

DÁIL ÉIREANN

AN COMHCHOISTE UM FHORBAIRT TUAITHE AGUS POBAIL

JOINT COMMITTEE ON RURAL AND COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT

Dé Céadaoin, 16 Deireadh Fómhair 2019

Wednesday, 16 October 2019

The Joint Committee met at 10.30 a.m.

Comhaltaí a bhí i láthair / Members present:

Seán Canney,	Paudie Coffey,
Michael Fitzmaurice,	Maura Hopkins.
Margaret Murphy O'Mahony,*	
Niamh Smyth,	
Brian Stanley.	

* In éagmais / In the absence of Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív.

I láthair / In attendance: Senator Rose Conway-Walsh.

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

Departmental Outputs and Expenditure - Vote 42: Minister for Rural and Community Development

Chairman: I remind members to turn off their mobile phones as they interfere with the sound system. This is our second mid-year review meeting with the Department of Rural and Community Development. This is a new committee that shadows a new Department.

We hope to follow the roadmap set out in the 2016 OECD report, Review of Budget Oversight by Parliament: Ireland. The committee will consider the Department's appropriation accounts for 2018, the current position in 2019, and the outlook for 2020 and beyond. The committee is also interested in considering the link between expenditure and performance following international best practice.

I propose that the following arrangements will apply regarding our mid-year review of Vote 42 - Rural and Community Development. The Minister may make a brief opening statement as follows: consideration of programme B - community development; consideration of programme A - rural development; consideration of programme C - charities regulator; consideration of programme D - appropriations-in-aid; consideration of the appropriation accounts 2018; and the outlook for 2020 and future years. Then, if not covered in the discussion of the relevant subhead, we will have agency statements from Irish Water Safety, IWS, and the Western Development Commission, WDC.

The committee will adjourn not later than 1.15 p.m. If any other matter is not covered, members can submit a written request for the information, through the clerk to the committee, which will be passed on to the Minister for reply. Is that agreed? Agreed.

I welcome the Minister for Rural and Community Development, Deputy Michael Ring. Deputy Seán Canney, Minister of State at the Departments of Rural and Community Development and Communications, Climate Action and Environment, who has special responsibility for natural resources, community affairs and digital development, will join us later as he has been delayed due to this meeting clashing with Oral Questions in the Dáil. Finally, I welcome the officials from the Department of Rural and Community Development who are accompanying the Minister and Minister of State - Ms Sheenagh Rooney, assistant secretary; Mr. Kenneth Jordan, principal officer, finance unit; Mr. Brendan Mahon, assistant principal officer; and Mr. David O'Connor, assistant principal officer.

The opening statement and briefing documents have been circulated to the committee. I propose that all documents supplied to the committee in respect of this meeting be published on its website. Is that agreed? Agreed.

Before detailed consideration of the Vote commences, I invite the Ministers to make briefing opening statements on Vote 42.

Minister for Rural and Community Development (Deputy Michael Ring): I thank the committee for its invitation to attend today to discuss the mid-year review of expenditure for my Department.

Before I go through some of the details on the progress being made by my Department, the Minister of State, Deputy Seán Canney, has asked that I offer his apologies. Unfortunately, this committee meeting clashes with oral parliamentary questions for the other Department that he represents. He hopes to join us at a later stage.

The Department has provided a short briefing note to members, which includes a summary of the programme areas and sets out expenditure to the end of September on these programmes. My Department is just over two years old. In that time, we have made huge progress and there has been a significant increase in the funding dedicated to both rural and community development.

The allocation for my Department increased by 26% in budget 2019 from €231 million to €291 million. This allowed increased funding for a range of areas, for example, €52 million for the rural regeneration and development fund, RRDF, €3 million to develop libraries, €2 million for the community enhancement programme, and €1.3 million for the PEACE programme. For 2019, the budget of €291 million for the Department comprises €153 million in current expenditure and €138 million in capital expenditure.

As requested, the committee has been provided with information on the expenditure by my Department to the end of September 2019, and the position is very positive. The total gross spend by my Department at the end of September was €190 million. This sum comprises of €120 million in current expenditure and €70 million in capital expenditure. This overall level of spend for the end of September is as planned at the start of the year. Current expenditure is at 97% of profile and capital expenditure is at 105% of profile. Since the end of September, there has been a further spend of more than €10 million, with €5.2 million in capital expenditure and €5.2 million in current expenditure. This brings the total expenditure to date to just over €200 million.

Capital spend is €75 million at this point, which when compares with a spend of €28 million at the same point last year clearly shows the progress made by my Department in terms of the delivery of our capital programmes and the timely drawdown of funding by local authorities and others. It also demonstrates that we are on track to continue the strong expenditure performance achieved last year, and to again ensure that the resources provided to my Department are fully used to the benefit of communities across the country.

Regarding rural development, one of the key areas of progress in 2019 has been the ramping up of the LEADER programme. I am pleased that both project approvals and spend have increased strongly this year. At this stage project approvals stand at €90 million, with a further €25 million worth of projects going through the approval process. I, therefore, expect that by the end of 2019, 80% of the €164 million allocated for project approvals will be approved. The balance will be approved before the end of 2020 and the projects will have up to three years to draw down payments. Almost 2,500 LEADER projects have been approved and are progressing across the country. They are contributing to the economic and social development of rural Ireland. They will ensure a strong flow of investment in rural Ireland at a time it needs it most, not least to protect against the uncertainty of Brexit. In terms of spend in 2019, while I initially allocated €30 million to the programme, expenditure stands at €33 million. Given this strong performance, I have allocated an additional €10 million to the programme. This is being reallocated from savings that are likely to materialise under the RRDF.

With regard to this fund, while I have reallocated the €10 million to the LEADER programme, progress with the fund has been strong. A total of 84 projects have been approved for funding with 38 projects under category 1 and 46 projects under category 2. As many as 62 projects have completed the required procurement processes and are being delivered. To date, 24 of these projects have drawn down some funding with the spend to date standing at €11.1 million. Given the fact that so many projects are being delivered and making claims, I expect a strong outturn from this programme in 2019.

While the LEADER programme and the RRDF represent the biggest rural programme areas by expenditure level, I would like to emphasise the continued importance of the other rural programme areas. The town and village renewal scheme, Ceantair Laga Árd-Riachtanais, CLÁR, the walks scheme, the outdoor recreation infrastructure scheme, ORIS, and the local improvement scheme are having positive impacts on rural areas throughout Ireland. While we need large-scale strategic investment, such as that provided under the RRDF and LEADER, we also need to ensure that every town, village and rural area can benefit from funding for their economic and social development. We have built up a very strong pipeline of capital projects across these schemes, as a result of which expenditure is very strong. To date, €9.8 million has been spent under the town and village renewal scheme; €8.7 million under the national rural development schemes; and €5.6 million under local improvement schemes. Each of these areas will see a full spend in 2019.

Regarding programme B, community development, as the committee will be aware, the two most significant programmes in expenditure terms are the community services programme, CSP, and the social inclusion and community activation programme, SICAP.

The community services programme provides financial support to community organisations to deliver local services through a social enterprise model. The funding supports the cost of employing a manager or a specific number of full-time equivalents. The CSP is a vital resource for a range of community organisations. It provides supports for staff in community halls. It supports the provision of vital services in disadvantaged areas. It also supports organisations that provide employment for those most distant from the labour market, including people with disabilities, Travellers and ex-prisoners. The allocation for 2019 is €46 million and to date, €42.6 million of this has been spent. Overall, the CSP is assisting more than 400 organisations by providing a contribution for more than 1,900 positions.

The social inclusion and community activation programme provides funding to help individuals and communities in our society who are experiencing disadvantage. It aims to tackle poverty and social exclusion through local engagement and partnerships between individuals and community organisations. In particular, it seeks to assist a range of disadvantaged groups, including lone parents, persons with disabilities, the long-term unemployed, Roma and Travellers. This programme area has an allocation of €43.2 million, with spend to date at €41.4 million. Like the CSP, this is a vital resource for those individuals most in need and for the organisations working to help them and their communities.

The Department also operates a range of smaller community development programmes and schemes. As I noted earlier in respect of rural development, while the funding may be smaller, the impact on people and communities is very important. The senior alerts scheme has reached a further 13,000 people so far this year. This is similar to the numbers last year and means that a total of 55,000 people have now been funded under the scheme. It is having a positive impact on older people and delivers benefits to them and to society. It enables many older people to live in their own homes with greater peace of mind.

The community enhancement programme has also been very successful again this year. It provides capital funding for communities across Ireland to enhance facilities in disadvantaged areas. Under the 2019 programme, more than 2,000 communities and community groups benefited from funding of €4.5 million, with local decision-making ensuring money is put to use where it is needed most.

Given the topic of today's committee meeting, my opening statement has focused on my

Department's expenditure position and the impact of some of the programmes we fund. As I said, the position is very positive, with all our programme areas progressing well and expenditure on target.

Before closing, I also wish to mention briefly our work on policy and strategy development. Over the past two years we have published a number of strategies and policies, including the public libraries strategy, *Our Public Libraries 2022*; the National Social Enterprise Policy for Ireland 2019-2020; and *Sustainable, Inclusive and Empowered Communities*, the five-year strategy running from 2019 until 2024 to support the community and voluntary sector. These strategies have been developed in partnership with the key stakeholders and with a strong focus on public consultation. This means that the policies and strategies we develop reflect the views of those working on the ground and that the implementation of the objectives and actions will have real benefits for communities and individuals. We are also working on a volunteering strategy, with the Minister of State, Deputy Canney, chairing a group on that work. We are developing a new rural development policy. This will build on the success of the Action Plan for Rural Development. Again, consultation is key to this work, with events held around the country to allow inputs from communities to this policy.

My Department's mission is now more important than ever before, given the many challenges communities and individuals face. In this context it is important we take stock and consult with our stakeholders and the public to continue to inform the strategic direction of the Department. This will help to ensure we put our funding to best use and that our programmes and schemes continue to have a positive impact on communities throughout the country.

I would welcome any questions from the committee.

Chairman: We will just concentrate on programme B to start. I commend the Minister and his Department on the implementation of programme B, in particular the community services programme. I can see in County Clare the positive impact it has on communities on the ground. I note that during the year the Minister called to Newmarket-on-Fergus, County Clare, and highlighted the good work being done there through the community services programme as operated by Obair. I am often asked by community organisations whether there is a possibility of expanding the community services programme even further to make it available to other communities that cannot necessarily avail of it at present. I know that the Minister carried out a review of the programme. Has the review thrown up any more recommendations to expand the programme where possible? The Minister might try to address that question.

Deputy Michael Ring: I thank the Chairman. Regarding the community services programme, as the Chairman said, funding is provided towards the cost of a manager. We provide €32,000 per manager and €19,000 per full-time equivalent. I wish to make it clear to the Chairman and the committee that we make a very substantial contribution. As I said, 400 communities throughout the country are being supported and approximately 1,900 staff are employed. With the allocation I have secured this year I am looking to see whether I can get more services into the programme. It is a very good programme that services rural Ireland in particular. Services are provided particularly to communities that would not previously have had them. The State might not have been able to provide them, the council might not have been able to provide them, the health board might not have been able to provide them if we did not have the community services programme. That is why I am carrying out a review at present. It is probably why we did the social enterprise policy as well. Some of the social enterprises are doing very well. They put the profits they make back into their enterprises. Some of these programmes, such as the community services programme, will never be profit-making, but at the same time

we need to give them the support, backup and resources they need to keep them alive because they provide excellent services. I am carrying out a review in this regard. I hope to be able to support a few more organisations next year.

