

DÁIL ÉIREANN

AN ROGHCHOISTE UM DHLÍ AGUS CEART AGUS COMHIONANNAS

SELECT COMMITTEE ON JUSTICE AND EQUALITY

Dé Céadaoin, 10 Aibreán 2019

Wednesday, 10 April 2019

The Select Committee met at 10.15 a.m.

MEMBERS PRESENT:

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| Deputy Colm Brophy, | Deputy Charles Flanagan (<i>Minister for Justice and Equality</i>), |
| Deputy Jack Chambers, | Deputy Jim O'Callaghan. |
| Deputy Clare Daly, | |

In attendance: Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire.

DEPUTY CAOIMHGHÍN Ó CAOLÁIN IN THE CHAIR.

Estimates for Public Services 2019

Vote 20 - An Garda Síochána (Further Revised)

Vote 21 - Prisons (Further Revised)

Vote 22 - Courts Service (Further Revised)

Vote 24 - Justice and Equality (Further Revised)

Vote 25 - Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission (Further Revised)

Vote 41 - Policing Authority (Further Revised)

Chairman: The purpose of the meeting is to consider the Further Revised Estimates for 2019 the Justice group of Votes. I welcome the Minister for Justice and Equality, Deputy Flanagan, and his officials. The proposed format is that we work on a Vote by Vote basis. The Minister will begin by making an opening statement. We will then consider the individual Votes and programmes. There are six Votes in total.

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

Minister for Justice and Equality (Deputy Charles Flanagan): I am pleased to have the opportunity to present to the select committee the Further Revised Estimate for 2019 for the Justice group of Votes. I am joined by my officials, Mr. Donnchadh O'Sullivan, Mr. Michael Culhane, Mr. Seamus Clifford, Ms Nuala Ní Mhuircheartaigh and Ms Elizabeth Downey.

The Justice group of Votes is made up of six Votes, with a combined gross expenditure allocation of €2.77 billion this year, comprising €2.58 billion in current expenditure and €195 million in capital expenditure. In addition, there is a further capital provision of €7 million in unspent capital from 2018 available for spending in 2019 under the capital carryover provisions. Gross expenditure in Vote 20 - An Garda Síochána - is €1.76 billion, which amounts to 64% of total funding for the entire group of Votes. The Estimate for 2019 is increased further by an additional amount of €3.58 million carried forward from 2018 under the capital carryover provisions.

I am informed by the Garda Commissioner that since the reopening of the Garda College in

September 2014, approximately 2,600 recruits have attested as members of An Garda Síochána and been assigned to duties in communities across the country. Reaching a strength of 15,000 will require continued recruitment on a phased basis in the next three years. The Government is committed to reaching this goal and I am pleased to say I have secured funding in budget 2019 for a continued uptake of 600 Garda trainees this year and the significant recruitment of civilians, known as Garda staff.

I acknowledge the importance of last year's report from the Commission on the Future of Policing in Ireland which reiterated the importance of Garda resources being focused on policing duties and recommended the transfer of many non-policing functions carried out by sworn members of An Garda Síochána to Garda staff or other agencies with greater responsibility for these areas. There are in the region of 2,500 full-time Garda staff undertaking administrative and technical duties within An Garda Síochána. The Government is determined that this number will increase to 20% of the Garda workforce, or 4,000 individuals, by 2021, to bring the composition of the Garda workforce more into line with international norms. The investment in civilian personnel will ensure trained gardaí will not be engaging in administrative and technical duties which could be done by suitably qualified Garda staff. This will ensure greater visible policing within communities, one of the key recommendations made in the commission's report. It will also help to address critical capacity and skills gaps in the organisation in various areas such as corporate supports, finance, HR and IR that are the legacies of the moratorium on recruitment put in place owing to the downturn in our economic fortunes.

The Garda Commissioner is responsible for the distribution of newly attested gardaí among the various Garda divisions. Newly attested gardaí have a further 16 months of practical and classroom based training to complete after their eight months in Templemore in order to receive their BA in applied policing which is accredited by the University of Limerick. To ensure they are properly supported and supervised and will have opportunities to gain the breadth of policing experience required, the Garda Commissioner's policy is to allocate them to designated Garda stations that have appropriate training and development structures in place that include access to a trained tutor garda and a permanently appointed supervisory sergeant who is thoroughly familiar with their responsibilities under the training programme. I am particularly pleased that the additional funding allocated in 2019 provides for an increase in the supervisory ranks of 190. The number of sergeants will increase by 110 and inspectors by 81.

