filter back to the needs of the constituency I represent and, I presume, many more constituencies. I ask the witnesses to clarify that matter.

Pobal probably has some connections with the Leader programme, which is basically no longer available. With only two years left of the current programme, there has been little or no delivery to the community and voluntary sector. This is alarming to say the least and it will be a scramble to the line to have the available moneys disbursed to community and voluntary groups. These organisations, all of which are voluntary, receive a small amount of funding and deliver a large number of services. The people involved do not receive any payment for the many hours of work they do. They have been telephoning politicians trying to secure Leader funding as this used to be available to them. The number of hoops they must now jump through means many of them have decided to forget it.

The West Cork Development Partnership, an excellent group that previously delivered the Leader programme, was wiped off the face of the earth for no reason. We no longer have a programme in the area and I understand it is now delivered through the Aran Islands. This is mind-boggling and questions need to be answered because it will probably lead to an inquiry in a few years. While that issue may not have anything to do with the witnesses, there is no harm in letting them know how people on the ground feel.

Pobal delivers the community services programme. I am often asked the same question about the schemes operated under this programme, some of which were allowed to appoint managers. If a manager retires, can he or she seek redundancy from the community group in question? This is a serious concern for the community and voluntary sector because many of these groups are being asked this question by managers contemplating retirement. The programme has been in place for many years. Who would fund redundancy payments? Voluntary organisations are extremely worried that they may be expected to do so.

Payment for bank holidays and so forth is also a grey area. Many issues arise regarding section 39 funding, which I accept is not the business of Pobal. However, the bottom line with the community service programme is that Pobal provides funding to the voluntary organisations which must then administer the funding. This is a significant burden and things fall between the cracks. Some of the organisations are concerned that workers may be entitled to payment for bank holidays on which they do not work. They fear they may end up in serious trouble. In one case, a group was fined €4,000 by Pobal, which was a scandalous decision. The group in question bought a work unit which community service programme workers could work in. However, it was later told it should have rented the unit and Pobal would have paid the rent. The organisation did the honest thing by buying the work unit from its funding and applying a small charge on Pobal, which refused to pay it and asked for the money to be returned. This is brutal for a voluntary organisation.

We need to consider what is happening on the ground. When people see attractive programmes advertised, they may decide to bring them into their community on a voluntary basis. They are then subjected to audits. I was the chairman of one group where the treasurer nearly suffered a breakdown as a result of an audit that was carried out. The auditor was ruthless. I did not give a damn because the bottom line was that we were all volunteers. I was not a politician at the time. I told the auditor to stop being ruthless as we were all human beings and asked if there was an issue. He replied that there were no issues and everything was fine. It was as if he had to justify his day's work in west Cork or wherever else he visited. This is not good enough. When a group makes a human error, the auditor should sit down with the individuals involved and rectify the problems rather than fining the group because that could put it out of business. The treasurers and other volunteers doing great work in their communities may decide they can no longer cope and will not want to be involved in what appears to be professional work that is

way over their heads.

I am not arguing that Pobal's work is all bad but I need to have these issues clarified. Where is the delivery in respect of farmers and fishermen? Is Pobal involved in delivering the rural social scheme? This fabulous scheme for low-income farmers and fishermen has become less attractive because payments have changed, which is a significant worry. We fought bravely and successfully when negotiating the programme for Government to have the numbers on the scheme increased. I notice, however, that the increase *per capita* in west Cork was among the lowest in the country, despite the area having large numbers of inshore fishermen and low-income farmers, primarily suckler farmers. I would appreciate it if they might be able to answer some of those questions.

Chairman: I thank Deputy Collins. I ask Mr. Leamy to address the issues raised.

Mr. Denis Leamy: I thank Deputy Michael Collins. I will respond to some of the issues and I might call on my colleague to respond to some of the others because he is more familiar with some of the questions the Deputy raised.

I will respond on the community services programme first because the Deputy raised a number of issues in terms of the audits and the burden that is placed on voluntary committees involved in that. On the context, there are more than 350 community service projects nationwide and the Department requires us to audit at least 5% of them on an annual basis. A set of rules has been set up for the community services programme by the Department against which we have to audit. Some issues that come across to the groups - I fully understand that from a local perspective, one would wonder why Pobal or the State is chasing an item of expenditure - are against the rules under which the programme was set up. They are against the rules to which the group signed up. We have raised this with the Department and have been working through it to try to change some of the rules to get rid of some of these anomalies over time. I also am aware that the Minister, Deputy Ring, is planning to review the programme towards the end of the year, which might allow for some of these pieces to be looked at. In terms of our role, our auditors go out to audit against the rules of the programme and we do not have the flexibility to move away from that.