Senator Paudie Coffey: I welcome the Minister and his officials. I know that a lot of the focus is on the expenditure, what it means for communities and how it works. Some of our body of work, as the Chairman knows, is to look at value for money in terms of the grants available to communities and to support the Department, local authorities, LEADER groups and others and, more importantly, the communities in maximising the drawdown of funds available to assist them.

Did the Chairman say we are just focusing on programme B or can we-----

Chairman: Yes, we are looking at programme B, community development.

Senator Paudie Coffey: What about programme A?

Chairman: We will come back to it after this one.

Senator Paudie Coffey: All right.

I acknowledge the increase in funding that has been made available. I acknowledge also that this is a relatively new Department - only two years old - and that from a standing start the Minister has managed to increase the budget by over 26% in 2019 to a total of €291 million across the various programmes. This needs to be acknowledged because it is hard-fought-for with other Departments. This committee has a special interest in rural communities and disadvantaged communities, and the funding the Minister has captured for those communities must be acknowledged and welcomed. I wanted to put that on the public record and to thank him for it.

Programme B concerns the community enhancement programmes, disadvantaged communities, SICAP and social inclusion. How can we ensure full expenditure by year end? The Minister has given broad figures up to the end of September but funding is still available until the end of December. Are there enough applications in the pipeline to spend the full amount for which the Minister has budgeted in 2019 for the various communities around the country? I acknowledge the increase in numbers under the seniors alert scheme. We often hear of rural isolation and increasing its reach by more than 13,000 people is to be welcomed.

Are the applications improving in quality? When schemes were new, some of the applicant bodies were not up to speed with their terms and conditions. Are many applications being rejected because of a lack of quality? Some community groups have been before the committee and they were concerned by the time and effort that needed to be put into preparing applications. Most of these bodies are voluntary and comprise people who, while having vast experience, give of their time on a voluntary basis to improve their communities. I am concerned that bureaucracy could get in the way of good applications. If there are issues with the quality of applications, we need to provide a resource to assist communities to improve them, so that we get the best value for money and that the funding benefits the communities and reaches them in the best possible way.

What barriers or problems exist for some communities in accessing finance? Some communities are better at this than others and some repeat applicants know the system very well. Some disadvantaged communities, however, may not have the same capacity to make quality

applications and we need to help them with resources and assistance, so that they can benefit from the funding the Minister is providing. They may not have the same number of volunteers or other resources and we should identify them and assist them. Partnership groups around the country do this but we need to constantly evaluate the success of the schemes so that we can reach out to the communities which really need the funding.

Deputy Michael Ring: The community enhancement programme and community services programme come from current expenditure and the spend will be drawn down. The Senator made an observation that I made after being Minister for only a short time. He is correct that some organisations have professionals who can put in applications on their behalf but others, which do professional work, do not have the same support so do not get the funding they should. In response to this, I asked my officials to go around the country to Helping Hands events, which were designed to help and support organisations in filling in applications. I could name six or seven groups in every county that come in on every single scheme and draw down from every pot but I could also name groups in west Mayo, north Mayo, north Kerry or north Sligo that did not get the opportunity, even though they are doing more valuable work than some of the others that are good at putting in the applications. We are working on it and I compliment my officials on meeting organisations around the country, for which the latter were grateful. A lot of groups do not know what funding is available so the Helping Hands events were very good for them.

The current funding will be drawn down and nothing will be left. In fact, we are looking for more in respect of both programmes. I can be critical of local authorities but I must be fair to them as well. For a good few years during the recession, there were no schemes and local authorities did not realise there would be continuation when the new Department was set up. I met county managers, outlined the expenditure over the next number of years and told them about the schemes so most local authorities make better applications now. One of the unfair criticisms the Department gets all the time, which also happens in respect of the LEADER programme and local authorities, relates to capital works funding. Some of these schemes take between 12 and 15 months to build. I could have been stricter than I previously was with regard to planning but, from now, I am not allowing further rural regeneration scheme applications unless they have full planning. There is no point giving funding to an organisation only for it to find that it has been refused planning permission or there is an objection and, two years later, they cannot spend the money. I am being stricter in allocating money now but there is a big improvement in spend.

Deputy Cowen was derogatory about the Department in his speech on the budget but his own county received €16 million, €2 million of which has not been drawn down. He would be better off asking his local authority why it did not spend that allocation. The investment the county got was very welcome, nonetheless, as it is in every county. This Department is working well, though, like every Department, it takes a while to bed down. What has happened in the Department in the past two years, however, has been exceptional. It has worked under difficult conditions and while every other Minister had a Secretary General in an established Department to meet, we did not even have an office. We were expected to function and we did that. It is a fantastic Department with a fantastic team and fantastic commitment. Whoever is in government next, the Department has to be left in place because people are happy with its expenditure and with what is happening. They want the Department and its funding to continue.

Senator Maura Hopkins: I have a few comments and questions on programme B. I wish to emphasise the importance of the community services programme, into which I understand

a review is under way. In my local area, there is no shop in Kilbride, which is a rural area just outside Roscommon town, so the programme has stepped in and is providing a community shop through Pobal, which is hugely successful. Other groups are looking to the example of Kilbride for other rural areas. It is important for the people it serves.

Another important service funded through the programme is Triest Press Printing, which is located in Roscommon town and supports people with disabilities to engage in work. They are busy providing this very important service for people in the area. I attended an event in Castlerea last Monday with the Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection, Deputy Regina Doherty. The social inclusion and community activation plan, SICAP, and the Ability programme are examples of cross-departmental work that supports people with disabilities to get the training and supports they need to re-enter the workforce. At the event, 14 people, who have great ability but who need a little bit more support, received certificates. In his opening statement the Minister spoke about looking at the impact of the Department's work, but this has a real impact in supporting people with disabilities to re-enter the workforce, thanks to SICAP and others working cross-departmentally.

I refer to the community services programme, from which we are all keen for more groups to benefit. When is the review of the programme likely to be completed?

In the context of programme B, the senior alert scheme has proved to be hugely successful since it became easier for people to apply for it. As my background is in occupational therapy, I know of the importance of the scheme to people across the country. It is important both for the people who use the alert system and their families who want to support them to live as independently as possible for as long as possible. I am getting this feedback from community groups and individuals across the area I represent in counties Roscommon and Galway and the response to what the Department and the Minister are delivering to the area is usually positive. I have mostly made comments rather than asking questions, but I would like to know when the review of the community services programme is likely to be completed.

Deputy Michael Ring: I will start with the review. Indecon is undertaking a review of the programme. I want to protect it, but I am afraid that weaker groups will be left behind. As I need to protect them, we will have to wait and see. The review of the programme will show whether we are getting value for money and what we can do to improve it. I also want to support social enterprises, which is why we have a national social enterprise policy for the first time since the foundation of the State. I need to protect the weaker groups in the programme, in particular, such as those some people might not think provide value for money. They might say someone else should be running them, but we do not have anyone else to do so and need them to continue. The Senator asked a straight question, to which I will give her a straight answer. The review will be completed by the end of the year. I want to make it clear that I intend to protect the groups that need to be protected.

The Senator also spoke about the senior alert scheme. When I took office, there was a public outcry as there had been an underspend under the scheme for many years. I made a decision to bring in Pobal and we ran an advertising and media campaign to notify all voluntary groups about the scheme. The senior alert scheme is now too successful, as I have had to find extra funding for it for the last two years. I welcome this because it is only right to do so. Some 55,000 people now participate in the scheme, including 13,000 new participants in 2019 and 20,000 in 2018. The scheme has received an allocation of over €2.3 million and I also had to find a further €1.6 million in funding. We have spent €3.7 million under the scheme to date. It is a great scheme which gives people peace of mind. Many people now participate in it and

we have to monitor it on a regular basis to ensure we modernise equipment as we move along and support elderly people. What is most important is keeping them safe in their homes. The programme has worked very well and I am pleased with it.

The community services programme, CSP, of which I spoke, is also a great programme and I wish I had more money for it in order to have more groups and better organisation. However, SICAP, the best programme of them all, receives the least attention, support and credit. I am trying to increase its yearly funding as it deals with the most marginalised on a one-to-one basis. We conducted a review and I made it easier for SICAP participants to run their business on a one-to-one basis. The level of success we have had with the programme is unbelievable, particularly for people on the margins such as those who had been in prison, who were not educated, or who needed job support. The number of people coming through the programme is incredible. It supports over 2,200 communities and 27,000 individuals, but it would be worth it even for one individual. I have been in Limerick, Dublin, Tallaght, and many other places throughout the country and the programme does not get the credit it deserves. I wish I had more funding for it because it deals with the most marginalised. I have received a small increase in the budget. Giving an increase to SICAP participants throughout the country is one possibility I will look into.

Senator Rose Conway-Walsh: I thank the Minister for his opening statement. It is ironic that we are here while a discussion on the systematic destruction of the community development and anti-poverty and equality movement is ongoing upstairs in the AV room. They are discussing community development and how it has been destroyed during the years. I do not mean to take from the various schemes, grants and moneys that are moved here and there. However, I disagree with the Minister on SICAP. Some good work is being done, but SICAP replaced the social inclusion programme which had much better quality measures and fantastic initiatives all around the country before the concept of activation was brought into it. We have lost much of the intelligence and even some of the pilot projects that were conducted on many of the social issues at the time. The Minister and I will have to disagree in that regard.

I am glad that a review of the CSP is being conducted, which the Minister has indicated will be completed by the end of the year. Will the recommendations be made public and, if so, when? I ask because many CSP schemes are finding it very difficult just to meet their overheads due to having to pay the national minimum wage and meet the increasing price of insurance and so on. I ask the Minister to let them know where they stand as soon as possible. One cannot operate a programme while always wondering whether one can switch on the lights or afford the little things. One cannot be strategic and focused in the work one needs to do while worrying about next week's bills. The sooner the review is completed, the better and it is important that the recommendations be made public. In the interim, I ask the Minister to examine the ability of some CSPs to pay the national minimum wage. He knows about the issues in the insurance industry and the problems these groups face which we are trying to tackle in many ways. We are hoping to pass legislation before Christmas that may help, but what the insurance companies are demanding from some of the groups is bonkers. We need to meet their needs in some way.

I have a few questions about the budget. Some 550,700 social inclusion units were profiled and there has been a 1% spend. The obvious question is why only 1% has been spent at this stage in the year. How is that issue going to be addressed?

My other question relates to the dormant account measures. I am sure there is a logical explanation but why was nothing profiled for it? Brexit will have implications for the PEACE

programme, but we are hopeful we will achieve a deal in the next 24 hours. Has an agreement in this regard been reached by the Irish and UK Governments in the event of a no-deal Brexit? I have questions on the other measures but the Minister might address those matters first.

As to whether different programmes are targeting the right people, there is confusion about the criteria and what programme meets which criteria. Are all allocations to these programmes based on strict criteria or are political decisions made in respect of the allocations? Are there predetermined criteria or is there political influence in how the allocations are made?

Deputy Michael Ring: I assure the Senator that, regardless of whether there is a deal or no deal, the PEACE programme will continue. It is a European programme. I have got a further increase in funding in respect of that very important programme this year. The programme will remain in place to provide support on a North-South basis regardless of what happens with Brexit. It will probably be needed more than ever if there is no deal.