While up to €95 million is available in 2019 for the overtime budget of An Garda Síochána, I must emphasise that garda overtime cannot be considered in isolation from the increase in the number of new gardaí and the redeployment of gardaí to front-line policing duties due to the civilianisation programme. Over a period, it is expected to alleviate pressure on the overtime budget. It is also the case that the unprecedented investment being made in Garda ICT infrastructure – some €342 million between 2016 and 2021 - will enable An Garda Síochána to deliver on reform and work more efficiently in delivering professional policing and security services for the community. I fully support the Garda Commissioner in his efforts to ensure overtime will come in on budget and that it will free up resources for other important areas in the Garda Vote such as increased training and the provision of equipment and other resources.

I am pleased that under the national development plan and as part of the overall vision in Project Ireland 2040, the Garda capital allocation has been increased from €61 million to €92 million this year, which represents a 50% increase. This will facilitate investment of approximately €61 million in ICT, now an important element in the fight against crime. This substantial investment will provide new and leading edge technology to support front-line gardaí in

their daily work across communities. In addition, the budget provides for a further €10 million investment in the transport fleet and €25 million in the Garda building programme, including the capital carryover. The building programme is an ambitious five-year programme based on agreed Garda priorities which continues to benefit over 30 locations throughout the country, underpinned by significant Exchequer funding across the Garda and OPW Votes. In addition to that programme, other major works to the Garda estate that are ongoing include the pilot Garda station reopening project, the development of a new facility on Military Road and the major refurbishment of Fitzgibbon Street Garda station. The programme also includes a PPP project to deliver much-needed new stations in Macroom, Clonmel and Sligo, as well as a new custody suite at the Garda station located on Anglesea Street in Cork. The clear goal of this investment is to address deficiencies in the Garda estate and provide fit-for-purpose facilities for Garda members and staff, as well as the public in interacting with them. There has been some good progress in improving the Garda estate in recent times, including in particular, the completion and entry into operational use in 2018 of three new divisional and regional headquarters in Wexford and Galway and on Kevin Street in Dublin which, collectively, required funding of over €100 million.

I am pleased that the process of implementing the report of the Commission on the Future of Policing in Ireland is well under way. Funding of €10 million is to be provided in 2019 for the justice and policing and transformation programmes to support ongoing reforms.

Vote 24 - Justice and Equality - includes a gross Estimate provision of over €501 million which is broken down into five separate programmes, comprising almost 60 separate subheads. There is an additional €940,000 in unspent capital available from 2018.

I am particularly pleased that substantial funding has been made available to agencies that play such a pivotal role in the criminal justice area such as Forensic Science Ireland and the Criminal Assets Bureau. A total budget in excess of €30 million is being provided in 2019 for Forensic Science Ireland, of which €18.5 million is capital. The allocation of additional funding is in response to the increased workload of Forensic Science Ireland, combined with the complexity of cases. Over €2 million in additional current expenditure has been provided to enable new staff recruitment and cover certain non-pay costs. Capital funding of €18.5 million has been provided for the multi-year capital project that will provide Forensic Science Ireland with the much-needed facility to carry out its crucial role in the criminal justice sector. While certain site preparation works have been carried out to date, the procurement process for the construction of the new laboratory which is being carried out by the Office of Public Works on behalf of the Department is due to conclude shortly.

A further €700,000 has been provided for the Criminal Assets Bureau, compared to the corresponding budget in 2018, to fund additional staffing resources assigned to the bureau. This brings the total budget for the bureau to €8.6 million in 2019. Members will be aware that the bureau plays a crucial role in tackling money laundering and targeting the proceeds of crime. All over Ireland the bureau is working to ensure criminals cannot enjoy the spoils of their illegal activities. The increased resources will support it in this vital work.

Additional funding of over €1.5 million has been made available to the Probation Service and the Irish Youth Justice Service in 2019. The total budget for these areas in 2019 is just under €61 million. The additional funding provided for the Probation Service includes €500,000 for the implementation of a Housing First project which is being undertaken in conjunction with the Irish Prison Service for the provision of accommodation and support for up to 75 hard-to-house prisoners. The additional funding for the Irish Youth Justice Service of €500,000 will

enable additional initiatives to be undertaken to divert young people at risk away from crime and anti-social behaviour.

Further additional funding, in the order of €3.6 million, is being provided for the Data Protection Commission, bringing the total budget to €15.3 million. The office has received significant additional resources in recent years to build the organisation's capacity and capability in preparation for its enhanced regulatory powers and more prominent international role under the GDPR. The increased resources have facilitated the recruitment of additional staff, including legal, technical, audit and investigations specialists, as well as policy and administrative staff. The increased funding fully reflects the importance of a stable and effective data protection regulatory environment in protecting the personal data of individuals, for the broader economy and, in particular, in the continuing expansion and growth of the digital technology sector.

It was also possible to provide additional funding of over €1.6 million for the Garda Síochána Ombudsman Commission, including a re-profiling of the existing budget and the provision of new additional funding, bringing the total budget to €10.7 million. It will enable additional staff to be recruited in carrying out its investigative and administrative functions and to further expand the unit established to deal with protected disclosures.