The results of those audits come to our audit, finance and risk sub-committee and we discuss many of them in detail. It is fair to say the percentage of groups to which we go back to recoup moneys or against which there might be negative findings is very small. However, there might be findings that relate to governance, to how decisions were made or to how persons were accounting for the moneys. It is about trying to improve the practice of the groups when they receive the reports or where they get some supports from us as well around these broader issues, and we use these reports to inform some of that.

On the manager piece, while I will come back to the Deputy directly later, there should be no liability on a group locally in respect of someone coming to retirement age. As for people seeking redundancy, we take a firm view that the contract with the individual is between the local group and the individual. The support that exists, from a community services point of view, is a subsidy to the programme. Because they sign up to this concept of community supports, it is expected that local groups would have a level of matching funding or income they would raise from an enterprise they are running and that they themselves would then run the programme. On the redundancy piece, if someone was looking for redundancy or if an organisation had to make people redundant, it is an issue that must be worked through the local mechanisms from a governance point of view. All the groups must provide a three-year business plan and a big part

of our testing and working through those business case studies pertains to sustainability. We do not always get it right but we do in the vast majority of cases, in trying to ensure they will be sustainable for those three years. In that sense, we would not foresee that there would be a need for redundancy. It is, however, the call of the local group in that regard.

Deputy Michael Collins raised issues in terms of the Leader programme. We are all familiar with the issues that relate to the Leader programme in terms of the slow take-up and throughput of projects. To clarify, our role in it was to assess initially the plans that were developed by each of the local action groups, LAGs. Second, it was to develop an ICT system to support the development of the Leader programme and third, we were required by the Department to carry out Article 48 checks at a central level on the Leader plans. The Article 48 checks are often the issue thrown up as being part of the delay and our turnaround time for any such checks that come before us is ten days. Moreover, we have kept to that over the past couple of years. However, I am aware that there are delays at a local level and nationally. There have been some changes made in the past number of months that have helped to speed up the process and we have noticed a good increase in the number of Article 48 checks coming to us to be done. In that regard, there will be a significant change over the next period but I accept there has been much difficulty and frustration in trying to roll this out on a local basis.

I might turn to my colleague on the point the Deputy raised on the fishermen and farmers with regard to the programme.

Mr. Jerry Murphy: It is likely that Deputy Michael Collins is referring to the social inclusion and community activation programme, SICAP.

Deputy Michael Collins: Yes.

Mr. Jerry Murphy: I will make two points about the targeting there. First, there is a nationally set number of groupings that the programme is to target but each local area, through the local community development committee, LCDC, is also given authority to add a target group locally if it is appropriate. That was open as a local opportunity. Although I might be wrong on this, I suggest that probably the reason they felt they did not need to add fishermen and farmers was that the programme now includes a target for low-income families. There was much discussion about farmers and fishermen. The intention always had been that the farmers and fishermen who had been targeted in previous programmes were to be those on low income. The idea was that targeting of low-income families should allow any low-income farmer or fisherman, in west Cork or any other area, to be a perfectly valid recipient of supports through the programmes. There certainly should be no reason that such work cannot continue with those groups in SICAP.

Deputy Michael Collins: On that basis, we lost a specific worker. There is a huge terrain of countryside in south-west Cork and at that time we lost our worker who was specifically dealing with low-income farmers and low-income fishermen. He was moved on to do some other job that did not relate to any issue of great concern to the people of west Cork. Unfortunately, we lost that worker. It was a huge loss to west Cork.

Mr. Jerry Murphy: The plans are developed locally. The rules are set nationally but how the resources are channelled, what workers are funded etc. is a local decision to be placed into plans.

Deputy Carol Nolan: I thank all the witnesses for their attendance. It certainly is valu-

able to hear the information, particularly the thorough and informative presentation from Mr. Leamy.

I will raise a couple of issues with which I am familiar. I certainly concur with Deputy Michael Collins that the Leader programme is posing difficulties for many community groups. One of Pobal's roles is to protect the services and support the community groups. Could an intervention be made to call for a review of Leader in light of all the complaints that are coming in? We have raised this at this committee previously and a review is warranted at this point.

The Tús schemes throughout the State are doing fantastic work. From speaking to participants in my constituency of Offaly, I am aware they are enjoying the schemes and are attaining valuable skills on them. I could not compliment them enough. A number of supervisors from Tús schemes have met me recently, however, and raised serious concerns about how the Job-Path scheme is taking some employees from them. People are very unhappy. The supervisors are unhappy but the participants, who had been enjoying their Tús scheme, are suddenly being pulled away and forced into employment in which they are unhappy and are not attaining valuable skills. This must be addressed. I took up this issue with the Taoiseach last year when he was Minister for Social Protection. It must be addressed because it is causing huge dissatisfaction among the participants and we want to safeguard the schemes.