The Senator mentioned a review of the community services programme. The latter is being reviewed to provide reassurance to various groups. I want to protect the groups that need protection. The Senator knows about that more than anybody else because she was involved in the community sector. Work is being done in north Mayo and in places like that where if it were not for the community services programme, services would not be provided. The Government and the Department part-fund the groups. Last year, I noted a difficulty in meeting the minimum wage payment. I had an equalisation fund and diverted €1 million from it. I did not ask anybody to submit applications. I met representatives from Pobal, which had assessed the programmes and had all the relevant information. Where groups had money in the bank, we did not have to support them. We supported the weaker groups. I allocated €1 million to the groups that needed it most. We have the Helping Hands information sessions. The Senator referred to the groups who need the money most. There are groups that are very good at getting professional help in the context of completing forms but I do not like that in terms of the securing of funding. Rather, I want to give the money to the people who need it most. I try to target money where it is needed most. That is why I got my departmental officials together with representatives of Pobal to go out and talk to the groups. It is one good initiative we did in the Department. We had big audiences at all the venues where the meetings were held. People got feedback on schemes and help in filling application forms. As in the case of Mayo, without even glancing at the funding allocated when I get the details from Pobal, I could nearly name the first five or six on the list, but that is not right. That is not what the schemes are about, rather they are about giving the money to the groups that need it most. However, we must also recognise the groups that are doing well, that have savings, those that are able to manage their programmes and that have been able to secure some funding. That is important.

We need some of the groups to be doing well in order that we can support the ones that are not doing so well. The reason I called for the review is because I need to protect the programme. I want people to know that this review is not designed to try to get rid of anybody. Rather, it is to ensure that we are getting the best value for money, that the money is being targeted where it is needed and that there is no waste in the scheme. The Senator and I know of places in Mayo where if it were not for the community service programme and the allocation of funding of €19,000 for the salary of an employee and €32,000 for the salary of a manager, there would not be a scheme in place. I provided for an allocation from the equalisation fund to meet the minimum wage for those employed in these schemes last year. I look at that again this year to see if there is anything I can do. We do not pay the full salary for these people. I have a decision to make in the next few days regarding the bringing in of more groups in order

to provide them with an opportunity to develop. If I have to deal with meeting the minimum wage for these people, I will not be able to bring in more groups. There are organisations that want to develop and that want to enter the programme. There are also organisations that need some support. I have to look at ways and means to support them.

The Senator spoke about the dormant account measures. I am looking at ways to provide support where there is a need in communities, where groups are not able to get funding from schemes that are in place. That is the reason I set up specified schemes. The Senator mentioned the social innovation fund. We allocated €5 million to it and €2 million to the social enterprise development fund. Such funding is to give groups an opportunity to develop programmes. The scheme with respect to the Dormant Accounts Fund is not the easiest to administer. I must have the funding in my budget line and draw it down from Government after that which creates a problem. It would be better if I could have the funding and spend it and then draw down from the fund but that is not the way it works. I must have the funding in my budget line, I must negotiate it even though when we spent the money we get it back from the Government. If there is €30 million of €40 million in the fund, we cannot simply spend it. I must have the funding in my budget line and other Departments get their share of the Dormant Accounts Fund. While my Department administers the respective scheme, in some cases we do not have control over where the funding goes. The Departments of Health and Education and Skills and other Departments have their respective schemes.

Senator Rose Conway-Walsh: The Minister might deal with the social inclusion units.

Deputy Michael Ring: We have 13 social inclusion units. They are provided to the local authorities and we meet 50% of the costs involved. The allocation of €550,000 for them will be fully used this year but I plan to review that programme also. Substantial money is being allocated to it and we need to know where it is being spent. We will carry out a review of that programme. I want to establish if we are getting value for money. We are providing €550,000 for it and paying 50% of the costs involved to the local authorities.

Senator Rose Conway-Walsh: Some 50% of the costs are paid and the local authorities also have their own resources.

Deputy Michael Ring: They have their own resources. We also support the local authorities in that my Department covers the salary of a broadband officer. We also fund a staff member to develop the Atlantic economic corridor which covers ten counties. We plan to do a review of that scheme.

Senator Rose Conway-Walsh: The local authorities are struggling to meet the matching funding required from their resources. That could be an explanation as to why the spend in many areas is not what it needs to be, but do not know how that can be addressed.

Deputy Michael Ring: We give them one overall payment from which they draw down funding. The local authorities tell me that they find it difficult to provide matching funding in respect of every scheme. I am in a particular position and I had better not make a comment on that matter. They take in major resources in the form of moneys levied from rates and planning charges. They provide services and are able to draw down funding. They get moneys from an equalisation fund. Those moneys accrue from the local property tax. We all have to play our part. It cannot only come down to one entity.

The Senator will be familiar with the local improvement scheme. The local authorities take

the top 13% from the Department and administer the scheme on its behalf. There are other charges relating to delivering what is required. I should make them provide 50% of the funding and we would get more value from the local improvement scheme. We pay the full funding for the scheme and on top of that we pay the local authorities to administer it for us.

I will carry out a review of the allocation for the social inclusion units and if there is a need to do something in respect of that programme we will examine it.

Senator Rose Conway-Walsh: Will further local improvement scheme funding be allocated before the end of the year?

Deputy Michael Ring: I have been accused all year of having an underspend in the Department. What I am hearing from members on all sides here is that my Department is overspending. I will have to wait and see what is the position. The Senator asked me about the local improvement scheme and I can tell her we gave the local authorities €10 million in February.

Chairman: We are dealing with programme A.

Senator Rose Conway-Walsh: In fairness, the Minister mentioned that scheme.

Deputy Michael Ring: I will come back to that.

Chairman: We are moving on from programme A but I will allow that question.

Deputy Michael Ring: I will answer that, as it will come up. Because of the weather we had last year and everything else, I made a conscious decision for this year to make money available for the local improvement scheme, LIS, at the end of the year. I allocated €10 million nationally to the local authorities in February; we are almost at the end of October and to date, only €5.6 million has been spent. To be honest, I am disappointed. They asked for the money early and I did that. If I give it late, they complain that they have not time to do it. I gave them the money and made a special effort this year to get the funding out to them so that when they are doing whatever tarring programme or works they are undertaking in whatever area, they could also do the LIS. It is very hard for me to give them more money when to date they have only drawn down €5.6 million of €10 million.

Chairman: That is very disappointing about the local improvement scheme. It is a wonderful scheme, which the Minister reopened some years ago for which he is due huge credit. Local authorities who have not pulled their weight in this regard should be named and shamed. I, and the committee, want to know what local authorities are performing well in this and which have spent their allocations. It is just not good enough that the Minister and his Department would allocate €10 million to upgrade minor roads in rural Ireland but that local authorities have not managed to spend the money. Those local authorities that have performed well should be rewarded for that. That is something the Minister could consider in future.

Programme A pertains to rural development and regional affairs. It is the Department's biggest spending element. The establishment of the rural regeneration and development fund was a game changer for rural Ireland. It gives those communities a chance to get big money. I am thinking in this regard of Lahinch, County Clare, which received €2.86 million last year in the second round of funding. A significant amount of that work was completed prior to the hosting of the Irish Open in Lahinch. It was a wonderful showcase for north Clare, for County Clare as a whole and for the mid-west. It is a testament to that particular fund and shows how the funding can be used for the benefit of the whole community. I am looking forward to work

being completed on Lahinch Seaworld as part of the application. Going back over to east Clare, to Lough Derg and Holy Island €920,000 was allocated to that programme under the rural regeneration fund. Much work is ongoing there. Holy Island will complement the blueway that has been developed along Lough Derg and will act as a magnet to bring visitors from County Clare back over to east Clare. That fund is hugely significant. County Clare benefited from a €1 million injection to the digital hub in Ennistymon. I understand that project is nearing completion and I look forward to it opening in the near future. Perhaps the Minister will come to Ennistymon and perform the duty himself. It was one of the first projects to benefit under the rural regeneration and development fund.

I compliment Leonard Cleary in Clare County Council, Urban McMahon, and Pat Dowling, the chief executive, who have driven this particular project. The LEADER programme is well established in County Clare and is to the forefront. I wish to compliment Dóirín Graham, Gloria Callinan and all the LEADER team there.

I note the Minister has reallocated €10 million to LEADER, which is welcome. In County Clare, money is running out and several projects that still are in the pipeline might benefit from an injection of money. The Minister will top up LEADER companies that have performed well, which is the correct approach. Consider the job that is under way in the Tradaree Arms in the main street in Newmarket on Fergus, where €1.2 million is going into the redevelopment of that building to provide a training area for chefs, a food hub, a meals-on-wheels operation, as well as a place for the youth of the village. This wonderful project, in the middle of the street, is made possible by LEADER funding, by Obair and by the local community. I look forward to that project nearing completion. That is the significance of LEADER.

Kilmihil, County Clare, was recently awarded €200,000 to develop an AstroTurf ground in the village. This is a wonderful community organisation. It is the first time they have been in receipt of major moneys from the State. It is another case of LEADER delivering on the ground.

I am involved in my local Tidy Towns organisation in Clarecastle. This year our points increased significantly, by 13. A meeting held in Power's pub was a celebration because of the community effort across Clarecastle from the young and not so young. The Tidy Towns competition is the best example of community development, pride in community and of improving public space. I encourage the Minister to support the Tidy Towns movement and the competition to an even greater degree in future years.

We touched on the local improvement scheme. I also compliment the Western Development Commission on the work it is doing. The Minister might come back to me on the issues I have raised.

Deputy Michael Ring: I will get my officials to send the Chairman and the committee an up-to-date list of who has drawn down what in the LIS and how much they were allocated since February.

The Chairman is correct; the rural regeneration scheme is a game changer. It will give communities the opportunity, particularly with digital hubs, food hubs and different projects where there would be an allocation from other organisations. When I came in as Minister, I spoke to the Minister of Finance and I must give him great credit. He asked me what was the one thing we needed and I said it was funds where, sometimes bodies received funds from local authorities, LEADER or from other organisations but they needed an injection of big money

to complete a project. That is why the rural regeneration scheme and the urban regeneration scheme were set up. I am aware that it can take some time to get some of the schemes up and running. We have to be careful and carry out due diligence to ensure that the schemes which are allocated funding are done properly in the first instance. We must protect taxpayers' money and we must ensure that everything is in order. These organisations are getting substantial amounts of money. I am pleased with the way that the scheme is working. I am aware of a scheme in County Clare that I intend to visit in the coming weeks. We also have responsibility for the library there. We give substantial funding to Ennis library and we need to turn the sod on that.

The rural regeneration scheme has been receiving applications since August and will be making announcements in the next few weeks. Other Departments have one round, we are coming into our second round. This scheme has various categories. Category 1 is for the big projects that are ready to go. We have made a few changes this time, and now they have to have planning and be more ready to go than the previous occasion. Category 2 enables people to draw down funding to get a scheme ready. Both of them are working very well. There are some fantastic projects being developed around the country at the moment. When this is over, we will be able to say that various projects were completed under the rural regeneration scheme and people will see that we have gotten value for money and created lots of jobs. I see it happening everywhere.

