

DÁIL ÉIREANN

AN ROGHCHOISTE UM CHUMARSÁID, GNÍOMHÚ AR SON NA HAERÁIDE AGUS COMHSHAOL

SELECT COMMITTEE ON COMMUNICATIONS, CLIMATE ACTION AND ENVI- RONMENT

Dé Máirt, 11 Aibreán 2017

Tuesday, 11 April 2017

The Select Committee met at 4 p.m.

MEMBERS PRESENT:

Deputy Timmy Dooley,	Deputy Michael Lowry,
Deputy Seán Kyne (Minister of State at the Department of Communications, Climate Action and Environment),	Deputy Brian Stanley,
Deputy James Lawless,	Deputy Denis Naughten (Minister for Communications, Climate Action and Environment).

DEPUTY HILDEGARDE NAUGHTEN IN THE CHAIR.

ELECTION OF VICE CHAIRMAN

Election of Vice Chairman

Chairman: As we have a quorum, we will proceed in public session. The first item on the agenda is the election of Vice Chairman of the Select Committee on Communications, Climate Action and Environment. I invite nominations for this position.

Deputy Timmy Dooley: I propose Deputy James Lawless who is the current Vice Chairman of the joint committee.

Chairman: Are there any other nominations? Is it agreed that Deputy James Lawless be elected Vice Chairman? Agreed. Congratulations Deputy Lawless. We will suspend for five minutes to allow the Ministers to come in.

Sitting suspended at 4.06 p.m. and resumed at 4.10 p.m.

Estimates for Public Services 2017

Vote 29 - Communications, Climate Action and Environment (Revised)

Chairman: I remind members and witnesses to turn off their mobile phones or switch them to flight mode as they interfere with the sound system and make it difficult for the parliamentary reporters to report the proceedings of the meeting.

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

This meeting has been convened to consider the Revised Estimate for Public Services: Vote 29 - Communications, Climate Action and Environment which was referred by the Dáil to this committee. The gross allocation for 2017, including a capital carryover is €528.2 million. I welcome the Minister for Communications, Climate Action and Environment, Deputy Denis Naughten, the Minister of State at the Department of Communications, Climate Action and Environment, Deputy Seán Kyne who will be joining us later, and their officials. As Ministers are present, officials should not speak in public session. I thank the Minister for the briefing material provided which has been circulated. I also thank the officials for their open and constructive dialogue with the committee secretariat's financial scrutiny team in developing their briefing document for this meeting.

I inform the Minister that the committee has agreed to proceed programme by programme and will initially focus on specific subheads before broaching any questions relating to the remainder of the programme. I will refer to the briefing document prepared by the financial scrutiny team of the committee secretariat to guide our consideration of the Revised Estimates.

We will start with programme A, communications. I invite the Minister to make a short statement giving a high level overview of the programme and ask him to be as concise as possible.

Minister for Communications, Climate Action and Environment (Deputy Denis

Naughten): I thank the Chairman. Before I commence, I will introduce the officials accompanying me. I am accompanied by Mr. Matt Collins, assistant secretary - Natural Resources and Waste Policy, Mr. Martin Finucane, principal officer and our chief finance officer, Mr. Denis Maher, principal officer, Ms Rebecca Minch, principal officer, and Mr. Jim Whelan, assistant principal.

The focus of programme A, communications, is to support economic growth, jobs, competitiveness and social inclusion through a range of policies and regulation designed to facilitate a more digitally connected society, including investment in next generation broadband networks and the use of digital technologies by citizens and businesses and support for digital entrepreneurship. The Estimates for programme A include initial funding of €15 million for the national broadband plan to bring high speed connectivity to all parts of Ireland, through a combination of commercial investment and State intervention.

Programme A supports Ireland's national digital strategy through measures such as the trading online voucher scheme, school digital champion and the Benefit Four programme. It also looks to underpin growth and innovation in the digital economy through the National Digital Research Centre and the Digital Hub Development Agency. The 2017 Estimate also includes €1.95 million operational funding for the National Cyber Security Centre for the protection of critical infrastructure and Government networks.

Chairman: In respect of Eircode, what percentage of the general public know their Eircode? I see there is a target of 70% for 2017. Is that too ambitious? What plans are in place to achieve that goal of awareness by 70% of the population?

In regard to the national broadband plan, when is the procurement process due to be completed and what metrics will be used to gauge the progress of the roll-out of that national broadband plan?

I call Deputy Dooley to discuss subhead A3, information and communication technology programme.

Deputy Timmy Dooley: That covers both broadband and Eircode. A sum of €15 million has been set aside for the roll out of the national broadband plan this year. Clearly the Minister does not expect to have too many homes connected under the national broadband plan if €15 million is all that is being set aside. I am anxious for the Minister to give us an indication of when he expects that tender to go to the marketplace. I refer to the acceptance by the Minister and his Department that eir is legitimate in its desire to connect the 300,000 homes or premises identified by it back in 2015. Does he believe that will now have an impact in terms of putting the tender to the marketplace? Will he let us know if he has had any legal or other communication from the two remaining bidders and if, in light of any communication or concerns they might have, he expects there will be any delay in the roll out of the tender?

On Eircode, the Minister and I have had various different communications both in committee and in the Dáil about whether it is a viable method any more. Will he update the committee on his opinion? Will he explain how one gets an Eircode? I had an interesting case in my constituency office recently where somebody who has built a home and wants broadband in it was asked for their Eircode. They did not have an Eircode and sought one. They could not get an Eircode and they have been bounced around and may have to wait for one. In order to procure broadband, which they really want - they are not overly exercised about postcodes - they have been told they need to get a postcode and it will assist them in getting broadband. They are not

able to get postcodes. The Minister might throw some light on that matter for me. The Minister for Housing, Planning, Community and Local Government, Deputy Coveney, has indicated that it is not his responsibility. Perhaps the Minister, Deputy Naughten, will accept responsibility for providing such postcodes.

Deputy Denis Naughten: I am responsible for pretty much everything else.

Deputy Timmy Dooley: Perhaps the Minister for Housing, Planning, Community and Local Government has thrown in the towel on the creation of a postcode.

Chairman: I will bring in Deputy Stanley and the Minister can answer the questions at the end.

Deputy Brian Stanley: I welcome the Minister and his officials. I refer to the €15 million of the €20 million allocated in 2017 for the national broadband plan. Does the Minister consider the money to be adequate if the procurement process will be closed this year, as he said it would be? The earlier false dawns were not the fault of the Minister, but the programme for Government stated this was all supposed to happen late last year. The process then carried over into this year because, we were told, it is very complicated from a legal point of view. Will the €15 million be adequate to complete the procurement process this year? I am concerned about the timeline.