The Tús schemes have been doing fantastic work. In many cases, they filled the void when we lost our town councils. They give participants a valuable opportunity that they would not otherwise get in marginalised communities. I reiterate the importance of an intervention to be made in that regard.

In terms of the PEACE programme, could a strategy to broaden this programme be put in place in light of Brexit? In terms of the priorities, is it possible that the priorities in the PEACE programme could be reviewed before 2020? Could negotiations with the European Parliament be called for in that regard because we are facing Brexit and its associated impact?

Mr. Denis Leamy: I thank Deputy Nolan. As regards the PEACE programme, we sit on its monitoring committee and are involved with Co-operation Ireland and Ulster University in regard to the quality and impact body for the youth strand. It is early days in that regard. The effects of Brexit were to the fore of discussion at the PEACE monitoring committee over the past couple of years. There are now firm funding commitments from the Irish and British Governments and the European Union for the PEACE programme to be sustained in the coming years. It is to be welcomed that this has been overcome in recent times.

As regards our role, we are not a decision maker in terms of the PEACE programme although we sit on its monitoring committee. I am happy to bring the point raised by Deputy Nolan to the attention of the PEACE monitoring committee and the Special European Union Programmes Body.

On the programme being widened beyond the Border counties, I take it the Deputy was referring to it being spread more down South, as opposed to the Border region and the North. That is set in stone because the plans were approved by the European Union and the European Commission, which took a long time. It would be difficult to extend it at present but perhaps that should be considered for the next PEACE programme or whatever will follow in that regard.

I will ask Mr. Murphy to respond to the questions on Tús and JobPath.

We have a fairly defined role in regard to the Leader programme. It is not our call to have a review of the scheme but, rather, it is a decision for the Department. We meet the Department on a regular basis and reflect on the issues that have been raised, of which it is well aware. There will be a significant improvement in the uptake of the scheme in the coming months. It will then be time to consider what needs to happen in terms of sustaining it for the future.

Mr. Jerry Murphy: I welcome the Deputy's comments on Tús. We share her sentiments in that regard. Several of the programmes operating within local communities that have a dual aspect in assisting people into jobs and in offering significant local community services are particularly important. Pobal plays a particularly important role in so far as we have a role in several such programmes. We are involved with Tús, the rural social scheme, RSS, the social inclusion and community activation programme, SICAP, and the community services programme, CSP, and we do our best to ensure co-ordination in that regard.

Unfortunately, we are not party to JobPath, which is directly contracted by the Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection, although we have many links in that regard. The Deputy's representation via the Taoiseach is the most important route but we can channel that these concerns exist. We also have heard these concerns and it is very important for the Government as a whole to carry out that co-ordination role and we will do what we can to ensure those messages are clearly passed through.

Senator Grace O'Sullivan: I thank the witnesses for their contributions. I would like to take a step back, as this is a relatively new committee and my questions are not as specific as are some others. What is the witnesses' definition of "community"? What do community and community development mean to Pobal? Is Pobal succeeding in the community-centred approach?

I am from Tramore, County Waterford, and always have been very active in my local community. One issue that is repeatedly raised by members of the community is that smaller groups that are already relatively embedded in the community are buckling under the weight of administration. Such groups are small and have ambition but they believe there is a time-consuming burden upon them and they have to go through hoops and loops to access support funding. What can be done to support such smaller groups that are developing but are wasting too much time or missing opportunities because of the administrative burden?

Another issue which has been raised pertains to personal professional development, such as continuing professional development, CPD, in the early childhood development sector. There is a sense that remuneration is low for what staff are putting in but that may be somewhat mitigated if there were more funding and support for professional development programmes. Not only would such people have something more to offer to their communities but there would be an appreciation of what they do and that they are moving towards more professional academic qualifications and would then have more to offer to organisations such as Pobal.

There is a sense that the outcomes to which Pobal looks are very prescribed. The area of climate change was mentioned by the Chair. As a society, we will have to adapt not just to environmental but also social and cultural changes. I wonder about the ability to have emerging, rather than prescribed, outcomes. We will need a society that is able to adapt, emerge and be creative. People in the community are our leaders and we should be looking to them as to how to develop our programmes. They should not have a sense of being told what is wanted from them and that they should not exercise too much creativity because that does not work for the organisation. I would like for there to be more development in that area.