On LEADER, we conducted an analysis of the programme and decided to give a further €5 million to the LEADER companies. To be honest, I could have just given a bit to everybody but that would have been wrong because some of them are performing very well but others are not performing so well. I have put criteria in place in terms of spend and allocation and my officials administer that. It is a very fair system and I did not get involved in it. I have now decided that we will look at the top ten and reward them. The Chairman has said that his LEADER company is okay, but I will also be looking at the ones at the bottom at the end of the year. If I think there will not be a spend under the programme, I will reallocate some of that money to those that are spending. This is Government money and European money that is available to communities and it should be spent. Some of the companies are doing fantastically well but others are not doing so well. I have heard a lot of criticism of the LEADER programme but my Department can only allocate the funds; it is up to the companies to complete the projects. I cannot give money to projects that are not completed. I cannot hand money over because at the end of the day, I am responsible. I am answerable to this committee and my Department is answerable to Europe with regard to that funding. When the spot checks come, if everything is not in order, then we have a problem. We have had problems in the past and there is no point in pretending that we have not. This year's budget allocation is €30 million but I will need substantially more and I will have to take that from the schemes where the money allocated may not be spent. I am glad to see it ramping up and going so well.

We have spoken previously about the Tidy Towns scheme which is also working very well. I am delighted that for the third year in a row, I have been able to provide €1.4 million for the scheme. I am the first Minister in the first Government to reward the Tidy Towns competition. We did it on a town, village and city basis. Funding for Tidy Towns and for the shows has gone down really well with the voluntary groups that do immense voluntary work for their county and country. It is only a "thank you" to them. It is not big money but it keeps the shows going and it gives a focus to the Tidy Towns committees. We had 918 entries this year, which is fantastic. I attended the awards ceremony in the Helix and saw the positivity and excitement of those who work for their communities. We are so lucky in this country to have so many people doing voluntary work. That said, I do not know why so many people choose to spoil our

countryside, towns and villages. I do not know why they cannot do what the voluntary sector does, by way of the Tidy Towns committees, instead of throwing their rubbish out of their cars and throwing their chip bags on the ground at night. There is a lot of talk about climate change and I hope when people are out at night that they think about the environment, about their communities and about what other people have to do to clean up their mess.

Chairman: Well said. Please God, next year Ennis will get over the line. It won the gold medal again this year for the cleanest urban centre. Please God next year it will get over the line and win the overall award. Senator Coffey is next.

Senator Paudie Coffey: As we all know, it is under programme A that the vast majority of capital expenditure occurs. Such funding is certainly welcome in the many communities that benefit from it, whether through the LEADER scheme, the rural regeneration scheme, town and village renewal scheme, the CLÁR programme, the walk schemes, local improvement schemes and Tidy Towns. Every single county and community in the country is touched by funding from these schemes. It is important to constantly evaluate their success and ensure that we are getting value for money from them. I listened with interest to the Minister's comments about how some applicant bodies like local authorities or LEADER companies are better than others. We must develop and progress those bodies that are not performing as well as they should be because when they are not performing well, it is the communities that suffer. The Minister knows that and I welcome the fact that his Department intends to focus on it going forward. As I said earlier, it is a concern of mine. Communities depend a lot on expertise being made available to them through voluntary effort and some are better than others at providing that volunteerism. We really need to assist those that are lagging behind because these are the communities that need assistance the most. That is something that we all need to continually work on in terms of how the various schemes are working.

In the context of the rural regeneration fund, I wish to mention a couple of projects in my own county of Waterford in an effort to gauge the level of ambition expected of applicants. This is not a criticism but in last year's allocation, Waterford did not do particularly well. I suspect that the applicant bodies themselves will admit that they were not up to speed in terms of the ambition expected by the Minister and the Department. I have had this discussion with them and have met them since then. There are two very ambitious projects from Waterford under rural regeneration which deserve a mention. I am not asking the Minister to comment on them because I understand that departmental officials are assessing applications at the moment. One of them is in west Waterford, the Blackwater Valley application which is a unique collaboration involving LEADER, the local authority and five communities. Five different villages in west county Waterford are aiming to create an economic development zone in rural west Waterford. It is a very ambitious project which is seeking a lot of funding but if it is successful it will have a real impact in every one of those villages. I like the fact that it is a collaborative effort, with the villages working together to try to bring up the whole west county Waterford area. They are not trying to do it individually, in their own silos. They are actually leaning on each other, sharing expertise and sharing each other's unique assets to make it a more attractive proposition overall in terms of enterprise, tourism and rural development. It includes the villages of Cappoquin, Lismore, Tallow, Aghlish and Villierstown. The project is very ambitious and the application submitted seeks funding in the order of €5 million. In his statement announcing the rural regeneration scheme, the Minister said that the Department was looking for applications of scale and sustainability that could really make an impact. This is possibly one such project because it will provide multifaceted benefits to an entire region of rural Waterford. The other project involves the Mount Congreve estate which recently came into the ownership of the

State. Waterford Council has taken over the running of the estate which is a very unique rural tourism enterprise on the Waterford greenway, with which the Minister is very familiar. The Minister has travelled along the greenway himself. The project aims to build on the success of the greenway and extend it out into the new gardens that are being run by the council. These gardens are a unique offering in terms of tourism and attracting international tourist footfall. These two projects are currently being assessed by the Department and I am just trying to gauge whether the Department is interested in funding projects of that scale. Is it the intention to fund multi-million euro projects that can have a real impact? Under the town and village renewal scheme, for example, while there have been some success stories, most of the projects were very *ad hoc* and standalone. The applications to which I refer are very collaborative and are co-ordinated across a whole region. I am hoping that is what the Department is looking for because that is what has been submitted. If these projects are successful, they will have a really beneficial impact on a whole swathe of communities across rural west county Waterford.

I also have a question on applicants who may be looking on but who are not as prepared as those that have already been submitted applications. Will this funding continue for the next few years? I ask this because communities are learning all of the time. My own community of Portlaw was successful in its application for €100,000 under the town and village renewal scheme. That lifted the confidence of people in the community and showed them that when an effort is made on small projects, great things can be achieved by working with the local authority, members of the community and other stakeholders. The same community is now considering submitting a larger scale application under the rural regeneration scheme, although not just yet. Portlaw is my own home town. It is unusual in being one of the only planned towns in Ireland. It was built by a Quaker family, the Malcolmsons. It was originally a mill town with serviced areas for the workers. It has a very unique social history. Unfortunately the old industrial site, of approximately ten acres, is a brownfield site right in the middle of the town. As it is adjacent to the town centre, it is fully serviced. It has all of the main services available to it, but because it is a brownfield site, there was never any interest in redeveloping or turning it into the amenity or attraction it should be. It has tremendous potential. I am trying to encourage Waterford City and County Council to identify the positives attached to sites such as this, derelict sites within town centre areas that are an eyesore but which have huge potential to improve the social fabric of a community and turn that community's confidence around. Applications should be made under the rural regeneration scheme in respect of such sites. What are the Minister's views in that regard? This is a brownfield site which has been contaminated. When I was Minister of State at the Department of the Environment, Community and Local Government, €200,000 was made available to make an assessment of the level of contamination. A roadmap could be provided to redevelop and regenerate the site. That is what the rural regeneration scheme should be about: regenerating derelict brownfield sites in the centre of towns throughout the country. I mention the site to provide an example. I am interested in hearing the Minister's views on whether an application could be made in respect of this site in the future.

Senator Maura Hopkins: I thank the Minister for his contributions thus far. I have a number of points to make and a number of questions to ask.

As the Minister will be aware, we were delighted to welcome him to Castlerea recently. I mention this in the light of the impact of programmes in category B and the achievement of value for money. The Department provided almost €1 million for the Beara-Breifne Way, a walking and cycling route from County Cork to County Cavan. It is important that we work across Departments and agencies. The provision of that funding is really important and we hope it will be a game changer in the development of the Ireland's Hidden Heartlands brand by

Fáilte Ireland. On the day of the Minister's visit, I am sure the sense of commitment among community groups and volunteers and their pride in their area will have been more than obvious to him.

Another example we saw on that day was the provision of funding of €1.5 million for the food hub in Castlerea under the rural regeneration programme which has been really important in filling a gap in the market in terms of the lack of chefs. An Chistin which was initially provided with rural economic development zone, REDZ, funding has much larger ambitions to develop into a space to support people who want to set up businesses. It hopes to achieve these ambitions through the voluntary group, Roscommon County Council, the Roscommon LEADER partnership, and Galway and Roscommon Education and Training Board. We know that overheads are high and will prove difficult for people in the sector to meet, but on the particular day that ambition was very obvious. LEADER programme funding has also been provided through Athleague Community Centre.

I want to mention the importance of another funding stream through the Department - CLÁR funding. While we talk about significant funding that is really important with which to deliver bigger projects, the impact of CLÁR funding in enhancing safety should be mentioned. We saw this on the particular day at Carrick national school, which is on the main road between Ballyhaunis and Castlerea which is an absolute death trap. The Department provided €50,000 to provide a new car park to take children away from the hard shoulder and provide a safe place in which to park for drop-off and collection. The CLÁR funding is extremely important and just one example. More than €240,000 was provided for projects in the county this year. It is, therefore, exceptionally important and I hope it will continue.

With reference to rural regeneration funding, the point the Minister made, that we should support the communities that need it most, is important. Many of the challenges facing County Roscommon also arise in the north of the county. Having seen Boyle, Castlerea, Ballaghaderreen and Tulsk all been supported with rural regeneration funding, I am satisfied that the funding is being used to support the communities that need it most.

I have two questions, one of which is about the walks scheme on which I receive a lot of calls seeking an update. It is really positive that the budget has been doubled, from €2 million to €4 million. An inspection with a view to including the Lung Valley within the Beara-Breifne way recently took place and went very well, but there is great anticipation and eagerness to have the area fall within the walks scheme. Obviously, the inclusion of walks has to be approved by the National Trails Office. I know that a process is under way, but will the Minister update us on when we are likely to hear the results in that regard?

My other question relates to the Western Development Commission, with which I know the Minister has been working closely. I met its CEO, Tomás Ó Síocháin, recently and understand more staff are being recruited. The commission is doing a significant amount of work, particularly on the Atlantic economic corridor and in encouraging working from home. It was involved in a successful digital working hub scheme in Tulsk. What is the Minister's view on how the commission can make further progress in developing and supporting communities in different areas?

I would like to comment on the Tidy Towns competition. In watching "Nationwide" on the evening the results were announced it was great to see so many people proud of their communities. I absolutely agree with the Minister that some people could do with watching the programme, but it is dreadful to have to see volunteers having to pick up litter, as I do regularly, in

bogs and along the sides of roads. TidyTowns does so much good work in instilling a sense of pride in place. It has also diversified so much in the context of further developments that have been supported with TidyTowns competition funding but also with funding under the town and village renewal scheme. In my home town of Ballaghaderreen funding under the town and village renewal scheme was used to paint many derelict buildings. The area has been given a great facelift and provided with a huge boost. TidyTowns competition funding is provided, but the town and village renewal scheme is also important in enhancing streetscapes, making us proud of the areas in which we live and encouraging tourists to visit them.

My questions were about the walks scheme and the Western Development Commission. I thank the Minister for all of his work. As we heard in his opening statement, a great deal of work has been done to make the Department highly functional. That has not happened by accident. I am very aware of the impact of the many schemes which have been opened and reopened. The positive role they play in supporting volunteers, local authorities and local community groups is extremely evident. It was more than obvious during the Minister's recent visit to Castlerea. I thank the Minister again for his work.