In terms of the national broadband plan, I have looked at the map that was given to us last week carefully, in particular the breakdown by county. Eir and the Department may say they are not cherry-picking, but in my county or the one next door, Kildare, in particular south Kildare, I can see on the map the heavy blue sections where it is commercially viable to provide broadband. The light blue sections show where Eir will provide broadband on a commercial basis.

I am very happy that more people will get broadband, because more people need to be connected. I can clearly identify from the maps the pockets of population in terms of towns, villages and large-scale developments. People outside of those areas are outside of the broadband system. Large tracts of land, including some in the Minister's constituency, will not be covered.

I know Eir is exercised about what I have said, which is fair enough. There are three commercial bidders. If the rich pickings in areas that are easy to get to are taken out of the equation, it causes a difficulty in terms of the overall tendering process and the level of interest from other bidders. I ask the Minister to clarify whether contact has been made by the other two bidders regarding the commercial or legal difficulties that may arise on the back of the decision and announcement.

Chairman: Can the Minister answer all of the questions in that slot?

Deputy Denis Naughten: I will deal with postcodes first. I will group the questions together, because that is probably the easiest way to proceed.

Deputy Dooley asked about the percentage of people who know their postcode. I do not have those figures available to me. Anecdotally from my own experience, and I am sure every member of the committee would find the same, people in rural areas in particular are now seeing the value of their postcodes since they have been available on Google maps and satellite systems. They no longer have to give directions. If they give their postcodes they can be inputted into the satellite navigation system.

As Members know, this is now available to the ambulance service in its centres so it can deploy ambulances and ensure that ambulances actually go to the correct properties. As I said to Deputy Dooley, townlands like Milltown are littered on over this country. People are in a panic when they have to give directions to make sure ambulances go to the correct locations. We have heard of numerous examples regarding ambulances, in particular in Kerry where there was some national publicity about ambulances that went to townlands in north Kerry when an emergency was in south Kerry. If people know their postcodes that will address that particular issue.

There has been an increased interest in postcodes. Since postcodes were launched in 2015, there have been €10 million look-ups and just short of 20,000 hits a day on the postcode finder. A direction has been issued by the Department of Public Expenditure and Form to all Government Departments and agencies that when they are revising their data systems they make provision for postcodes. Some have done so already. The register of electors now contains postcodes, which makes it easier to identify individuals and families and access them in order to carry out physical visits.

It is catching on. Far more businesses are using postcodes and the second anniversary will occur mid-year. Members will see at that stage there are more contracts in regard to users of the service. Considering that this is a long game and is not supposed to have a very short impact, nonetheless it has already had a significant impact. It is dealing with issues that are affecting people such as directions, in particular emergency services.

Deputy Dooley asked me how one gets a postcode. First, data is collated by An Post which is sent to GeoDirectory, an agency of An Post which liaises directly with Eircode. I know from representations I have received as Minister that there seems to be a delay in the system. I met the new chief executive of GeoDirectory earlier today and raise the issue with him. I understand later this week there will be a meeting between GeoDirectory and Eircode to see whether they can resolve some of the outstanding issues. The Deputy is correct. There is frustration about the current system.

The national broadband plan has two aspects. One is the commercial aspect. Across Ireland, 1.4 million homes have been connected under the commercial aspect of the national broadband plan. Commercial companies are spending about €1.6 million per day rolling out a network as we speak. It involves fibre to homes and the cabinet, wireless and mobile broadband. The final cohort involves approximately 750,000 premises.

We conducted an analysis of urban areas where commercial operators said they would provide broadband commercially and realised that about 84,500 premises were unlikely to get high-speed broadband to their homes. We included them in the intervention area. That brought the figure to over 800,000 premises across the country. Deputy Dooley is correct. Eir has said for a long time that it would provide high-speed broadband to 300,000 homes in rural areas. We have all had experience of Eir giving commitments in the past.

We have made it crystal clear within my Department that we would amend the map for Eir or any other operator if it was prepared to sign a commitment agreement. We entered into discussions with Eir on that in late October or early November. Those discussions concluded at the end of last month. On foot of that, we signed the contract. That now means that fibre will be brought in 90% of cases to those 300,000 homes at a rate of passing one house every minute of every working day over the next 90 weeks. It is my intention that after the completion of this, the momentum will continue until every single home has access to high-speed broadband. As

I have said before in the House and publicly, I am not getting hung up on dates. I am focused on delivery. I have been able to bring forward the delivery of broadband services with which people can get speeds equivalent to 1,000 Mbps. This is the same as 200 high-definition Netflix channels going at the one time in the one home with no drop-off in service. That is the type of broadband that is only available in places like South Korea. Even parts of New York do not have that type of service.

We are bringing a future-proofed network to rural areas. Deputy Stanley asked me if the company is cherry-picking. The non-commercial aspect of the national broadband plan clearly deals with this in that the State would intervene where it was not commercially viable for an operator to provide high-speed broadband to those premises. Where there is a commercial operator willing to do that, then the State cannot intervene because of EU state aid rules. We have made sure that this company, which is spending €200 million of its money, will be tied into a contract in which we have bound it to targets on a quarterly and annual basis, so it ensures at least 30,000 homes a quarter are passed and that 95% of people who apply for a connection get one within 20 days. That is a significant improvement on the current situation.

If I am Minister in 90 weeks' time, in my term I will have overseen one in four premises getting access to high-speed broadband. That is a significant improvement on the situation we had last year when people were canvassing and we had a deplorable broadband situation. We are not neglecting the people outside the light blue and dark blue areas. I accept the people in the amber areas are on the final stage of the State intervention in the national broadband plan. We are working with mobile phone companies and wireless operators to assist them in the roll-out of their networks with the release of the 3.6 GHz spectrum. We are working with local authorities and the National Roads Authority to release ducting. The mobile and wireless broadband task force is making significant progress in tackling bottlenecks, which is assisting companies on a commercial basis in rolling out networks to the four corners of this country. In tandem with that, we have provided funds to RTE to begin to release the 700 MHz spectrum which will provide 5G coverage. It is my firm view that this should be done on a geographical rather than a population basis. This will mean that the whole country will have access to 5G broadband.

The €15 million will be adequate to complete the procurement process. We are already going through the procurement and tender process. We are working on a 1,000 page, 25-year contract. It has to be future-proofed for those 25 years and it is important that we get it right.

The only communication I have seen from the other two bidders is what has been put out in their statements. The announcement we made this day last week would not come as a surprise to them. I am determined to make sure Eir fulfils its role and the winning bidders fulfil their roles so we can have high-speed broadband provided to every single rural premises as quickly as possible.

Deputy Michael Lowry: I welcome the arrangement and agreement the Minister has come to with Eir. It is positive news and is welcome. I compliment the Minister on his personal interest in moving this matter forward. It is a significant issue in rural Ireland. At last people see something positive is happening and some day soon all will be connected to a proper level of broadband service.