Mr. Denis Leamy: I thank the Senator. Pobal sees community as every town, village and city across the country but we look at it through a lens of social inclusion, equality, where the areas of greatest disadvantage are and from where the resources to address those issues will come. We work with the Government to target those areas through that lens. While some programmes may have a more universal element, most have a targeted element to assist those who need supports to have a better quality of life in terms of engagements with society, while taking into account people's broader issues.

On community development, which also relates to the Senator's latter point, it is very much a bottom-up approach. Needs are identified at a local level and plans are then worked through to respond to those needs. That is our definition of community development. However, we sometimes struggle with defining or working through the programmes as to how they might match that in the most effective way because there is a clear requirement for accountability for the funding and taxpayers' money spent on each area. Trying to get that match can be difficult.

To return to the Senator's point on people's creativity or innovation in responding to their local needs, a key challenge for us is that because an idea does not fit a particular box there may be no scope for it to be funded or worked through. We will address that challenge over the course of our next strategic plan and the next few years in terms of matching that in a better way. However, we are constrained in respect of data protection, public accountability for moneys spent and the various circulars on how that must be accounted for. As I said in my statement, Pobal has evolved over a number of years. It has to evolve further in how it truly responds to those things that are emerging from communities.

A good percentage of our staff come from community development backgrounds and have worked on the ground in every parish in the country. They know the issues involved. We have to work through the frustration people sometimes feel at the very defined ways in which Pobal expects people to account.

I will hand over to my colleague who will talk about professional development in the early years sector.

Mr. Jerry Murphy: I would like to give an example of some of the things we have been trying to do recently concerning the demands on groups which we absolutely accept is the case. As an organisation working on behalf of the Government, we are channelling many services through local communities. If we do not actively support them, we will all lose, including communities. The senior alert scheme is a good example of where there has been a series of changes in legislation which have led to more onerous demands being placed on groups. Garda vetting is one such demand. The group is linking directly with vulnerable older people in their homes and the law now provides that the person who goes to people's homes has to be vetted. That is a large additional burden on a group. We have tried to put processes in place in order that we can make these arrangements for groups in order that they will not have to carry all of the bureaucracy. We have also taken other bits of the bureaucracy off them that they had to manage in the past, in particular finding all of their own equipment and going through tendering processes. We now control these things centrally. We have worked with local volunteer centres to make the Garda vetting process available to them. The feedback we are getting is that once people have been through the training process, the committees see that they have to be on board in dealing with the issues they might have viewed as a burden previously. We are the messengers and the face of the centre for groups and making these demands.

On further professional development in the early years sector, I point to two things. The De-

partment of Children and Youth Affairs has been providing money for us for a number of years for an active learner fund that offers direct funding for training for people within the early years sector. It has been an effective fund and very useful for people within the sector. I flag that there is work ongoing between us and the Department of Children and Youth Affairs to look at the further need for professional development and how it could be delivered. It is a need which is very much a recognised within the sector. We are aware that the Department of Children and Youth Affairs is looking at it and we will be supporting it in that regard.

Deputy Seán Canney: Like the rest of my colleagues around the table, I am delighted to meet the delegates. Like every other Deputy, rural Deputies especially, I have a long history of working in the community. I compliment the delegates on the work they do.

We have spoken about the rural social scheme and Tús, but one of the issues I am coming across lately is insurance cover for rural social scheme or Tús participants working on projects in villages and towns. In that regard, there is an issue about working on public roads. There is an anomaly in that it is very hard to determine who is the employer and thus should insure participants if they are working on roads.

Senator Maura Hopkins took the Chair.

Deputy Seán Canney: The local authorities, through Irish Public Bodies Insurance, are not inclined to take on this insurance liability and the sponsoring groups definitely should not be expected to take it on. This is seriously curtailing the benefit that can be delivered by the schemes. It is something of which the Leader groups and those administering the rural social scheme are acutely aware. I remember back in 2007 and 2008 that it boiled down to who prepared traffic management plans. The Leader groups or companies trained somebody to prepare the plans which previously had been signed off on by the council engineer. However, they were told that they could not do so. It nullifies and negates much of the positive work that is being done and that can be done. It may not be the role of Pobal to sort it out, but it has a responsibility, with the local authority groups and Leader companies, to put something in place quickly to prevent the demise of the schemes and their benefit to the areas in question. That is not a criticism but a comment on something that is hitting us hard in rural Ireland.