Additional funding has also been provided across a number of equality areas, including gender equality, in the order of €1.9 million, bringing the total budget to €5.1 million; Traveller and Roma initiatives, in the order of €500,000, bringing the total budget to €3.9 million; the migration and integration fund, in the order of €1 million, bringing the total budget to €2.5 million; and LGBTI equality measures, in the order of €200,000. This funding will assist in continuing to progress our national equality strategies for Traveller and Roma inclusion, the national strategy for women and girls, and the migrant integration strategy. It will also allow the State to derive maximum benefit from EU matching funding available for European Social Fund projects.

I am pleased also that significant progress is being made in the restructuring of the Department. As recommended by the effectiveness and renewal group, ERG, the Department has now been realigned under two pillars each headed up by a Deputy Secretary. The two executive pillars, civil justice and equality and criminal justice, will be supported by a central corporate pillar. A new corporate governance structure reflecting this realignment came into operation from January 2019.

The effectiveness and renewal group also recommended that the Department should design and implement a new operating model, based on five functional units each focused on specific areas of activity, policy, operations, transparency, governance and legislation. The Department established a transformation programme to implement the new operating model. The Department has completed the high level design of the new operating model at the end of March and has now moved to detailed design. The programme is on schedule and due for completion by October this year. I am pleased that in the recent periodic reports which I have received effectiveness and renewal group have noted the substantial progress being made by the Department consistent with the group's recommendations.

Turning to the prisons Vote, Vote 21, the gross Estimate in 2019 is €359 million. The additional current expenditure of almost €10 million, compared with the corresponding budget in 2018, includes €7 million in respect of additional payroll costs and to recruit both prison and administrative staff to enhance delivery of services and the implementation of updated business processes throughout the prison service.

The prisons capital budget is €32.3 million in 2019 and will enable significant progress to be made on the redevelopment of Limerick Prison with in cell sanitation and a dedicated stand-alone new female prison for the Munster region. This project is due for completion next year.

A total Estimate in gross terms of €138.4 million is being provided for the Courts Service, Vote 22, plus an additional €2.5 million in unspent capital from 2018.

The unspent capital from 2018 will mainly facilitate the continuing expansion of the Courts Service online strategy which in turn supports the key objective of improved services to the public and access to justice. The enhanced services include the full deployment eLicencing system to all solicitors throughout the country and the commencement of the development of eProbate system and electronic sharing of probate information with the Revenue Commissioners.

A gross Estimate of €3.38 million has been provided for the Policing Authority Vote, Vote 41, and the gross expenditure budget for the Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission, IHREC, Vote 25, is €6.75 million to enable it to continue its important work in promoting and protecting human rights and equality.

I will be happy to take any questions the members may have in relation to the varied range of Votes which make up the justice sector budget.

Chairman: I thank the Minister. In case the Minister's remarks in relation to the stand-alone female prison for the Munster region are picked up, that is not due for completion until 2021. He said it would be next year.

Deputy Charles Flanagan: I thank the Chairman. He is quite right.

Chairman: Deputy Ó Laoghaire was the first to indicate. I will call Deputy Chambers after him.

Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire: I welcome the Minister. Will the Chairman clarify whether we are taking these subhead by subhead?

Chairman: We will take Vote 20 for An Garda Síochána only.

Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire: If I recall correctly, there is a reduction of €3.5 million in Garda overtime. There were overtime bans last year and the year before. In 2017 it was in December only but it was for much longer last year. While I understand that a huge amount is being spent on Garda overtime, it is usually a decision taken by chief superintendents and superintendents based on the resources available and the pressures on them to get units out there when they are needed. It has been overspent substantially over the last two years but now it is not even the case that the budget is the same. There is actually €3.5 million less available for that. That is extremely challenging. I am concerned that it might have significant impact on the capacity of the Garda to deliver the service.

Chairman: As there are six subheads to process, I ask Deputies to group their questions, otherwise we may be here for a long time and unnecessarily.

Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire: Is there any plan to expand the Garda youth diversion project this year or is there a new project?

A response to a parliamentary question last year - I presume the figures are broadly the same

- showed that 111 out of 563 operational Garda stations do not have broadband. I expect that some of them may have been tackled but I doubt that all 111 have. What plans has An Garda Síochána or the Department to tackle that?

I refer the plan to reach 15,000 sworn members by 2021. I have already said that we should consider hiring more than that. Are we on track to reach that target? I will take this opportunity to refer to a trend that I am seeing more and more. There are areas, such as Carrigaline and Douglas in my own area, which have grown rapidly - I am sure this has happened in parts of Dublin and the commuter belt - where there were small Garda stations that would never have been district headquarters or anything like that and which would have a small complement of staff who are really struggling as the population, which is often very young, has increased. It is possible that the Department and An Garda Síochána need to pay specific attention to those areas that have seen rapid growth. Does the Minister have any such plans? If so, will he outline them? There is a need for more Garda resources in those areas.