On the Eir agreement, what oversight is in place for that? Who measures the delivery and performance? What strictures are in place in the event of it not reaching its targets and objectives? The Minister mentioned that he would have momentum built at that stage and would be rolling it out further. What are his views on building on that momentum? What mechanisms

will he use to achieve that? What is the timescale involved?

Deputy Brian Stanley: It is good news that homes are being connected and there is a timeline for it. However, I still have concerns about the 300,000 homes to be connected. I will put the connection of the 750,000 homes in the following scenario. The Minister has 75 acres of land and he wants to sell them to me. However, in the meantime, he decides to sell off 30 of the best acres to Deputy Lowry, for example. That means 45 acres of marginal land are left which is less attractive.

If this broadband roll-out is done as a package, it is aggregated out better. Whichever one of the three bidders does it and is dealing with the full 750,000 households, it means the easy-to-reach ones will be done in this 90-week bundle as they are more commercially viable. The aggregate cost of trying to get to the hard-to-reach houses in the more difficult areas of counties Roscommon or Laois would balance out.

I welcome the fact that 300,000 easy-to-reach homes will be connected in the plan. It is happy days for them and many people in my constituency will benefit from it. However, like the 30 good acres which were sold, for the 400,000 homes outside of that, it will be less attractive for the companies to connect them. Will a larger subvention be required per household from the taxpayer because whoever takes on these 400,000 premises has a harder job to do?

Chairman: On gauging the metrics of broadband and Eircode, as they are being rolled out, would it be possible to have targets included in the mid-year review of the Estimates? This would allow the committee to see if the targets and timeframes are being reached.

Deputy Denis Naughten: The targets and the contract are published on the Department's website. It is there for everybody to see exactly what Eir has signed up to. It will be reporting quarterly to us and we will be publishing those figures.

Taking Deputy Stanley's example we are not selling land but putting infrastructure into it. It is more like we are draining the land. If we put a drain through the good 30 acres, the marginal land will benefit more. One has to go through the good land to get to the bad land anyway. We are going to have fibre built out to one third of farms across this country over the next 89 weeks. Whoever is the successful bidder, or bidders, for the final two thirds of farms which need broadband, they can plug into that network that is already constructed. Part of the heavy lifting is done in relation to that.

We honestly do not know about costs and potential costs because we are in the procurement process so we will have to see what comes back on foot of that. Eir is spending €200 million of its own money. To answer Deputy Lowry's question, we have bound it to a contract which has built-in penalties. The detail of the penalties and their financial implications are confidential. That is one of the few things that is not on the contract that is available on the website. We have set binding targets for every single quarter over the next 89 weeks. Eir will return those figures to us and we will spot check those. It is very easy to see where the cable has or has not been laid. I have asked the officials to give me a full list of the areas across the country so as I travel around the country I can look and see for myself if the cable is on the poles or not. We will do individual spot-checks to see if they have passed a particular area. It is also our intention to publish that information as it becomes available to us. For example, in my own parish of Drum, where it has already brought the fibre out, people will tell you very quickly if Eir has said it has delivered broadband to that area and the cable is not there. By putting as much information as possible into the public domain, people will identify it very quickly. We will publish the targets

as they are delivered upon on *broadband.gov.ie*, listing the areas where broadband has been provided. As the fibre is delivered to particular areas, they will turn from light blue to dark blue on the website, so people can see as it is being rolled out across the country.

On building on momentum, in a lot of cases subcontractors do this work. Many of those are working for all the operators. They will be able to continue on with the roll-out of that network. We hope to be in a position to have the vast majority of the country completed by 2020, based on the current rate of roll-out. Deputy Stanley is correct that the further down that road one gets, one will get to more isolated locations. That is why we have never given a definitive commitment that it will be a fibre solution to every single home. We have never given a definitive answer for when the last home will be connected because we just do not know. If we are talking about going up the side of a mountain, it is very difficult to say what the technical challenges are going to be for individual premises in individual locations. The last community in the country to get electricity was 40 or 50 years after the first one because of some of the technology challenges. I do not envisage anything like that happening on this occasion.

It is also important to remember that we already have two cable networks going to the vast majority of premises in Ireland already, the electricity network and the telephone network. In one form or another, all the operators are looking to piggy-back on some or all of that network so that should help to assist the physical roll-out of that network when the contract is ultimately awarded.

Chairman: It would be useful for the committee to have those metrics on the roll-out in the Estimates so that we can see the progress. I know the Minister referred to it.

Deputy Denis Naughten: Every Member of the House got a copy of them last week.

Chairman: Yes but the Estimates could include information with regard to gauging the metrics and on how it is advancing. I welcome the Minister of State, Deputy Seán Kyne, who has joined us. We will move to sub-head A5, information society and e-inclusion. This sub-head comprises 1% of the vote's adjusted growth allocation.

Deputy Denis Naughten: Sub-heading 5 is on the information society and e-inclusion. It covers items such as the trading online voucher scheme which has €3 million allocated. It was disappointingly under-spent last year. I know that some members of this committee have been very active in going out to businesses and encouraging them to trade online and I encourage other members of the committee and Members of the Oireachtas to do likewise. We are providing a grant of up to €2,500, a 50-50 grant, for a business to establish a website and to put in the back office sales aspect needed to take payments online. Up to 30% of that grant aid is also available for online marketing. It gives businesses which are currently offline the opportunity to start trading online. It is for any business of up to ten employees. People can apply through their local enterprise office.

The other aspects of that vote are the national digital strategy including the benefit scheme, there is €1.6 million allocated for that, and the cyber security operational funding for which €1.95 million is allocated and which we expect will be ramped up over coming years as capacity in that area is increased. There is €0.4 million is allocated for the emergency call answering services and we are in the middle of a tender process for that now.

Deputy James Lawless: On sub-head A 5, the Minister mentioned the online trading voucher scheme which has been very successful and I congratulate the Minister and the Depart-

ment on that. I have seen many businesses in my own constituency avail of it and the local enterprise office has been very proactive in pushing it out and encouraging its usage. When my own constituency office highlighted it, it was inundated with local businesses coming in and asking questions about how they could avail of it. It is a success story all round. I also take the Minister's point that there was not the take-up there might have been, as there were allocations that were not drawn down.

According to the local enterprise office which was to the forefront of pushing out the scheme, there was some feedback from the businesses that the scheme was all or nothing. They could draw down the voucher of up to €2,500 but some of them may have just wanted to take €1,000 to do a bit of dabbling, put up a website and get it going and then maybe six months later they could put in a back office, with a sales side or whatever it was, but they could not draw down in tranches. Apparently, this was a problem for some businesses especially if they were putting their first toe into the water of the Internet, that they drew down a small amount, thinking they could complete the job later in the year but were then told that they had put in their application. They would nearly have been better off putting in for the full €2,500 but then they may not have had immediate use for that. I am sure they could have found it but it would not have been the optimum use. Maybe the Minister and the Department could look at whether in the future the scheme could be allocated in installments or drawn down as it is used. The local enterprise office has said that while it is a very useful and popular scheme that has been a practical issue.