Deputy Michael Ring: I thank Senator Coffey for his comments on the rural regeneration scheme. He asked a few questions and spoke about individual cases. Naturally enough, I will not comment on individual cases. To be fair, many applicants under the first round of the rural regeneration scheme did not really know what was expected of them. I will outline the process, the funding, where we are going and what we have. The first round of the scheme was new for me and for the Department. It was new for everybody. We all learned a great deal from it. Many applications were received. Forty-six applications came from one county. I do not care how good they are. They could not get 46 applications for a rural regeneration scheme. Independent Deputies complained because they did not get funding. I would love members to go in to see the quality of the applications. It was just before the local elections. It was a case of one for everyone in the audience. That is not what the rural regeneration scheme is about. It is about the issues that the Chairman and Senator Coffey have spoken about. The Senator is right when he says that the Waterford greenway is a fantastic operation in his local countryside. It has lifted Thomastown and other towns and villages.

Senator Paudie Coffey: Kilmacthomas.

Deputy Michael Ring: Kilmacthomas. I love that place.

Senator Paudie Coffey: It is a fine place.

Deputy Michael Ring: It is a lovely spot.

Senator Paudie Coffey: Flahavan's porridge comes from there.

Deputy Michael Ring: Yes. It is a lovely place.

Senator Paudie Coffey: It is the best porridge in the world.

Deputy Michael Ring: It is a fantastic place. I think the number of allocations made during the first round represented a great achievement on the part of the Department. They are now progressing. The Senator asked about giving guidance to applicants. We have done that. To be fair to my officials and staff, they went around the country. They had meetings. They brought in the local authorities and the LEADER companies. They brought in anybody who had made an application. They went through what they are expecting from the next round. They went

through where applicants went wrong in the particular round they were in. I have to say my staff put a lot of work into getting people to participate. They did too good of a job. We now have applications worth a record €169 million. We do not have that kind of funding to allocate. A really competitive process is under way now. The evaluation committee, which evaluates and looks at the applications, will put forward the projects to me. There is going to be real competition this time. There has been a big improvement in the standard of applications this time. To be fair, it was a new programme the last time.

The Senator asked whether we are continuing with the funding. Yes, we are. People said it would not happen. People said it was only a scam, in the context of the 2040 project, but that is not true. One round is already over. Eighty-four projects were approved in the first round. Thirty-eight categories were approved in category 2. To respond to another question he asked, some €1 billion is being provided over ten years. People can come in under category 2 to draw down funding to make their projects category 1 projects. That was another omission in the past, when groups did not have the money to put an application together. Now we are providing the funding for that. We will be opening that again shortly. We opened the first round and we allocated the funding. We opened the second round in August and we will announce the successful applications in the next few weeks. We will open it again early in the new year. The programme will continue for ten years. The money is there. It has been committed by the Government. There will be a real demand for that funding over the next few years because the quality of applications will get better, particularly now that category 2 is in place. We did not have that in the first round because it was a new scheme. A number of groups got money the last time to make their applications fall under category 1. They are working. They are coming in with fantastic applications. There are fantastic applications around the country. We have heard about digital hubs and food hubs.

I will respond to Senator Hopkins in a moment. Fantastic projects are already taking place around the country. Regardless of who is here in ten years' time, he or she will be able to identify what was done in every county under the rural regeneration scheme. Senator Coffey spoke about rural development. There is no doubt that the schemes which have been introduced by the Department have given a new lease of life to many communities. We would like to have more money and more funding. As a Department, we have done very well. We have been in operation for two years. I think we have achieved a great deal in the last two years. I thank the Senator for his comments. Senator Hopkins-----

Senator Paudie Coffey: I would like to follow up on what the Minister has said before he moves on to Senator Hopkins. I acknowledge that the Minister of State, Deputy Canney, is here too. I welcome the improvement in the standard of applications. That has to be noted by this committee because it is something we look at regularly when we hear from community groups. I want us to note that. I would like to ask the Minister about the scale of projects. He does not need to be too specific. If he could give us an idea of the minimum or maximum value of projects, that would help us to understand the level of ambition involved in this scheme. Are we talking about €1 million projects or €2 million projects? Does the Department have an open mind? Does it depend on the evaluation that is done by the panel which examines these matters? I am trying to get an idea of the scale of these projects to give communities an understanding of whether they are being too ambitious or reaching too high. We want game changers for rural Ireland. I am trying to get an idea of the scale of the projects being submitted. We must remember they are being submitted by stakeholders that are collaborating. I have mentioned an example in County Waterford. Communities are coming together with LEADER and the council. The entire west of the county - not just individual villages - is coming together to try

to lift the region. I wonder whether this is an example of the type of ambition the Minister is looking for.

Deputy Michael Ring: The Senator is quite correct in what he says about ambition. That is why we have asked for collaboration. We have allowed local authorities, LEADER companies, State agencies and Fáilte Ireland to collaborate with groups. The Senator has asked a question. We want to get projects that involve collaboration. We do not want to fund projects that do not have a chance. That is why the evaluation committee is there. We have to fund projects that have a chance. In every walk of life, there will be things that work very well. Regardless of what business one is in, one will come across good ideas that may not work. We do not mind taking some risks. The evaluation committee has to make a decision. It has to look at what will happen if funding is provided for a project. Will it be sustainable in the future? Will employment be created from it in the future? Will it need further funding from somebody else at a later stage? All of this is considered.

Senator Coffey spoke about a development in his own county. I have not looked at it yet. All I am saying is that it will be very carefully looked at. The committee will look at the criteria, at whether it is sustainable, at what it will do for communities and at what it will do for jobs. I have to mention the work done by the evaluation committee on the last occasion. The Senator is quite correct. I want to make it clear that the standard of applications this time has been a big improvement on the last time. To be fair, people know now what is expected of them. My officials went out to talk to people and to go through these matters with them. I have to say it is fantastic that we have so many applications. Applications worth €169 million have been received in a very short period since we allocated the funding in February. We have funded projects from €500,000 upwards. We look at each application. We have funded projects up to €10 million. We have funded projects of €3 million, €2 million, €330,000, €969,000 and €845,000. We look at each case. The big thing is the collaboration with State agencies, local authorities, the National Parks and Wildlife Service, Fáilte Ireland and LEADER companies. When they submit their applications, they have a great deal of groundwork done to make sure they are sustainable. That is the whole issue. They have to be sustainable. I will explain what we do not want. The Senator will recall that several years ago, the big fad was the development of community centres. Some were fantastic but then everybody in the audience had to have one. As a result, we had three in places that were within a two or three-mile radius. Now, it is only the ones that were really needed that are surviving while the others are not.

Senator Hopkins asked about the walks scheme first. We have opened the walks scheme again. I got an extra €2 million this year. We have received 59 expressions of interest and there are 979 landowners. I hope to announce the first phase of successful applicants shortly. The scheme is fantastic and is run well by my Department. Again, funding is key. I will not close the walks scheme. I will shortly announce the names of the successful applicants. There was a lot of work involved with assessing whether applications were value for money and, therefore, would receive funding. The good news is that the scheme is open, we had €2 million but we got €2 million so we will have €4 million. The scheme will be left open to receive expressions of interest and we will assess it on a year-to-year basis.

The Senator talked about the rural regeneration scheme and I agree with her. I visited Castlerea and Athleague in County Roscommon where I saw that people appreciated the funding that the Department gave to different projects. I visited the food hub in Castlerea, where I witnessed the enthusiasm of the people involved, as well as by their commitment and development ambitions.

The Senator mentioned the shortage of chefs and how people in the region are getting employment. Recently I visited the Mayo Abbey Training Centre to present certificates to 14 or 15 chefs who participated in a 12 or 13-week programme. The common denominator between the chefs is that every single one of them got a job on completion of the course and that might be lesson for the education sector and everybody else. One needs to train people to meet demand. In this country there is at present a demand for chefs, good quality food and digital hubs. In my own town and county, we set up a digital hub that has a queue of people seeking to avail of. I know of one person who runs her business from the hub and recently she won a contract from a major multinational to pay out its wages. She is doing that work from a town in rural Ireland. Broadband will be a game changer. We need high-speed broadband to be rolled out to every rural community in order that people can work from home. Many multinational companies have said they will be able to create more jobs and people can work from their homes when we have high-speed broadband, which needs to be rolled out.

As for the CLÁR programme, I have been blamed for its success. I was allocated €5 million in the budget and for the last few years due to making savings I allocated a further amount of money. Recently I had to put in place categories. The largest category is the support for schools but there is also community safety, play areas and community welfare. I also set up a number of other schemes, such as support for first responders in terms of ambulances and established sensory gardens. I want to fund sections of society that will not secure funding from elsewhere. I want to give them an opportunity where there is demand and a need. Last year, due to extra funding, I funded more projects. This year I did not have the same amount of funding because, despite what was said by some Deputies in certain political parties, 100% of the budget for my capital programme was spent last year. While 99% of the funding for our current programme has been spent, we made savings on services that we were using with another Department. Originally we thought we would have to pay funding for services but then we did not have to, so we saved €1.4 million and we saved money due to a reduced need for staff. Every single penny of the capital programme was spent and 99% of the current programme has been spent so it is a great success.

I have spoken about the tidy towns competition and Senator Hopkins is quite correct. I have witnessed what the competition does for communities and for this country. We do not thank or give the deserved recognition to the organisers and volunteers for the fantastic work that they do.

The Senator spoke about the Western Development Commission. To be fair to the Minister of State, Deputy Canney, he was not here. He is present now so he might add to what I say. The commission has a new CEO who is a very good person. He is doing very well and is going in new directions. We have a new board and more staff have been employed. A new five-year strategy development plan for 2019 to 2024 has been put in place called “Work Smarter, Live Better”. Perhaps my Minister of State will comment and I thank him for coming. As I said earlier, he was delayed because he had to respond to questions in the Dáil.

Minister of State at the Department of Rural and Community Development (Deputy Seán Canney): I apologise for not being present. I could not bilocate this morning and I had to be in the Dáil to answer questions.

Chairman: The Minister of State is welcome.

Deputy Seán Canney: I thank the Chairman. The Western Development Commission is working very closely with the Department on the Atlantic economic corridor task force.

We have given them increased funding there so they will be able to play a bigger role in co-ordinating all of the activities of the Atlantic economic corridor task force. They are working very well with us. They are creating this movement and brand that we need for the Atlantic economic corridor, which serves the ten counties from Donegal down to Kerry. The initiative is very important. They are entwined in all of the activities within the Atlantic economic corridor, are always present and provide a lot of research. Any funding we give them comes back to us multifold.

The Western Development Commission offers a lot of advice to businesses in the west of Ireland, particularly on Brexit. Many companies can get advice from the commission, which is well equipped to help them out. A local connection is very important as well.

Chairman: We will finish programme A after comments from Deputies Smyth and Fitzmaurice. I remind members that we must finish by 1.15 p.m. at the latest.

Deputy Niamh Smyth: That is loads of time.

Chairman: I urge members to be conscious of the time constraint. I want to conclude this meeting today and remind members that we must discuss a couple more programmes.

Senator Paudie Coffey took the Chair.

Deputy Niamh Smyth: I thank the Minister and Minister of State's comments. The time of this meeting clashed with other meetings and, unfortunately, I could not be here to listen to the Minister's presentation.

The Department of Rural and Community Development is of great interest to me as I represent the very rural constituency of Cavan-Monaghan, which also includes part of County Meath. I compliment the Minister on the work done by his Department. The funding provided is hugely important for rural constituencies in the form of CLÁR, LIS, LEADER, digital hubs and the town and village renewal scheme. All of the schemes are very worthy and have borne fruit in towns and villages in my constituency.