Last week my group in Belclare in Tuam, County Galway received its paperwork to fill in for next year's rural social scheme programme. I compared it to what had happened in the first year the scheme was run in terms of the documentation required from the sponsoring group. I question the need for some of it. It has applied for so many years to seek to provide a scheme, a work schedule, in engaging with the supervisor and the Leader company. Every year there is an additional request that something else be provided. For instance, this year groups have to provide health and safety plans. The sponsoring and local voluntary groups are being burdened with a huge responsibility. It is turning people against getting involved and signing their names on a piece of paper on behalf of a sponsoring group. Somebody, be it Pobal, the Leader company or the Department, needs to play a role in taking it back. They should be sorting out the insurance issue rather than telling us why it cannot be sorted out. Pobal should play a role in that regard.

Deputy Joe Carey resumed the Chair.

Deputy Seán Canney: Pobal oversees the spending of a lot of money. When we undertake a project, we are asked if we delivered value for money. If, for example, an engineer was to write a letter to say value for money had been achieved, is it the kind of thing Pobal would ac-

cept? I know that the schemes do achieve value for money. Any money spent on them, including the social inclusion and activation programme, SICAP, the rural social scheme or the community employment scheme, probably represents the best value for money achieved for any public money spent. I would like to see it being proved, rather than making a bald statement they did achieve value for money. From a political point of view, we need to see the value that can be achieved with a small amount of money. With a little more money the schemes could achieve so much more for communities. For the participants it is very important that this kind of stuff is being spoken about.

I find that when participants aged 55 plus are told that they have to go off a scheme, they do not find other gainful employment. Someone who is 30 years old may be brought onto the scheme who might be in a better position to find employment. I ask Pobal to take on board the issues people who are part-time farmers face on rural social schemes. When they reach the age of 55 years, they should be allowed to remain on the scheme until they reach pension age. That would provide stability in the numbers of participants involved. We are to increase numbers on the rural social scheme. We are meant to double them over the next two years. We also need to ensure we bring the threshold down to 55 or 56. If an individual at that age does not have employment then he or she can remain on the scheme until he or she gets the pension. They are small things that mean an awful lot to people. I commend the witnesses on the work they do and on the profile of the work they do. What we do not do is put it out there as good as we should. It is good money being spent in a positive way.

Mr. Denis Leamy: I thank Deputy Canney. I accept his last point. We need to be better at illustrating the impact of all these ranges of work and the value given to the people involved as well. They need to see and hear about it from others.

I refer to the rural social scheme and the issue of insurance. I have heard about it from a wide number of people as well. We have a firm role in providing a help desk, a payroll service and training in the social rural scheme. We are guided by the rules set by the Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection. However, I undertake to ensure we raise it and try to get it addressed. This issue has been raised with us in Pobal. I know it is coming more and more to the fore in terms of groups taking responsibility for insurance.

In respect of the documentation that groups receive, the rural social scheme was mentioned but we could apply it to many schemes and programmes we are involved in. We are tied again by the regulatory and legislative frameworks. We cannot do some of these things for the groups. Mr. Murphy gave an example of the senior alerts where we can take on some of that and take away some of the burden. However, there are some things, especially relating to health and safety or other items that the groups themselves have to own. What we need to look at there, and we have done it at times, is providing more comprehensive training and support to groups. That is something we will be trying to address over the next three years as well. I refer to Pobal being out there much more, involved in regional seminars, working with groups on particular themes and looking at templates that are there.

We cannot work through those templates with people but at least we can hopefully provide them with the materials. We do that on many programmes. Doing more of that is where we need to concentrate and take away some of that burden from groups. How we deliver value for money is my first question everyday. The value of the work going on on the ground across the country is critical. We are a management and administrative framework to that. It is incumbent upon us to be as lean as possible in how we provide that service. We measure the administration costs of the overall programme costs. Those are declining.

We also look at better ways of doing our work. Technology has been extremely important to us over the last number of years. I refer to online portals and online engagement with groups. That throws up issues as well, especially in areas where broadband is not particularly strong or people do not have the resources to engage. However, we have two sets of support available. Most are online but paper versions are also available to the groups that cannot engage with that. We ensure we are getting as much efficiency as possible through applying technology to the changes and we are continuing to do that. There is much more technology that can make us lean into the future.

Most of our resources and staff are actually out on the ground. The community and early years side of things involves meeting groups and involvement through regional supports. They are one-to-one supports through the groups. To lessen the burden on the groups is part of the critical infrastructure. I will come to Mr. Murphy in respect of the outputs.

Mr. Jerry Murphy: We take seriously our role in trying to assist the groups on the ground in demonstrating the value of what they do. It is all very well for a group in a local area to be doing something. However, the message needs to get out and it needs to be joined with the messages from the other groups around what works, what does not and what they are producing for Government. We have invested heavily in systems, support structures and in data collection to try to give those messages. At times, it is not popular locally because we are asking them to give us information. However, when the benefit is seen of putting that information together to demonstrate to Government the value of their programme, people then see it is all about maintaining investment.