Deputy Denis Naughten: We are willing to look at any suggestions that helps to maximise the use of this scheme. Last year's target was to issue 3,000 vouchers by the end of 2016. We are at 2,930. Off the top of my head, the average spend on it is roughly €1,400. This has a huge impact. It increases sales by an average of one fifth, it increases employment by one third and two thirds of those businesses are now trading internationally. In my own constituency, in Cormicans, a business selling school books which operated entirely out of two shops, one in Roscommon and one in Athlone, started trading online. Now they have sold Irish school books into the Middle East. There is potential for every business. Money is going into provincial towns from international sources that would never have gone into those towns in the first place. I actively encourage people to avail of it.

The administration involved in breaking it down on a step-by-step basis would be quite complicated, and that is the reason it has not been done to date. We have reviewed the operation of the scheme and will be announcing changes to it to assist people with it, but it has been a phenomenal success. We are trying to deal with some of the anomalies in it. That issue has not come to my attention to date, but we will look at it.

Deputy Brian Stanley: I welcome the fact the online voucher scheme exists. We have sought an increase in the scheme in our pre-budget submission for the last number of years, so I am glad the Government and ourselves agree on that. It is certainly beneficial.

I was surprised by the low take up. Did the Minister say there was a 50% shortfall in the take up?

Deputy Denis Naughten: No, it is a 50% grant.

Deputy Brian Stanley: I know that it is a 50% grant. It is euro for euro.

Deputy Denis Naughten: Yes, 50%.

Deputy Brian Stanley: Can the Minister talk about the take up?

Deputy Denis Naughten: Our target for last year was that by the end of 2016 we have 3,000 vouchers issued, and we were 70 short of that. The actual amount of cash that is drawn down is in and around €1,400. The actual cost of putting a website up and putting back office sales software in place is not coming anywhere near €5,000. It is more like €2,800. We have decided to include marketing in that as well. There is also training involved in it. There is not much point in putting a website and the service and facilities in place if people are not able to update it and utilise it properly. Training is also included in that figure.

Deputy Brian Stanley: Could I suggest that information on the changes be sent out to Oireachtas Members? We have a role in terms of encouraging the local authorities members to get the information out there.

Deputy Denis Naughten: It was to be sent out last year but I will make sure that it is sent out again.

Chairman: We now move on to programme B, broadcasting. I invite the Minister, Deputy Naughten, to give a brief opening statement.

Deputy Denis Naughten: The purpose of programme B is to promote the broadcasting sector by ensuring high quality output by State broadcasting companies and promoting a strong, high quality private broadcasting sector. RTE and TG4 are funded through a mix of commercial revenues obtained largely from advertising, Exchequer grant payments and licence fee revenues. Broadcast licensing fee receipts are estimated to be €222 million in 2017. The broadcasting programme provides €190.7 million in TV licence fee receipts to RTE to enable the company to meet its statutory obligations as a national public service broadcaster. In addition, the programme provides €4.2 million in TV licence fee receipts and €29.5 million in grant payments to TG4 to produce a comprehensive range of programming in the Irish language. Programme B also forms new Irish television and radio programmes through the broadcasting fund, operated by the Broadcasting Authority of Ireland. The fund receives 7% of net television licence fee receipts, which amounts to €14.7 million in 2017.

Chairman: What we are dealing with here is under subhead B3, grant to RTE, grants and aid. The subhead comprises 35% of the Votes adjusted gross allocation. The third metric provided, the allocation relating to independently produced programmes, increased for the period 2015 to 2017 but the expenditure itself remained the same over that period. Can the Minister expand on the reasons the allocation increased but the expenditure remained static? Do any members have any other questions?

Deputy Denis Naughten: The simple answer to that is that there has been a fall in advertising.

Chairman: Thank you.

Deputy Brian Stanley: Perhaps I missed an announcement, but on the licence fee the concern is that one in seven people does not pay and so six out of seven are carrying it. There is huge concern, particularly for low and middle income households that there would be no increase in that fee and that the improvements would come by way of the €40 million that is not being collected. I do not know how accurate the reports are, but there is a company that is already involved in collecting licence fees in England and there certainly have been difficulties with it in terms of the methods it is using to collect money. Issues could arise from that. I would be concerned about a bunch of heavies going around to collect licence fees. We have seen this

in other areas. Up to now it has been An Post. In general, it has been reasonably professional in how it has been carried out but I just wanted to flag that concern. We have discussed other options in this forum and in the Chamber. There are other methods that could be looked at that are used internationally and they should be examined carefully.

I know there is a difficulty with trying to tackle high wages at RTE because some of the people who are on the largest sums of money in RTE are contracting companies. That should be looked at. The idea of somebody getting €250,000 for a couple of hours on a Sunday morning does not wash with the public, particularly in light of the fact that we are asking the public to put in more money and asking for greater compliance. We want people to get value for money for their licence fee. We in Sinn Féin want a strong public broadcasting sector. It is important that we maintain, retain and improve it.

The key points are that we should ensure there is no increase in the licence fee and that we do try to improve compliance without using private contractors. There is also the excessive wages of a small number of people. It is a semi-State company. I know that there is a legal point made about these people being self-employed. That is also being used in the construction industry for a separate set of reasons, but in the case of RTE it appears to be used as a way to ensure that people are paid excessive incomes where they are not direct employees.

Deputy Denis Naughten: On wages and salaries, RTE has reduced its operating cost by 30%, staff cost by 25% and staff numbers by 21%. That is 500 people between 2008 and 2013. Since December 2015 pay restoration has begun at the broadcaster, beginning with the lowest paid workers. Individual contracts are a matter for the company itself and not a matter that I, as Minister for Communication, Climate Action and Environment, can get involved in.

It is not my intention or plan, as I have said here before, to increase the television licence fee. I have made that crystal clear to RTE. There are opportunities there where people are not paying for the service and expect everyone else to pay for it. If we increase the TV licence fee the people who pay for everything and get nothing are the ones who are going to have to pay again for this and the people who are prepared to pay for nothing will get away with it again. We will bring forward legislation in the coming weeks which will be brought before the committee at the heads of Bill stage for its views on it. We hope to be able to allow me, as Minister, to seek a tender for the TV licence inspection regime. It is my intention that local post offices will still sell the TV licence and people will still be able to purchase one in them. An Post currently holds the contract in regard to television licence inspection. Under the existing legislation, I cannot put that out to tender but I am seeking the flexibility to allow me to do so. An Post may bid for the new contract, as might others. I do not know at this stage who might be interested in it. We have issued an expression of interest notice. As I said, I do not have the power or the authority to put that contract to tender. There is a significant scale of evasion - €40 million is a substantial amount of money. As I said earlier, there has been a significant fall-off in advertising. There is now more money being spent on advertising in the digital market than on terrestrial television. This is a growing trend. If we want to have quality programming and news and current affairs on our terrestrial channels, then we will have to pay for it. We need that in a functioning democracy.