I have spoken at length with the Minister about CLÁR funding. One can see from the applications submitted to the Department that the vast amount of them were from schools. Presumably, the schools cannot get funding for traffic calming measures, playgrounds and exercise facilities in any other way. People in County Cavan are delighted to see that Drumkilly national school, Milltown national school, the alleyways in the Drumbannon estate, Bailieborough, Billis national school, Darley national school and Mullahoran national school were successful under measure 1 and measure 2 applications by Cavan County Council. If one reads the project descriptions in the application form,s one will discover that the reasons are exactly what I mentioned in respect of schools finding it difficult to get funding for traffic calming measures, car-parks, footpaths, soft play areas and all-weather pitches. Therefore, CLÁR funding is hugely important to small communities and schools that have no other way to access funding.

As the Minister said himself, the Department is a victim of its own success in the sense that there has been a deluge of applications. Today, I wish to refer to Scoil Bhríde, Killeshandra, St. Mary's boys national school, Belturbet, Shannon Gaels GAA club, Bruskey national school, Ballynarry national school, Trivia House, Swanlinbar, St. Felim's national school, Ballinagh, St. Felim's national school or the Vale school, Bailieborough, and Kingscourt community centre. I appreciate that the Minister cannot fund them all but these are very worthy cases and the funding will be spent on groundworks, drainage, fencing, extensions to existing playgrounds,

multipurpose game areas and the resurfacing of all-weather pitches. They are the disappointed applicants. In the Minister's perusal of the applications, do they need to be strengthened in any way or has it simply become so competitive that he cannot do it all? How can we, on an all-party basis, help to ensure there will be funds in place in order that all such worthy applications will be successful? The Minister might comment on whether it would be worth their while reapplying to him.

It is wonderful to see the local improvement scheme, LIS, up and running again. As the Minister will be aware, the scheme was closed for the receipt of applications for a period of ten years during which time many local authorities did right by people by continuing to accept their applications. For example, a man in his autumn years, Mr. Seamus Clarke, in Killinkere, County Cavan applied for the scheme almost ten years ago around the time I started in politics in 2009.

Acting Chairman (Senator Paudie Coffey): I remind the Deputy not to mention persons by name.

Deputy Niamh Smyth: I beg your pardon. Such persons throughout the country are deeply frustrated. Cavan County Council can only deliver on a small number of schemes. On an annual basis we are in single digits through no fault of the local authority. I appreciate that it receives a certain amount, but we are trying to fill a ten-year gap when the scheme was not open for the receipt of applications. However, many local authorities were good enough to continue to accept application forms in the belief and understanding that some day the scheme would be reopened for the receipt of applications. It is of huge importance to communities, in particular, for farmers across counties Cavan, Monaghan and Meath, that funding for the scheme be increased. Does the Minister see himself being in a position to deliver more schemes because it is our job as the local Deputies to ensure the Government provides as much funding as possible and I suppose adopts a positive bias towards counties and constituencies, the economies of which are dependent on the agriculture sector to keep young people working on farms? That is what the LIS does. It is the scheme that is of most importance to my constituency.

The Minister mentioned broadband provision. It is something about which he is passionate. There is a successful digital hub in Cavan town. The reason it is so successful is that a broadband connection is not available. The further one goes from Cavan town in my neck of the woods towards Canningstown, Knockbride and Killinkere and on into west Cavan to places such as Bawnboy and Swanlinbar broadband is not available. The digital hubs have been filling that gap by allowing people a space in which to work, network with others who are running small businesses and seek business further afield outside their own county by having access to the worldwide web. Will the Minister comment on the digital hubs and broadband provision, indicating where he sees us going because constituencies such as mine are paralysed without a broadband service. I meet young people in my constituency offices for whom the availability of broadband will determine whether they will live in a rural part of the county or considering exiting. We have as a result seen an exodus of young people from counties such as Cavan, Monaghan and Meath. Broadband provision is a huge issue for them. If they cannot do their work and their children cannot access the Internet to carry out research in doing their homework and studying for college, they cannot consider living in a rural part of County Cavan or County Monaghan. Will the Minister also comment on this issue?

The Rural Regeneration and Development Fund is doing tremendous work. In Castleblaney we will have someone - the Acting Chairman has someone from his area coming too - to talk about the success of the feasibility studies in the context of the regeneration of the main streets.

In deciding how we and the Department can deliver more and something better, we will be glued to the findings, analysis and feedback.

Acting Chairman (Senator Paudie Coffey): I call Deputy Fitzmaurice. The Minister can then respond.

Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice: I thank the Minister and the Minister of State for coming.

Since the local improvement scheme, LIS, was resumed in 2016, a lot of good work has been done in different places. The guy who has been waiting for ten years would probably need to submit a new application. Last year the Minister allocated two tranches of funds, one early and one later in the year. Is there a possibility that the same will happen this year? The LIS has solved many problems where people live on roads not within the remit of the local authority, which is good.

Under the Rural Regeneration and Development Fund and the town and village renewal scheme, great success has been achieved in places throughout the country. Every one of us has probably been involved with Tidy Towns. Last year the Minister announced that some Tidy Towns committees would receive €1,000 and others, €2,000. Will such funding be provided again this year? Perhaps the money was to be used for a celebration after so many years work.

The following is directed at the Minister of State, Deputy Canney. In the programme for Government reference is made to the Atlantic economic corridor. The Minister of State has spoken about it and I am aware that he is involved in its development. Has an application for TEN-T funding yet been made by the Department? The Department of Transport, Tourism and Sport was making it, but the Minister of State was liaising with it on the inclusion of the Atlantic economic corridor.

On the LEADER programme, there were problems early on. Will the Minister, please, provide an overview of the programme? Have the problems been teased out and how is the programme progressing in the expenditure of funds?

Deputy Joe Carey took the Chair.

Chairman: We have finished our discussion of that programme.

Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice: The Minister can comment on it quickly, if he wants do so.

Under the CLÁR programme, there was a second tranche of funding last year. In County Galway, for example, there was funding made available for 12 safety measures last year. There was funding for six such measures this year. Is there any hope extra funding can be made available given this year? What the CLÁR programme does is great in providing for safety measures - the case of the school in Carrick in Ballinlough was mentioned - to ensure the safety of both motorists and children. In that regard, I wonder if there will be a second round of funding towards the end of the year.

Deputy Michael Ring: I thank Deputy Niamh Smyth for her comments on the Department and acknowledging that the funding provided is helpful to rural communities.

The CLÁR programme was the big issue raised by Deputy Fitzmaurice. As I stated, we received 490 applications last year but were only able to fund 179. I suppose the programme is a victim of its own success. Last year there was a second round of funding because of savings made in the Department. I am looking to see whether there will be savings made this year. As

I stated, I have looked at different measures under the programme such as the provision of first responders and playgrounds. I have tried to strike a balance to provide a certain amount for each project. This year there was a big demand from schools.

What I am finding with a lot of Departments is that everything is being thrown on my Department. I would like to see greater collaboration with other Departments. For example, I would like to see the Department of Education and Skills providing some funding to support projects. I am actually funding the undertaking of works outside schools. I do not regret this one little bit because in some areas there have been very serious accidents in which children have been badly injured. There have also been pile-ups when parents have been dropping their children to school. We have done a lot of work inside and outside schools which includes the provision of parking spaces. We have undertaken some fantastic projects for schools under the safety scheme. It is a scheme under which next year I will be looking at changing the profile of funding. I might be able to provide more funding for schools. I would welcome the Department of Education and Skills providing a little more in that regard.

Deputy Niamh Smyth talked about the local improvement scheme, LIS. If Deputy Fitzmaurice does not mind, I will answer both Deputies at the same time. Under the LIS, I provided funding early this year. I provided it in February. Senator Conway-Walsh also raised this question. I gave them €10 million. The spend has been €5.6 million to date. How can I give them any more money when they will not spend the money they have? It makes my job very difficult. The Deputies are both correct that there is such a demand for the LIS. I also referred to this when replying to the Senator earlier. The local authorities are charging the Department 13% in some cases for carrying out work but it varies around the country. Instead of them charging me and my Department for doing LIS roads, the time has come to have a partnership. I could do something different with the LIS. I would like the Department of Transport, Tourism and Sport and the local authorities to put a bit of money into the scheme. We have a major national problem with the LIS because more and more roads needing to be done. I would like to have more roads done.

Since I came into office I have put €48 million in during a short period. It is a substantial amount for this small Department and I would like a bit of support now from the local authorities. I could do what a previous Government and a previous Minister did - and there was nothing wrong with what he did - which was to make the local authority top it up in CLÁR areas. If I do that, however, I would not be able to give funding to areas that do not have CLÁR. My Department needs to have discussions with the local authorities. They also have ways and means of getting revenue in. It is one thing for me to give funding such as €10 million but then 13% of that across the board is being paid out for local authority staffing when the staff is there. It does not make sense when we have a need for the LIS. I am just putting that marker down. I want local authorities to match the funding I give. If they are doing 30 roads in a county, they could then do 60. I am making that call so that my officials and the CCMA will sit down and see if they can come up with a scheme where the local authorities would put some money in along with the Department of Transport, Tourism and Sport. I have asked the Chairman previously about the Department of Transport, Tourism and Sport in this regard. That is the Department with responsibility for roads. If I did not bring this scheme in, there would be no scheme. I brought the scheme in. I had to go to the Government looking for funding. There was no LIS for a good many years.

Chairman: We certainly support the Minister on that. What the Minister said makes absolute and entire sense.

Deputy Niamh Smyth: I agree. Before the Minister established his Department, the Department of Transport, Tourism and Sport that gave funding for local improvement schemes, which was proper order. Since the Department of Transport, Tourism and Sport is not contributing to it now, I hear the point the Minister is making that local authorities should contribute, but Cavan County Council, for example, is down 50% on its annual revenue funding for roads. It is my understanding that local authorities have nothing to give in that regard. I take the Minister's point about the Department of Transport, Tourism and Sport because it is about roads. He is correct that this is an area to which the Department should contribute.

The Minister will be aware from the list of applications I have outlined that the vast majority of applicants are schools. They cannot get funds anywhere else. I believe that the Department of Education and Skills should also intervene and support what the Minister is doing.

With regard to LEADER, and Breffni Integrated funding, there was some criticism in respect of getting funds out. I attended Aughalooa Bruskey community centre recently. They had a greenfield site and now, in the heart of the country, they have a fabulous brand new community centre with hundreds of people attending, be it for bingo on a Sunday night or for community events. They held their opening recently. This is down to Breffni Integrated and LEADER funding from the Minister's Department. What people are achieving by pulling communities together in the middle of nowhere is phenomenal.

The Shercock community first responders received money and CLÁR funding from the Minister's Department and I supported them and the Minister in that. They are saving lives. I believe they received some €14,000 or €15,000, which has made such a difference. They now have 14 volunteers on call 24-7 to respond to people who are in almost fatal situations. The group is saving lives and the funding has made a huge difference. I pass on my compliments regarding that programme. It is to be continued as it is very important.

Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice: Will the committee note the Minister's suggestion that we bring in the Departments of Education and Skills and Transport, Tourism and Sport to give a hand with some of that funding? The committee should put it together here and support what the Minister has said.

I worry somewhat about councils contributing a top-up because some of them have a woe-ful amount to spend at the moment. The Minister might dispute that but some of them are a bit tight. Where schools are concerned, it is generally the field beside the school and outside where the bit of work is done. The Department of Transport, Tourism and Sport has a fairly big budget and it should be able to share a bit of it.