I will use the social inclusion and community activation plan, SICAP, as an example. That was raised earlier. There is an information system now in SICAP that allows us not only know what each group is doing but exactly who they are doing it with and to prove that, for example, in terms of the targeting issue that was raised earlier, we know we are working with the most disadvantaged people. We also know what services they are getting and how they have moved from unemployment to employment. Mr Leamy mentioned earlier in his opening address that our relationship with organisations like the ESRI is important to us. We work closely with the ESRI. It objectively and independently looks at the figures and what is happening. It has been able to make very strong statements that the programme is working with the most disadvantaged and that it is producing a series of outputs.

I will point members as well to one of the documents going around. It is called “Kickboxing kindness and going the extra mile”. It is an example of good practice not always being about numbers and figures. It is about dealing with people with particular types of issues, how local groups have successfully managed to do that and then drawing those lessons out to give elsewhere. We see that as an important part of our role.

Mr. Denis Leamy: Deputy Canney also asked about people aged 55 years being asked to leave the scheme to be replaced by someone younger. As the labour market gets tighter, our increased focus is going to be on people who find it the most difficult in accessing employment, the longer-term unemployed or people who have a whole series of obstacles to gaining employment. Part of our informing of policy and Government Departments will be about the focus that needs to be put there. The recovery will allow us to be far more focused on those who need it most. That would be in respect of people of all different needs and ages in terms of accessing employment and the various schemes. I take on board what the Deputy said and it will be to the fore of our thoughts in working with the Government Departments and developing the schemes.

Senator Maura Hopkins: Some of the questions I wanted to raise have already been answered. I will make a few general comments and maybe the witnesses can give me a sense of their thoughts on issues that have not been raised.

My first thought is an issue that I have raised at length with the Minister for Rural and Community Development, Deputy Michael Ring. I refer to support for boards, voluntary bodies and voluntary people. I am happy to hear the witnesses say they are committed to ensuring there is more comprehensive training and support for volunteers. That is hugely important. Volunteers and all of those involved in different boards right across the country give huge service and time. They have to grapple with all sorts of form filling and trying to deal with a burden of responsibility as well. It is crucial that there is enhanced training and support, as required, for those groups.

Another relevant point I have noticed in the few years I have been in this new role is that the most organised groups are able to benefit most from funding. While that is important, we also need to look at groups that find it a little bit difficult. Not every village and town is going to have people very organised, committed to filling out the paperwork and committed then to getting back more questions that require more paperwork. I see it with regard to funding that has been approved. I am thinking of Roscommon and Galway. I would like to see other areas getting a fair share, but I think the issue comes back to people within those communities being organised, ready to go and having projects that are ready to be submitted. That all fits under the community services programme etc. That is an important point, one that I have raised at length with the Minister for Rural and Community Development, Deputy Ring.

I have some experience of the social inclusion and community activation programme, SICAP, in my area. We have two rural men's groups within County Roscommon. They are fantastic in terms of ticking the boxes for social inclusion. The groups are made up of older men, many of whom are living on their own. This is an important network and outlet for them on a weekly basis. However, I am currently of the understanding that these groups do not fit under SICAP. It goes back to the comments made by Mr. Leamy and Mr. Murphy. They said it is a question of looking at needs within different communities and at what social inclusion means in different communities. Certainly, in my view, social inclusion means providing funding and support for those groups. Those groups are still operating but they are being run on a shoestring. More individualised criteria specific to communities should fit under SICAP.

My third point has been stated several times. It relates to the challenge for the rural social scheme and the Tús scheme and the importance of these schemes for the people who are participating in the communities. There is a difficulty with people being taken off schemes and that is a major problem. We know extra places were allocated for the rural social scheme last year. That is great but in my area it has been difficult to recruit people. It is fine having extra places but it is a problem if we do not have people to fill them. It is obviously positive that we have more people back in employment. That is great. However, there is a gap. Deputy Canney stated clearly that there is a gap, especially with people in their late 50s or early 60s who may find it difficult to get employment elsewhere. That is certainly a point the Pobal representatives should take from today – I realise they are aware of it anyway.

I wish to comment on a more positive level about my recent experience with regard to the seniors alert scheme. The changes made are having a real impact in terms of the people being able to access alarms more easily. As the Pobal representatives have said, more support is being given to link people within different areas. That is important and perhaps it is a template Pobal can use for other programmes.