Chairman: We will move on now to subhead B5, TG4 grant-in-aid. This subhead comprises 6% of the Vote's adjusted gross allocation. If there are no further matters arising under programme B, I will move on to programme C - Energy. I invite the Minister to give a brief opening statement.

Deputy Denis Naughten: The focus of programme C is the delivery of key elements of the Government's energy policy. The programme provides €9.4 million to cover the operational cost of the Sustainable Energy Authority of Ireland and over €90 million in capital funding for the sustainable energy research programmes. The €72.5 million provided for the better energy grant programmes, operated by the SEAI, include the better energy home scheme to provide grants towards a range of energy efficiency measures to home owners, the better energy warmer home scheme to deliver a range of energy efficiency measures free-of-charge to low income households and the better energy communities programme to encourage community-based partnerships to improve the thermal and electrical efficiency of the building stock and poor energy homes.

The three schemes are anticipated to deliver energy savings of 182 gigawatts per hour in 2017 and will provide around 8,200 low-income homes with energy efficiency measures while continuing to stimulate activity in the retrofit industry, supporting approximately 3,000 jobs. The energy programme also provides for expenditure to fund applied energy research and demonstration programmes and projects.

Chairman: Subhead C4, sustainable energy programmes, comprises 18% of the Vote's adjusted gross allocation. Do members have any questions on this subhead?

Deputy Brian Stanley: On the SEAI funding, there has been a lot of retrofitting of houses built in the past 40 years. A problem has arisen in regard to some of the houses built between the 1950s and 2007. Many of these houses were never insulated and are difficult to insulate now, and many of the people living in them are experiencing fuel poverty. Are there plans to target these houses which are in dire need of insulation? I can point to examples of houses built in 2005 and 2006 which have been insulated and re-insulated while around the corner from them there are houses that were built in the 1930s with no insulation, which are inhabited by vulnerable people such as pensioners and people in receipt of disability benefits. I acknowledge that much good work is being done.

Deputy Denis Naughten: Is Deputy Stanley speaking about older houses with solid walls or cavity walls?

Deputy Brian Stanley: Solid walls.

Deputy Denis Naughten: There should not at this stage be houses with cavity walls that have not been insulated. Most or all of those houses should have been insulated at this stage. If not, we need to know about them. These houses were the easiest to retrofit and that work should now be completed. A number of community organisations have operated a rolling scheme over the past number of years to deal with those homes. As far as I can recall, over 300,000 houses have been completed at this stage.

The Deputy is correct that only limited retrofitting of houses with solid walls is possible. Some of them were done and some were not. Earlier this year, under the better energy and warmer homes schemes, I announced that houses in respect of which it was only possible to insulate the attic would be revisited with a view to their being externally or internally insulated free of charge. This will cost, on average, €20,000 per home, which is a substantial amount of money. Up to now, families whose attics were insulated were ineligible for a second round. Under the new measure, they are no longer deemed ineligible. The remaining houses in respect of which there was no retrofit of attics or otherwise because they had solid walls will also be externally or internally insulated.

The Deputy will be interested to know that we are currently finalising details of a pilot scheme for the approximately one in five homes, particularly in the midlands, whose only source of heating is solid fuel, mainly turf.

Deputy Brian Stanley: There is an area in Laois where the pilot scheme could be run.

Deputy Denis Naughten: There are plenty of areas in Roscommon and east Galway as well. Under the pilot scheme, we will be spending approximately €20,000 on those homes in terms of retrofitting, insulation and the installation of a renewable source of heating.

In regard to the warmer homes scheme, we are also considering the use of a renewable source of heating for houses eligible under that scheme. This may be an attractive scheme to elderly people in particular who are no longer able to carry turf to the range and find it difficult to take out ashes and so on. They can then act as the benchmark for other people in the community to have that work done.

We also need to address the issue of fuel poverty. Fuel poverty is not only a problem for people on low incomes. There are many families paying mortgages, child care costs and so on that have very limited disposable income. We are also considering the introduction of a retrofit scheme for such families under the better energy homes scheme. Under that scheme, families would be eligible for a 50% grant. For families that have cash or have access to capital, that is great. We are working with the SEAI, the NTMA and the European Investment Bank to put a suite of funding models in place for domestic customers. This will allow families to pay for this work incrementally on their electricity or gas bills over an extended timeframe. Some families may be able to raise a loan to part-fund the work and others may be able to come up with the cash necessary, but there are a number of funding models available to them to put the matching 50% funding in place. We are putting aside €5 million for this scheme this year to deal with some of the technical challenges arising, including taking fossil fuels out of those homes. The private capital that is available will be used to significantly ramp up those schemes from this year on.

Deputy James Lawless: I have questions on C5 and C7. Is it possible to take those now?

Chairman: We will move on to any other subhead under programme C. I ask the Deputy to name the subhead as he asks his question.

Deputy James Lawless: Can the Minister provide us with an outline of the C5 spend on energy and research programmes? What research is being done and what is the goal of the programmes? Are they renewable energy programmes? In a similar vein, C7 covers subscriptions to international organisations. Which organisations are they? Members attended a renewable energy conference towards the end of last year. While the Brexit fall-out and international co-operation are very important, things like the interconnector came up at the conference which involves a difficulty since we no longer have a land bridge to mainland Europe in terms of energy interconnection. There were a few suggestions doing the rounds around that. It may be that international organisations come into that space. I am looking for an overview on those two headings to see what we are doing there.

Deputy Denis Naughten: Before I answer, I note in relation to international organisations that I have spoken to a number of members here about my disappointment at COP22 in Marrakesh at the lack of parliamentary representation from Ireland. When the next COP takes place in Bonn later this year, I would like to see representation from the committee in attendance. It

would be very useful for members to have the opportunity to meet with colleagues from all over the world. Having members in attendance would allow us to liaise to cover a great many more of the seminars taking place. Some really interesting work is going on there. At a technical and expert level, we have only a limited team of people. While we had some assistance from a number of NGOs that attended, I was disappointed having spoken to other delegations and found that quite a lot of them included parliamentary representation. As such, I urge the committee to ensure there is a strong representation the next time. Climate issues go right across the board. This is not just a matter of the climate agenda and the environment, but of agriculture and transport also. It may be that members from other committees could also be involved in some of the sessions.