Chairman: On foot of this discussion, and time is of the essence, I would like to have seen another allocation for LIS this year. The Minister has outlined why this is not possible, with only €5.6 million spent out of a €10 million allocation.

Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice: Would it be fair to say that other counties nearly have it spent? Galway County Council is going well at spending its allocation.

Chairman: We have asked for that.

Deputy Michael Ring: What I have said to the Chairman, and he will give the members a report on it, is that an up-to-date list of the funding will be sent on to him.

Chairman: Will the Minister reach out to the Department of Transport, Tourism and Sport?

He also has links to the CCMA. They have role in this as well. If the Minister could bring all of those parties to the table, including his own Department, the committee would like to have an input into that. We acknowledge the value of the LIS and we give recognition to the Minister for reinstating the scheme. We would like it to kick on with more roads being done. Currently, for whatever reason, some local authorities are not pulling their weight. If we can play a role in trying to make it happen, we will. We will reach out to the Department of Transport, Tourism and Sport, the local authorities and the Minister's Department to try to get a conclusion to it. Is that something that could be picked up?

Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice: Did the Minister say there was a 13% administration cost from councils?

Deputy Michael Ring: Yes.

Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice: Would his Department consider a pilot scheme where community groups would make an application as well as councils make theirs? Let it be done via two avenues. The Department could get a subcontractor in to do a road, which may work out cheaper. Would this be possible?

Deputy Michael Ring: Deputy Smyth also raised this issue. I could do with a bit of support with LIS on the basis of the demand for it. The Deputies said that councils do not have a lot of money but they have a responsibility. They will have their estimates processed in the next few weeks. I was a Minister of State in the Department of Transport, Tourism and Sport and when councils were spending money on roads, they took in certain revenue from the State. Councillors also have a responsibility. It is fine for them to throw over the blame to this Department and say they want more money, but they have a budget process. I have not seen any council yet put funding into LIS in its budget process. I call on all of the councils in the State to put a bit of funding into the LIS. I have put my share of it in. Now let them provide a bit of funding for next year for the LIS. They have discretionary funding. They are able to find that funding for many events around the country, and rightly so, but as elected representatives, the council members have a responsibility as well. I put it to the councillors now that they should put some funding into the LIS. My Department will have €10 million available again from January 2020. If every local authority in the State put a small bit of funding in, we would all help the people that need it.

Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice: There is a worry about that. Let us consider, for example, a housing estate that has not been taken over by the council. Deputy Canney might remember that he was not allowed to put the money into works. No more than a road that is not a council road, there could be an obstacle there that may need to be checked out.

Deputy Michael Ring: The LIS is a statutory scheme with regulations on how it works. It would take legislation for me to be able to change the rules of the scheme. The rules are there and the scheme is working around the State. We have had a few problems, but it is fine; these things happen. The LIS is a good scheme. The committee could make a suggestion. I have asked the LEADER companies, Údarás na Gaeltachta and other State organisations if they would consider making applications to take that scheme on. I do not mind who takes it on. We are providing the funding. Once we get value for money, we are happy. My inspectors go out on a regular basis to check the LIS roads around the country to make sure they are compliant with the rules and regulations that are there.

Digital hubs and food hubs are very important. The RDRF and the town and village renewal

scheme are creating jobs all over the country. There have been some great successes in Cavan and Monaghan. There have been some fantastic applications for the RDRF. As I said earlier, €169 million worth of applications have been received. We will not have money for all the projects. It will be very competitive this time. An evaluation committee will let them through and after that, we will see what funding we have to deliver as many projects as possible.

The Senator knows my views on broadband. I know the Minister of State, Deputy Canney, will add to this. My view is that it is the most important piece of infrastructure. It is not that many years ago - some members are too young to remember - when the by-election was held in 1975. At that time, the lack of lighting in certain places was a big issue in north Mayo. At that time, officials in Dublin were talking about whether or not they would give lighting to rural Ireland - whether it would be economic to do so. Broadband is the same. It is a critical piece of infrastructure that we are going to need and want and that we should have regardless of whether it involves a child in Belmullet, Blacksod or Blackrock. Children in all these locations deserve equality and should have the same facility. A child in any of these areas that do not have broadband who is doing his or her leaving certificate should have the same facility that is available in other areas so that he or she does not have to go into towns to obtain information from the Internet.

Deputy Seán Canney: Deputy Fitzmaurice asked about TEN-T. The Atlantic economic corridor task force met with officials from the Department of Transport, Tourism and Sport. The Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport and I sat down and discussed TEN-T and the Atlantic area. Following on from that, we had a presentation from the Department of Transport, Tourism and Sport at a task force meeting. Following on from that, a letter was crafted in consultation with our Department and sent to the Commissioner asking him to take on a review of the TEN-T process. The letter cited the reasons for it, including the fact that the Atlantic economic corridor region needs to be included in TEN-T. There will be an early review of the TEN-T process. It has been brought forward by two years so it is with the Commission. The process has begun. I want to put on record that the letter from the Department of Transport, Tourism and Sport was fully supportive of the reconfiguration of the maps to make sure the west of Ireland and all the infrastructural projects would be included in that. I compliment the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport and his officials on their co-operation in getting that done. It was a long time coming. It took time to get there but there is a better understanding because of the collaboration on that issue between the Atlantic economic corridor task force and the Department of Transport, Tourism and Sport.

I concur wholeheartedly with the argument that broadband is essential. In 2019, rural broadband and regional economic development received an allocation of €2.4 million. This provided funding of €42,000 to each local authority to support broadband officers, which is a total figure of €1.3 million. The role of broadband officers is to facilitate the telecommunications industry to roll out infrastructure to make sure we remove barriers and black spots for mobile phone and broadband coverage. Some very exciting things have been done in Mayo where the broadband officer has created an app that has mapped all the existing duct work or pipes in the ground so that if any telecommunications company wants to provide a service to any town or village, it knows what is in the ground and where to find it. That app will be rolled out to every local authority where the broadband officers will take that on board. TII has retrofitted about €12 million worth of duct work into the motorways to make sure we are prepared for anything that might happen in the future. We are doing great work there. The broadband officers are also a very good information point for issues such as broadband being beside a house and it not being possible to get access to it. The broadband officers will find out what is available through

the telecommunications companies and if it is not available, how long someone must wait for the intervention. A person will get a factual answer rather than a fuzzy one and will be told about the companies that have availability within that area. I reiterate what the Minister said about broadband and the 1.1 million people in this country - 25% of our population - who do not have access to high-speed broadband. The national broadband plan is essential. It is not a discussion; it is something we will be doing. The final due diligence is being done. The maps closed on 30 September for any private company that wanted to say that it could provide additional broadband. That map has been sweated and the results of that will be sent to the European Commission, which must approve the final sign off of the contract. We are working towards getting that done as quickly as possible. Given the level of investment, it is important that we do it right and make sure we have all our i's dotted and t's crossed to make sure we protect public money and customers so that they will have high-speed broadband for the next 35 years without any slowdown or diminution of the service in ten, 15 or 20 years time. That is the important part.

Deputy Michael Ring: I have allocated €1.4 million to Tidy Towns this year. As I said earlier, it is the first time that any Government has given Tidy Towns recognition. We would like to give it more money but we do not have it. It is a recognition of the fantastic work done by Tidy Towns. It goes down well as people all over the country appreciate it. The funding will help Tidy Towns with projects so it does not need to be out fund raising for them. It is just a recognition of the work it does do.

A point was raised about LEADER. To date, LEADER has ramped up. In fact, it is causing me a problem because we had €30 million in the budget for this year and to date, we have paid out €33.3 million and expect to go over €40 million this year so I will have to re-profile some of the money within the Department to meet the demand. I will have €5 million in the next few weeks and will announce this extra funding for the LEADER companies. I will reward the top ten companies and at the end of the year, look at the ones that are not doing so well and re-profile that money as well.

Chairman: To finish on this programme, this committee will draft our thoughts on the LIS and forward them to the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport for his observations. We would appreciate it if the Minister for Rural and Community Development could reach out to the County and City Management Association. It would be more appropriate if the Minister could do that. We will link back in as a result of that.

This concludes that programme so we will move on to programme C, the Charities Regulator.

Senator Rose Conway-Walsh: I was to get in on the previous programme. I had a few short questions about LEADER. The Minister has almost answered one of them but I still have a couple of technical questions.

Chairman: The Senator did not indicate.

Senator Rose Conway-Walsh: Sorry, I thought the Chairman had seen me.

Chairman: I did not see her. Could the Senator be brief because we only have a few minutes left?

Senator Rose Conway-Walsh: Did the Minister say that €5 million would be re-allocated? I think that is the right thing to do with regard to the ten best-performing companies.

Deputy Michael Ring: There will be an extra €5 million.

Senator Rose Conway-Walsh: Is that being sourced out of the rural economic development funding that was not spent?

Deputy Michael Ring: That is correct.

Senator Rose Conway-Walsh: So it has just moved from rural economic development funding.

Deputy Michael Ring: Yes.

Senator Rose Conway-Walsh: It is €5 million and the Minister says it will be done in the next couple of weeks.

Deputy Michael Ring: I hope to do that in the next couple of weeks.

Senator Rose Conway-Walsh: That is good. Heading into the last year of the allocations in the last programme, is there any mechanism in the IT system to handle or manage commitments because the local action groups need to know about them and what will happen to them? Is there any mechanism in the IT system so that it becomes available to them for other commitments they have within their programme?

The contracts for the staff within the local action groups or the local action groups themselves end in 2020. What arrangements has the Minister made for 2021? What arrangements has the Department made? Does the Minister know what shape the future programme will take? Under other programmes, funding is needed to draw up a plan for the next programme. Will it be front-loaded again for the next programme so that these companies can get prepared?

There is a reason I am asking all of this. Obviously, we do not want to lose the staff in the LEADER programmes. They need some degree of certainty on how the Department will operate the transition from one programme to the next.

I have a similar question on rural regeneration.

Chairman: We will leave it at that then, Senator.

Senator Rose Conway-Walsh: The Minister said he would increase the rural regeneration commitment from €2 million to €4 million over the lifetime of the Government. That has been done. However, submissions were asked for last year, but I understand the funding has not yet been allocated.

Deputy Michael Ring: What is that?

Senator Rose Conway-Walsh: This is under the rural regeneration and development fund. It is a different programme but under the same area. Does the Minister know what I am talking about?

Chairman: Could you clarify which one you are talking about, Senator?

Senator Rose Conway-Walsh: The rural regeneration and development fund.

Chairman: Is that the fund?

Senator Rose Conway-Walsh: The applications were asked for last year.

Deputy Michael Ring: I know what the Senator is talking about. The LEADER programme is a joint venture between ourselves and the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine. Some of the funding and projects have been allocated in different counties. I will get my officials to come back to the Senator on the projects around the country.

Senator Rose Conway-Walsh: I would appreciate it if the Minister could do that. Obviously, I am interested in Mayo.

Deputy Michael Ring: I could name them but I do not like to. I could be accused for naming the Mayo ones, so I had better not.

Senator Rose Conway-Walsh: We would not want the Minister to get into trouble.

When are the decisions going to be made around the category 2 projects for the rural regeneration development fund? Will there be a further round of funding for category 1 projects?

Deputy Michael Ring: The rural regeneration scheme is a ten-year programme with €1 billion. We have already had the first round, which was allocated in May this year. The second round has closed for category 1 applications and the approvals will be announced in November. Immediately after that we will announce again for category 2. That is for the funding to get the projects up and ready to make them category 1 projects.