My final question is on the presentation made. I come from a rural area. The Pobal representatives indicated that, based on the 2016 deprivation index, small towns of between 1,000 and 5,000 residents have been worst affected during the past ten years. We know that. The Pobal representatives also attested to the need for further targeted initiatives in those areas. What future plans does Pobal have to try to target those continuing challenges in towns and villages?

I will go back to my first point. I think we need to take a fresh look at how we support communities that are not as well organised as others.

Mr. Denis Leamy: I will start with the last point from Senator Hopkins. That is part of the discussion we are always having. There is a call for applications. We see applications coming from some of the usual groups that are well-organised. These groups can write submissions well and can meet the criteria or examine the criteria and match it well.

That is why we are relying more on other tools that identify areas of disadvantage and the groups that are most disadvantaged. The idea is that we are not solely relying on what is submitted to us. We have other tests. Senator Hopkins referred to the deprivation index. The index is one criterion used within some programmes. We are keen to see it used in more programmes but it is up to Departments to agree to it. Increasingly, Departments are using the deprivation index to help identify where resources should go. It is taken into account when examining the appraisal of some of the applications.

Reference was made to some areas that may not have strong capacity. We have capacity events to support groups. The work includes building business plans. For example, under the community services programme, an applicant is required to have a three-year business plan. Sometimes we might work with a group over a year or two years to improve capacity at pre-development stage. This can enable groups to apply for the community services programme and they can sustain themselves in the programme. That is done over a period. Anyway, I fully accept the Senator's point: we need to continue improving this area and looking for other ways to assess where the moneys should be going.

When we do geographical testing throughout the country there is a reasonable match. Some areas lose out more than others but there is a reasonable match in terms of the resources matching the areas of disadvantage and where the target groups are.

I welcome the remarks of Senator Hopkins on the seniors alert scheme. I take the point made by the Senator. It is a consideration of ours. We have seen how the seniors alert scheme has worked. We have taken some lessons from it and we are learning how to apply them to other programmes we are involved in. We are in the process of doing that.

Mr. Jerry Murphy: Deputy Hopkins specifically raised a point about men's clubs for those over 65 years in the area. It was the case up to 1 January that they could not apply but now they are eligible, subject to the fact that SICAP funding overall is aimed at addressing disadvantage. The funding would need to be for those over 65 years in a disadvantaged area. Disadvantage is the common factor for all SICAP funding. Anyway, those over 65 years are now included.

This is a good example of the fact that as we have left the economic crisis, the Government has had an ability to move on. The last programme was focused on getting people into jobs. The entire allocation was skewed towards working-age people who were unemployed. However, as we have moved away from that, the Government has been able to broaden the categorisation. I hope that example will be useful for Senator Hopkins.

The issue of supports for boards and volunteers was raised. We accept absolutely that it is critical for relevant infrastructure to be supported. Pobal tries to undertake a series of practical roles. We produce sets of materials under a general heading of managing better. They give guidance for voluntary boards about how to carry out the management of Government funding etc. The documents are currently being rewritten. At the end of the first quarter, they will be reissued in updated form to include the most recent changes in legislation etc. We try to ensure that Pobal keeps in mind the types of boards that are applying for funding. When we write guidance material, we try to ensure it is accessible to the groups that most need the money.

I reiterate my earlier point about the fact that so many more legislative demands arise now regarding data protection, child protection and so on and we have to face up to them. If we do not, we could potentially be putting groups into a difficult position. For example, let us suppose a group took on the management of money. Then, three years later an audit is done and someone says the group did not obey the law. We have to cover all those areas. We try to act as a bridge so that there is at least a translation of the materials to make them as accessible as possible.

The scheme to support national organisations operates through Pobal. It is a Government scheme organised through the Department of Rural and Community Affairs. The scheme funds several umbrella groups. One function of these groups is to be as supportive as possible, especially to communities of interest throughout the country that fit under particular types of headings, including headings of disability, educational or young people. A range of communities are covered. This is close to our hearts and the philosophy of what we need to be doing.

Chairman: I thank Mr. Murphy. I will ask a few questions, although I do not wish to repeat what has already been said. I value Pobal's work. Its role is critical. Community development is close to my heart. I have worked with communities across County Clare and tried to help them navigate their way through the various issues that arise from time to time.

As Members of the Oireachtas, we have dedicated lines to particular Departments to ask about medical cards, social welfare benefits and so on. Would Pobal consider setting up a unit that Oireachtas Members could dial? There are many programmes under Pobal's remit, but Members could target their queries and speak to the relevant person or section.

There are quite a few groups, including some large ones, involved in the community services programme, CSP, in Clare. There is a cap of 315 groups. Is that moveable? Pobal is considering whether to have more programme groups. The witnesses might take us through the possibility of new groups forming and applying for the programme in their villages or communities.