To answer the question, the subscriptions are to the International Energy Agency, to which, in fact, I am giving the keynote address in Paris in June on behalf of Ireland, the Energy Charter Secretariat, the International Renewable Energy Agency and the International Energy Forum. The energy research programmes involve the ESRI, the International Energy Research Centre, and the Energy Policy and Statistical Support Unit. Those three bodies are very much involved in providing data and information to me as Minister and to the Department. We have used that data in our negotiations on the ETS and the non-ETS sides at European level. The other major research areas include renewable energy research development and deployment for which €1.2 million has been allocated and the Department's research and development on energy policy to which €500,000 has been allocated. The large bulk of the money, which is €4.75 million, relates to ocean energy development.

The reason we have invested significant money into ocean energy development is that nine tenths of the area under Ireland's jurisdiction is underwater. We have probably one of the best ocean energy resources in the world. Ourselves, Portugal and Scotland are probably at the leading edge in relation to this. Scotland, in particular, is well ahead of us. As Minister, I signed a co-operation agreement with six other northern European states, both EU member states and non-EEA states, to consider how we can co-operate together and share data and research. We have three test facilities in Ireland for ocean energy, including a lab-scale research facility in Cork, a quarter-scale research facility in Galway Bay and a full-scale facility off the coast of Mayo. We also have the added attraction of a grid connection into the Shannon Estuary at Mon-eypoint and an allocation of funding under the REFIT scheme to take up to 30 GW of ocean energy. I have recently spoken to the NTMA and the European Investment Bank and I note that organisations like that are prepared to fund projects should they come to commercial operation stage off the Irish coast. We are very much open for business in that regard which is why a significant amount of our money is invested in the area.

On the SEAI side, there are a number of other research programmes involving energy and business, an energy efficiency action plan and public sector energy efficiency support. In that regard, I note that one of the initiatives we delivered last year and which has not been highlighted enough was that, working with the Minister, Deputy Paschal Donohoe, we have an agreement that if a State Department, agency or any other body, including a hospital or other unit, saves money in relation to energy, it can hold onto it. For the first time within the public sector, there is an incentive to get into the whole area of energy efficiency. Up to now, that was only really available to the private sector because if a saving was made, for example, in Portlaoise hospital, it was absorbed back into the HSE and, eventually, the Department of Health. Now, the hospital can actually hold onto any money it saves on foot of energy efficiency.

The other funding areas include renewable energy information, sustainable energy zones, of

which there is one in Dundalk, EU obligations, better energy financing, the PAYS scheme, the better energy smart grid, electric vehicles, exemplar projects, technological assistance, SME energy efficiency and industrial engagement.

Chairman: We move to programme D, natural resources, in respect of which I invite the Minister of State, Deputy Seán Kyne, to give a brief opening statement.

Minister of State at the Department of Communications, Climate Action and Environment (Deputy Seán Kyne): The focus of programme D is to manage Ireland's mineral, hydro-carbon and other geological resources in a sustainable and productive manner. The programme provides funding of €3.7 million for mining services, including €1.6 million for remediation works at the historic mining sites at Silvermines and Avoca. The programme also includes an allocation of just over €12 million for Geological Survey of Ireland services, including €8 million for the Tellus mapping and INFOMAR projects.

The Tellus mapping project consists of airborne mounted geophysical measurements and ground geochemical samplings. Data from the project will facilitate the improvement of geological maps, new radon mapping and agricultural mineral maps. Data from the Tellus project will also facilitate better land use planning and research. The INFOMAR project is Ireland's national seabed survey and is managed by the Geological Survey of Ireland in co-operation with the Marine Institute. I acknowledge the role of the Geological Survey of Ireland in providing equipment and up-to-date mapping in respect of the attempt to recover the helicopter, Rescue 116. I commend everyone involved and acknowledge the tragic loss of life for the families. The INFOMAR project also involves updating navigation charts and has been used by the Admiralty in the UK in updating all charts worldwide. It is something with which they are discovering things in close proximity to the surface of water, including rock shards that were heretofore not found. It has huge implications for improving safety for seafarers.

Chairman: I thank the Minister of State. Does he know the actual coverage in square kilometres of the INFOMAR and Tellus projects to date? Does he have that information.

Deputy Seán Kyne: The Tellus project has covered many counties, mainly in the northern half of the country but also County Waterford where there is specific private sector involvement. I think 41% is the overall figure for the level of coverage in 2016. The goal in 2017 is to increase that figure to 50% of the country, mainly the northern half. In 2016 the INFOMAR project covered 4% of the country, or some 4,000 sq. km. The aim is to increase that figure to 9% in 2017.

Chairman: I thank the Minister of State.

Deputy James Lawless: I have a question on geosurveying and topological surveys. It is something I raised when the Minerals Development Bill was before the House a few weeks ago. A notion has come from recent research that rare earth minerals which are very valuable and used in iPhones and other consumer technology manifest in slag heaps in a mine previously in use which was abandoned or discontinued and thought to have exhausted its commercial potential. In recent research at the Irish Centre for Research in Applied Geosciences, iCRAG, which I think is a Science Foundation Ireland centre for geological research it has been discovered that some of these rare earth minerals are present in some of the slag heaps. This presents an opportunity because typically it is the site of a mine which has been abandoned or is disused and which may or may not have been remediated or cleansed and dealt with. Some of the mines may be quite old and may not have been subjected to the full rigours of development. At

the same time, they contain a valuable commodity in the form of these rare earth minerals. I know that I mentioned the Minerals Development Bill, but it was news to me and I think it is a relatively recent discovery. Have there been any forays into that area? Has it been covered in geological surveys, or is it in the Department's work plan for the year ahead to investigate the opportunities that may present?

Deputy Seán Kyne: During the discussion on Second Stage of the Minerals Development Bill I stated I would ask my officials to undertake a study of best international practice. It makes sense to utilise resources to be found in slag heaps or pits. I hope to have more information in advance of Committee Stage. The name of the Department includes the word "Environment" which entails recycling and everything that goes with it. It is something the Department needs to promote.

Chairman: I will open up questions on other subheads included in programme D.

Deputy Michael Lowry: There is a figure mentioned in the Vote for the rehabilitation of the Silvermines area. Is that correct?

Deputy Seán Kyne: Yes.

Deputy Michael Lowry: There is a serious issue there with contamination of both grasslands and waterways. Will the Minister of State give me the details of what is proposed?