As for the IT mechanisms, I do not know but I will get back to the Senator on that question.

Senator Rose Conway-Walsh: That is important.

Deputy Michael Ring: On the LEADER programme, the European Commission has proposed a 5% reduction in the CAP. The CAP has now been carried over for another year. The Government does not want that to happen. We will be negotiating with Europe but that will be some time next year.

The LEADER projects will be allocated up to 2020. There will be a three-year time gap for the spend on that. I have already raised this issue. I would like a continuation of the LEADER programme. I do not want to see the vacuum that was created the last time but it is not looking good at the moment with the CAP negotiations. I have asked my officials about it. To be fair, they have been talking to Europe. We are trying to get continuation of the programme. The gap was what created many of the problems with the LEADER programme and I do not want to see the gap materialise again. I want to see the continuation of the programme.

Senator Rose Conway-Walsh: Will the contracts be extended?

Deputy Michael Ring: I do not want to get into that because we have to negotiate with Europe first on the continuation of the scheme.

Senator Rose Conway-Walsh: Will this programme and the allocations made run beyond 2020?

Deputy Michael Ring: This relates to the continuation of the scheme. The allocation will be made to 2020. This scheme will continue to 2023. The existing contracts are in place and will be up to 2023. That gives us a time span between now and then. I hope that the CAP negotiations work out well. I do not want to see the LEADER programme cut in any way. That is why I will be fighting to ensure that happens. My officials are already talking to their counterparts in Europe to try to get a continuation of the scheme. The scheme operates up to 2023.

It is up to us between now and then to get a new round.

Senator Rose Conway-Walsh: The contracts will go on. There will be an extension in the contracts. The current contracts expire in 2020. Is that not correct?

Deputy Michael Ring: My understanding - I am open to correction - is that they run to 2023.

Senator Rose Conway-Walsh: Can someone clarify that?

Deputy Michael Ring: That is my understanding.

Senator Rose Conway-Walsh: My understanding is that the contracts are until 2020.

Deputy Michael Ring: To be fair, we will get back to the Senator on that. My understanding is that the date is 2023 but I may be wrong. What will happen in 2020 is that the spend will be made. It will take three years to get the spend dealt with. I think the contracts have to be in place up to 2023, but we will confirm that.

Senator Rose Conway-Walsh: I have a few other questions on the other programmes.

Chairman: We will move on to programme C, which relates to the Charities Regulator. We will also deal with the other issues, including appropriations-in-aid. We have already dealt with the Western Development Commission. We will take questions on Irish Water Safety as well. Is anyone offering on that?

Senator Paudie Coffey: Is that Irish Water Safety?

Senator Rose Conway-Walsh: I want to ask another question under programme B.

Chairman: That was the first item we dealt with this morning.

Senator Rose Conway-Walsh: I meant programme A, the other one.

Chairman: What does the question relate to?

Senator Rose Conway-Walsh: It relates to the broadband task force. It is not only broadband. It refers to mobile telephones as well. The Minister will know that there are many areas in Mayo where there is no mobile telephone coverage. Can the Department play any role in that? I am not simply talking about remote rural areas. I am talking about within the Castlebar circle too. There are estates where people have to go out and sit in cars or walk up the road to make a call. It matters besides the inconvenience and the health and safety issues for individuals. It is relevant for the Atlantic economic corridor and attracting investment and so on. If a chief executive of a company is going from A to B and he or she cannot connect on a mobile telephone, it acts as a deterrent from operating within that area. Has the Minister thought about mobile telephone coverage within any of the schemes?

Deputy Michael Ring: I will let Minister of State, Deputy Canney, respond to that. Some positive things are happening.

My Department is supporting broadband officers and area of natural constraint officers. Senator Conway-Walsh will understand that the Department of Communications, Climate Action and Environment has a vast budget. I do not want those responsible to be using this Department but I am and we are trying to do something for rural Ireland. Where we see there is a

need, we certainly will not be found wanting.

The Minister of State, Deputy Canney, has a hat in both Departments. I will let him tell committee members what is happening. I want to be careful of my Department. Other proposals come into me on a daily basis from other Departments. Of course, they come in with proposals but no money. We cannot be the Department that is picking up the tab for every other Department. We see proposals coming into the Department on a regular basis. They do not come in with money.

I took on the local improvement scheme. I could be using that €10 million for the town and village renewal scheme or CLÁR or for the outdoor recreation infrastructure scheme. Yet, I believe there is a demand for the LIS and that is why I am doing it.

Deputy Seán Canney: The Senator asked about the mobile telephone and broadband task force. I chair the task force. It is made up of representatives from telecommunications firms, local authorities, the Department of Communications, Climate Action and Environment and the Department of Rural and Community Development broadband officers. We have stakeholders, including the Office of Public Works, OPW, ESB Networks and all the utility providers. We also have ComReg.

ComReg has worked on the mobile telephones and black spots. We now have a live map. As a result of the task force work, ComReg has produced an online map that shows where the black spots are. We are encouraging those involved through the broadband officers in each local authority. We are engaging with the telecommunications companies to provide the infrastructure to ensure that we can eliminate these black spots.

Senator Conway-Walsh mentioned Castlebar. We are looking at whether there are public buildings or lands that we can use for the infrastructure rather than have the telecommunications companies acquire land in other ways. I mentioned earlier it will be a shared service and every company will be able to look at the one mast. The ducting that TII is putting in will be leased out to the telecommunications companies and they will all use the same duct, so there will not be a demand for everyone to have a similar duct. That is happening.

Where there is an application for planning permission to put up a mast, there are local objections. Normally, if one holds a public meeting and asks everybody whether they have a mobile phone, they will say they have and they will complain about not having coverage, but, at the same time, they do not want a mast to be located in their area.

There are still some black spots. This is noticeable on the motorway between Tuam and Dublin and I have noticed it around Leixlip, so it is not confined to rural areas. The mobile phone and broadband task force is trying to marry all of the players and stakeholders to make sure they all understand what is going on, and ComReg is also involved. It is important that we try to eliminate the black spots. Where the Senator knows of a particular black spot, I suggest that she contacts the broadband officer, who will be able to tell her what plans there are to try to improve reception, which is part of their function.

Senator Rose Conway-Walsh: I want to raise the issue of the local improvement scheme, LIS. It would be remiss of me not to say there are 500 roads in Mayo waiting to be done under the LIS and that number will increase every year. While I understand the difficulties, one of the causes was the severe cut to the number of outdoor council staff. I would be bitterly disappointed if Mayo was to hand back any of the money for LIS roads when 500 roads are waiting to

be done. At the end of the day, we do not say to people who are living at the end of these roads that they do not need to pay their property tax because they can hardly travel on their road. If counties have not spent their money, is there a way of reallocating it or is the Department bound by statute in a way that means it cannot be reallocated? It is disgraceful that money would go back to the Department.

Deputy Michael Ring: I want to make it clear that no money has gone back. My capital budget was spent last year, 100% of it.

Senator Rose Conway-Walsh: This is for the LIS. The Minister said €10 million was allocated for this year and only €5.6 million has been spent.

Deputy Michael Ring: They have until the end of the year to spend it. We have written to the local authorities to put pressure on them and they have until the end of December to spend that funding. They are all telling us that it will be done by the end of year. Last year, they told me that if they had received the money earlier, they would have it spent, so I gave it in February and gave another allocation in November because I had some savings. At the moment, we expect the €10 million to be spent. I can guarantee the Senator that I will notify this committee if the money is not spent by any local authority. There is no point in me going to Government, fighting for a budget when we have a massive demand for LIS, and the councils get money they are not spending.

One of the problems is that I cannot change the rules and regulations because the LIS is a statutory scheme. There are sometimes different reasons they do not complete the spending of the funding.

The Senator referred to council staff and she may be right about the outdoor staff. I looked at figures in the past week regarding the number of staff that every local authority employs throughout the country. We need more staff and we need more people on the ground. The local authorities have been told that for the past number of years but it seems they feel they need more engineers than outdoor staff. I do not agree. If one thing came up at the local elections, it was in regard to not having enough outdoor staff. It is about not having the services when people are paying their property tax and businesses are paying their rates. The councils have a legal obligation in regard to some services. While they do not deal with water or refuse anymore, they have to provide other services. The one issue that came up on housing estates was that more outdoor staff were needed.

For example, there are areas to be cleaned. Where I live, there are ten houses and every year we put €1,500 or €1,600 aside to do our own grass cutting and so on, and we pay for that ourselves, despite the fact we pay our property tax and other taxes. While it is not for me to lecture the councils, they need to focus on their core job.

Senator Rose Conway-Walsh: Absolutely. That is why they never should have been turned into development companies.

Senator Paudie Coffey: With regard to water safety, coming from a coastal county, like the Chairman, I want to deal with the issue of safety at beaches, rivers and quarries, which have been a problem and, unfortunately, we have had some drownings in quarries in recent years. Lifeguard courses are consistently run by Irish Water Safety. I commend the volunteers who are involved in that movement and acknowledge the good work that is being done.

The Minister has approximately €600,000 provided in the budget and, up to the end of Sep-

tember, 71% of that money was spent. Does he envisage that the remainder will be spent in the coming months?

I acknowledge some of the initiatives that are taking place. At Tramore beach in County Waterford, the Waterford water safety committee implemented an initiative for access for people with disabilities whereby a beach wheelchair was introduced. I acknowledge that we are reaching out to those who have disabilities in regard to water safety, and I know that is supported by IWS. It is a new initiative that should be extended to other beaches around the country.

On a good news story, two young volunteers from Tramore, Tom Breen and Dylan O'Brien, came second in the European surf lifesaving championships. They came up through the ranks of IWS and the courses that were provided. To say they are now European champions shows the value of this work. These are young lads who will be role models for other young people to get involved in IWS. I commend their work, as well as the work of the committees involved.

I ask the Minister to continue funding Irish Water Safety. We are an island and we have lots of water around us, including rivers and quarries.

Deputy Michael Ring: I thank the Senator for his comments. We have changed the name to Water Safety Ireland because it was getting a lot of calls from people who thought it was Irish Water.

Last year, we had a major promotion in regard to water safety which included a major public awareness campaign and work in schools and educational settings. The Department funded the operating costs of Water Safety Ireland to the tune of €1.1 million in 2019.

In 2018, 103 people drowned in Ireland, and I offer my sympathy to the families. This was the lowest number of such deaths in 80 years but it is still far too many. When we compare the number of road deaths with deaths in regard to water, the number of people who die in water in this country is unbelievable. As I said, one is one too many. I compliment Water Safety Ireland for the job it does, for its educational work and for its great advertising campaigns, especially when the weather gets warm. The first thing we hear on a bank holiday weekend is that there have been tragedies. Water Safety Ireland has done a tremendous job, in particular when we see the kind of funding it is getting compared to what is spent on road safety.

We are a coastal country and many people use the water. Last year, 103 people drowned in Ireland, which is a lot of lives and means a lot of families and other people are affected by those deaths. That number is the lowest in 80 years and I compliment Water Safety Ireland.

Chairman: I thank the Minister, the Minister of State and the officials for their attendance. It is clear the Minister is allocating funding where it is most beneficial in the communities and I commend him on that. It is a logical, practical use of the money and this committee will support him in any way possible. I thank members for their co-operation.

The joint committee adjourned at 1.10 p.m. until 10.30 a.m. on Wednesday, 30 October 2019.