I welcome the comments on volunteers, voluntary boards and committees and their community development work, which is significant. Without their input, we would not have the communities that we do today.

I agree with Senator Hopkins about the burdens that have been placed on community groups in terms of filling out forms. One community could be far ahead because of its people, so I would welcome more training sessions, information evenings and the like to upskill volunteers so that they might get the best out of the system.

Senator Hopkins also asked about the 2016 deprivation index and highlighted small towns of between 1,000 and 5,000 people. The witnesses stated that further targeted initiatives were

needed. What targeted initiatives have worked to date, could they be expanded or are new ones required? What should the Department be considering and how could improvements be made?

Has Pobal received contact from the men's shed movement? It is widespread and large. The witnesses referred to social inclusion, interaction, mental health and so on, and the men's shed movement encapsulates a great deal of positivity in that respect. Would Pobal be interested in getting involved and supporting men's sheds throughout the country?

Mr. Denis Leamy: Regarding the question on a direct line, we have what we call a funder query dedicated phone line for Departments. I will need to check, but my understanding is that Oireachtas queries come through that line as well. We will get the number for the Chairman before the meeting finishes and email it to him. We deal with many queries on an ongoing basis as well as representations from Members of the Oireachtas. It can sometimes be difficult for Members to raise individual sensitive issues, so we tend to deal with many queries on that basis.

I apologise to the Senator for not reverting to her regarding initiatives in respect of towns of between 1,000 and 5,000 people. It may be time to consider more targeted initiatives. When I was writing my presentation, I was thinking of how we used to be involved in a number of dedicated programmes to small towns or areas within cities or some rural areas, for example, RAPID. A new RAPID programme is being directly managed by the Department through local authorities. Our experience of RAPID, especially in provincial towns, was positive. It was not just about the money. While money helped, of more importance was the agencies, each of which had a budget head, working together on the issues that pertained to the areas in question. They were instructed to share resources and focus on the key targets in each town. They then had to account to an implementation body in the town itself, which in turn had to report to a national monitoring committee comprising all Departments.

I am not saying that we need to replicate them exactly, but these were the types of targeted initiative that worked, especially in smaller areas. Many areas identified different issues to be addressed, so this model allowed for a bit of innovation and creativity. There was a small amount of funding to animate that or match-fund something that an agency or community representatives might have devised. I neglected to mention that a good number of community representatives also sat around that table. They were informing the process and challenging what they were hearing around the table.

These are the types of targeted initiative that we had in mind, but there could be others relating to, for example, people with disabilities. We are involved in one under the Ability programme through the Department of Employment and Social Protection. We were also involved in the Equality for Women Measure, EWM. That programme tended to be extremely bureaucratic because of the EU dimension, but if there was one without the bureaucratic dimension that focused on gender-specific issues, it would be useful and appropriate at this time.

Mr. Jerry Murphy: The Chairman asked a specific question about the CSP and its entry points. There have been no such opportunities in recent years because there has been no money, but an additional budget was identified by the Department during 2017. The process is ongoing. Thirty-three applications have reached the final stage and the Department is making a final decision. My understanding is that announcements will be made on new entries in February. There is no new set of money to follow that up of which we are aware, but we hope that the new entries will bring new thoughts, ideas and blood to the programme.

A number of men's sheds are funded through programmes that are ultimately administered

by Pobal. That it has taken off as a national movement is amazing, as are the supports it offers. I will focus on the local issue, though, as it may be something that we have not got across enough at this meeting even though it is an important part of our ethos. Of the moneys that Pobal is involved in designing schemes around or overseeing, a large amount ends up within local umbrella structures that make allocations to groups like men's sheds. The social inclusion and community activation programme, SICAP, was referenced as an example. On average, each local community development committee is allocated approximately €1 million. All of the roll-outs are handled through local development companies. While we work with the Department to set the national structure, targets and planning processes and set up the ICT element, decisions are made locally about which groups they want to work with. A significant number are deciding that they want to work with groups like men's sheds.

Chairman: Are committee members satisfied with all of that? Good. On behalf of the committee, I thank Mr. Leamy and Mr. Murphy for attending and for this positive engagement. We look forward to hearing from them again in the future. I wish them the best. We will publish their opening statement on the committee's website. Is that agreed? Agreed.

Mr. Denis Leamy: We thank the committee.

Chairman: We will suspend for two minutes and resume in private session.

The joint committee suspended at 12.29 p.m., resumed in private session at 12.32 p.m. and adjourned at 12.45 p.m. until 11 a.m. on Thursday, 15 February 2018.