Deputy Seán Kyne: There are ongoing issues on different sites within the Silvermines complex. I know that officials from Tipperary County Council and the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine, with assistance from the Environmental Protection Agency, EPA, are investigating unexplained cattle deaths. However, I do not want to cause alarm because they may not be related to the contamination. They could be related to many things such as paint or batteries or whatever else may have been dumped. It is one of the most serious issues that has been raised. There are different sites, including the Gortmore and Magcobar mine sites. There are ongoing plans to undertake a hydroelectric project on the Magcobar site. Remediation work has been carried out at Gortmore at a cost of about €6 million. The facility is over 60 ha in size and a permanent disposal site for tailings. Remediation work by the Department has taken place to a very high standard. Previous remediation work is being monitored. There have been a number of horses grazing on the land since it is privately owned. While concern has been expressed about whether they are causing damage, I have been assured that they are not, but the matter is being constantly monitored by my Department. There are ongoing investigations by the local authority and the Department and monitoring by the EPA of the entire complex to ensure there is full and final remediation. The last remaining element of the project at Gortmore involves the Garryard tailing site. It represents a distinct, separate phase which is not critical to the overall success of the work completed to date. This part of the project is estimated to cost in the region of €10 million.

Deputy Michael Lowry: How much?

Deputy Seán Kyne: In the region of €10 million.

Deputy Michael Lowry: Is that sum included in the Estimate?

Deputy Seán Kyne: It will be expended on a phased basis but certainly not within one year.

Deputy Michael Lowry: What is the timescale involved?

Deputy Seán Kyne: It will depend on the engineering reports that have to be produced on that section. It is the aim of the Department to ensure full remediation of the tailing site over a number of years.

Deputy Michael Lowry: A committee is meeting to assess the situation and conduct analysis and an evaluation. Is there a timeframe for its work? When does the Minister of State expect to receive reports?

Deputy Seán Kyne: The committee that is meeting is engaging with Tipperary County Council, the EPA and the Department. It is discussing the specific issue of unexplained cattle deaths which, not to be alarmist, may or may not be related to the site. There may be other reasons involved. That is the main report for which we are waiting. The EPA is investigating the issue and at this point no specific cause has been identified. No further remediation works are envisaged until funding becomes available for the final phase of the project. A provision of €400,000 was made available in 2016 for land acquisition and contingencies that might have arisen from ongoing environmental monitoring designed to detect changes on the site. While this money was not required in 2016, the same contingency sum has been made available in 2017. Further provisions will be required to cover additional costs that may be required to be met.

Deputy Michael Lowry: I thank the Minister of State.

Chairman: We now move to programme E, inland fisheries, on page 18 of the briefing document. I ask the Minister of State to make a brief opening statement.

Deputy Seán Kyne: Programme E provides for grants and aid for Inland Fisheries Ireland which is responsible for the conservation, management and regulation of Ireland's inland fishery resource. The programme includes an allocation of just under €17.6 million towards the staff costs of Inland Fisheries Ireland, the Loughs Agency which covers the Foyle and Carlingford Lough and the Irish Lights Commission. The Loughs Agency is a North-South body which is co-funded on a 50:50 basis by my Department and the Northern Ireland Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs. The programme also includes a sum of €11.6 million to meet non-pay, current and capital expenditure by the two agencies.

Chairman: I thank the Minister of State. We will start with subhead E3, inland fisheries, on pages 19 and 20 of the briefing document. The subhead comprises 5% of the Vote's adjusted gross allocation.

Deputy James Lawless: Is it possible to get some indication of how Inland Fisheries Ireland is faring, particularly in the conservation of stocks? In recent conversations I have had it was suggested that in much of western Europe stocks were under pressure. What level of conservation has been achieved by Inland Fisheries Ireland? I appreciate that there are wider factors which are outside its remit, but how are we faring in that regard? Are we seeing even limited successes and beginning to claw back? I know that salmon stocks, in particular, as well as stocks of other species, are under severe pressure. I think some new orders ran throughout the year, extending different limitations to fisheries. There is much work ongoing, but I am concerned that it is all in the wrong direction. I appreciate that there are global factors at play, but how are we doing as a nation, particularly the State agencies tasked with this responsibility?

Deputy Seán Kyne: There are two particular stocks, salmon and eel, of particular concern to the Department. Salmon stocks have not performed as expected, anticipated or hoped for

following the ban on drift netting in 2007. It was considered there would be an exponential increase in salmon stocks. While the increase in salmon numbers was very positive in the first year after the ban, they declined suddenly thereafter, much to the disappointment of all involved. The reasons for the decline are multifaceted and we are unable to pinpoint them. The worrying decline in Atlantic salmon numbers may be the result of global warming, a decline in feed resources in the Atlantic or sea lice.

Stock management in rivers is based on the advice of the standing scientific committee which reflects best practice internationally. The committee sets a conservation limit based on fish counters over an average period of five years and then assesses whether the 147 rivers, sections of rivers and estuaries are open or closed for fishing or catch and release. I have asked the Department to initiate a review of the catch and release policy in advance of the 2018 season. Many anglers believe it would be advantageous to have a catch and release policy on all closed rivers. Having more people fishing on these rivers would reduce the level of poaching as anglers would be able to observe poaching and, if one likes, act as guardians of the rivers. When rivers are closed, the only people on them are the poachers. I have asked officials to examine this issue in advance of the 2018 season.

The 2007 Council eel regulation was drafted in response to the endangered status of the European eel. It is probable that any recovery of the Irish eel will take place over a long time-frame because the species is defined as critically endangered. For this reason, eel fishing has effectively been banned. Scientific fishery research is being carried out to glean the best advice on Irish eel stocks. The research was announced in November 2015 and a number of former eel fishermen are involved to further develop national knowledge of the species and its medium to long-term potential for recovery. In the short to medium term the prognosis for the restoration of the eel fishery is not good.

Deputy Brian Stanley: I note an increase of €2 million in the allocation for Inland Fisheries Ireland. A backlog of cases will occur following the change proposed in legislation due to be adopted. The new legislation will result in a large number of legal actions. Is the €2 million increase sufficient to deal with this backlog or does it even cover these cases?

The Minister of State is correct regarding the protection of eels and the EU regulation in this matter. However, a number of former eel fishermen who accepted the approach taken at the time went out of business. They were engaged legitimately in eel fishing which was their livelihood. If a similar decision had been taken in mainstream agriculture, a financial package would have been provided either before the ban or soon afterwards for those who were about to lose their livelihoods. Has progress been made in providing a modest compensation package for former eel fishermen who were put out of business by the ban on eel fishing?

Deputy Seán Kyne: The Inland Fisheries Bill 2017 will be before the House this week. I hope this important legislation will be passed without undue delay in the Dáil to ensure Inland Fisheries Ireland will have proper powers of prosecution. It has not been brought to my attention that costs will arise from a backlog of cases. Inland Fisheries Ireland has not raised any issue in that regard. My officials will engage with the agency to ascertain if there are issues, but I do not believe that is the case. Inland Fisheries Ireland takes routine cases and arising from the cases that were lost, anyone who goes out poaching today, tomorrow or in the coming months will still be liable to prosecution based on the existing law. The new legislation, when enacted, will copperfasten the prosecution rights of Inland Fisheries Ireland.

On the eel fishery, a bid for a hardship scheme is being costed and considered. Given the

competing demands for money, the issue is being examined in advance of the 2018 Estimates. The scheme is with the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform.

Chairman: As there are no further questions on subheads in programme E, we will proceed to discuss programme F, environment and waste management. I invite the Minister to make a brief opening statement.

Deputy Denis Naughten: The purpose of programme F is to promote the protection of the natural environment, the health and well-being of citizens and the transition to a resource efficient sector of the economy in support of ecologically sustainable development, growth and job creation. The environment and waste management programme includes an allocation of €17.7 million towards staffing costs and €13.8 million towards the non-pay, current and capital costs of the Environmental Protection Agency. The programme includes €11 million in grant aid funding for the remediation of landfill sites, the disposal of historical tyre stockpiles and the repatriation of North-South waste. Also included in the programme is €1.75 million to fund a range of Irish academic and research institutions involved in economic modelling and analysis which supports the development of the national mitigation plan and the national adaptation framework, as specified in the Climate Action and Low Carbon Development Act 2015.

Chairman: We will start with subhead F6, landfill remediation, which comprises 2% of the Vote's adjusted gross allocation.

Deputy James Lawless: The Minister must forgive me for being parochial. For some time significant issues have arisen in the remediation of the Kerdiffstown landfill site near Sallins in my constituency. An ambitious plan is in place with Kildare County Council aimed at remediating the site and developing a public park and other amenities on the site. I am not sure if this work is provided for in the subhead as I note the allocation has been reduced.

Deputy Denis Naughten: I am lucky that I, too, can think parochially. As the Deputy is aware, the site in question was taken over by Kildare County Council and preparations are well progressed for its remediation in the coming years. Applications for the necessary permissions are expected to be lodged this year. Significant funding from the Vote has been expended on the site to date. Subject to procurement procedures that are to follow, several tens of millions of euro are expected to be required to remediate the site. Kildare County Council is likely to draw down funding of approximately €4.5 million this year alone, making it the largest single beneficiary under the subhead by some distance. I hope that clarifies the matter.

Chairman: If Deputies do not have further questions on programme F, we will proceed to programme G, appropriations-in-aid.

Deputy Denis Naughten: Appropriations-in-aid are income receipts to the Department, other than from the Exchequer. The vast majority - €222 million of a total of €338 million - represent the pass-through of television licence funds from An Post which are then paid out by the Department to RTE, TG4 and the Broadcasting Authority of Ireland. The balance is made up of income to Inland Fisheries Ireland, the Geological Survey of Ireland, the GPO property nominal rent and pension related deductions in public bodies being returned to the Exchequer.

Deputy Brian Stanley: The Minister referred to rent on the GPO. I understood that, since the GPO was taken over on Easter Monday 1916, it had not been handed back to anyone else. Will he clarify the matter?

Receipts from the plastic bag levy are allocated to the Department. It is then distributed to

local authorities to provide recycling banks. What was the revenue from that in 2016? How does it compare with four or five years ago? Is the revenue holding up? Is there an intention to examine other areas where similar funding could be collected and redistributed to local councils to provide similar valuable services?

Chairman: Deputy, the next section is the Environment Fund.

Deputy Brian Stanley: The Minister can answer my question about the GPO.

Chairman: Perhaps the Minister will bank the next question.

Deputy Denis Naughten: An Post rents the GPO from the State and I, as Minister, hold it on behalf of the State. The rent is €223,000 per annum.

Deputy Brian Stanley: Are we still paying ground rent on it?

Deputy Denis Naughten: I honestly do not know. I will refer back to the Deputy on it.

Chairman: As there are no further questions on programme G we will proceed to the Environment Fund. Deputy Stanley asked his questions on that. I invite the Minister to make an opening comment.

Deputy Denis Naughten: The Environment Fund was established by the Waste Management (Amendment) Act 2001 and comprises revenue generated from levies that were introduced in respect of plastic bags, the levy for which is currently 22 cent, and waste sent to landfill sites, the levy for which is currently €75 per tonne. The Environment Fund is spent on activities and schemes to reduce waste and to increase environmental awareness. Income to the fund in 2016 was almost €57 million, but this is expected to reduce significantly over this year and next year due to landfill capacity constraints, the full operational opening of the thermal treatment plant in Poolbeg and the export of waste for treatment abroad. Expenditures from the Environment Fund allocations, totally €39.4 million, were approved by the then Minister for the Environment, Community and Local Government in January 2016. I recently approved allocations totalling €38.76 million from the Environment Fund for 2017. Some programmes formerly funded from the fund will be funded directly from the Exchequer in 2017. These include the full amount of €8.5 million of the Environmental Protection Agency's capital budget for research and development, €3 million for the international environment subscriptions and €1.6 million for waste policy initiatives.

To answer the Deputy's question, this fund is falling off. There are two reasons. One is that people use plastic bags less often and the second is that landfill capacity is less available now than it was a number of years ago. On the question about the profile of the fund over the last number of years, I do not have that to hand. The yield from the plastic bag levy is €9 million. The Environment Fund for 2015 was €46.09 million and it was €56.85 million for 2016. The projection for 2017 is €45.3 million. If the Deputy wants more historical figures we will have to get them for him.

Chairman: Thank you. There are no other questions on the Environment Fund. It is proposed that the briefing documents for the committee relating to these Estimates and previous Estimates be published on the committee's website. Is that agreed? Agreed.

I thank the Minister, the Minister of State and the officials for attending this constructive meeting. Given the ongoing engagement on the Estimates process, is it agreed that there

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should be further engagement between departmental officials and officials of the Houses of the Oireachtas and that the result of the engagement be reported to the committee? Agreed. The committee will be revisiting the Estimates later in the year. That concludes our consideration of the Revised Estimates for Vote 29 - Communications, Climate Action and Environment.

I remind members that the joint committee will be launching its report on the Prohibition of the Exploration and Extraction of Onshore Petroleum Bill 2016 tomorrow, 12 April, at 11 o'clock in the audio visual room. Committee Stage of the Bill will be taken in this committee early in May after the Easter recess. The committee will also be considering Committee Stages of the Inland Fisheries (Amendment) Bill 2017 and the Minerals Development Bill 2015 in May.

Message to Dáil

Chairman: In accordance with Standing Order 90, the following message will be sent to the Dáil:

The Select Committee on Communications, Climate Action and Environment has considered the Revised Estimates for the Department of Communications, Climate Action and Environment.

The select committee adjourned at 5.45 p.m. *sine die*.