Deputy Charles Flanagan: Deputy Ó Laoghaire raised the very important issue of Garda overtime. Deputies will be aware that the management and allocation of the Garda overtime budget is the responsibility of the Garda Commissioner. It is an important issue and one which is always the subject of debate in the Oireachtas, and perhaps rightly so. There will always be a need for a certain level of overtime. The €95 million which is available this year is by any standard a most significant sum. It would not be fair, nor would it reflect the facts on the ground, if Garda overtime was taken in isolation. It must be seen in the context of other resources available to An Garda Síochána which is why the importance of the recruitment campaign has a direct bearing on overtime. The more Garda numbers we have the less reliant the service will be on overtime. The sum of just under €100 million is an appropriate sum. To bolster my point, I am told that the overall spend on overtime until the end of March, a couple of weeks ago, was €21.8 million, which is on target. That accords with the overtime profile as established by the Garda Commissioner. With new Garda numbers and with the existing overtime we will manage to have a police service with a greatly enhanced number of policing hours throughout the State. The ongoing programme of civilianisation must also be borne in mind. This leads me to the other questions. We are on target for 2021 to have 15,000 sworn members of An Garda Síochána and 4,000 civilian staff. I am very keen that the State supports the Garda Commissioner in this, especially in the civilianisation programme, notwithstanding the challenges this will pose for An Garda Síochána.

I am aware this committee recently produced a very fine report on rural crime and, as a public representative, I believe that availability and visibility are key with regard to An Garda Síochána. The civilianisation programme will allow for the release of more gardaí to do what they are best trained to do, which is to protect communities from harm by way of additional numbers of gardaí on the streets. We are on target for 2021 to do this.

An additional €2 million has been provided for the youth diversion programme under the Dormant Accounts Fund. This will involve additional and new investment. I do not have details on the locations of these programmes in front of me but I am happy to provide details to the Deputy. Deputy Ó Laoghaire will be aware of the importance of the youth diversion programmes around the State. It is my intention that the €2 million would allow for new and enhanced programmes.

I am aware that this committee is very keen to see progress on the issue of broadband in Garda stations. There are 565 Garda stations in the State. I have spoken with my Cabinet colleague with responsibility for broadband, the Minister for Communications, Climate Action

and Environment, Deputy Bruton. I accept there are variations and fluctuations in the number of sites connected to the Garda network but it is important that we engage in projects to enhance access, especially in rural Garda stations. There is a project in this regard. Increased resources for the Garda fleet allows for mobile IT systems to be contained in Garda cars. Often this is the only means by which there is ICT network connection. This is also important in the context of rural Ireland. Any member of An Garda Síochána currently attached to an unconnected Garda station can nevertheless access to the PULSE system at the local district station. This is important in ensuring there is an element of connectivity. I accept, however, that there is a challenge. It is being worked on.

On the issue of struggling Garda stations, as highlighted by Deputy Ó Laoghaire, of course An Garda Síochána - at Commissioner and management level - review the profile of Garda stations in the context of a changing social profile of an area, with particular reference to areas of recent growth by way of house building, and also in areas where there are seasonal variations. In Kinsale, for example, which is in close proximity to, if not in, the Deputy's constituency, during the summer months one will see increased Garda deployment, as with other resort-type areas. The profiling of a Garda station with numbers and senior figures within Garda stations is kept under review in the context of policing needs in each area.

Deputy Jack Chambers: On the question of civilianisation, will the Minister give an update, with an exact figure, on how many gardaí have been redeployed to the front line on the basis of mitigating the need for overtime? What is the new recruitment in terms of the civilianisation or redeployment within the public service to meet the change, as referred to by the Minister?

I now turn to the capital budget in which there has been an increase of 58%. Will the Minister give an update on the cost for reopening of Stepside Garda station, in the context of that capital budget? Perhaps he will also give a break down of other rural stations.

On investment, gardaí were positive about mobile phone technology being used for live data updates. I believe this was piloted in Limerick. Is there a commitment to roll this out in this capital budget? That is an important reform in PULSE.

The witness security programme budget is up 505%, which is significant. Does this increase relate to the current gangland situation? It appears to be a very significant year-on-year rise. Will the Minister please provide context for that figure? Obviously, this has been ongoing for a number of years.

Is there a commitment to expand the Garda armed support unit? There have been significant gangland difficulties in my area, which in many cases is connected to Ireland being seen as part of the cell structure for the European transit of drugs. How are the Department of Justice and Equality and An Garda Síochána positively addressing this? We have had some successes but unfortunately they have been a drop in the ocean. People will be killed in the crossfire if we do not see a greater deployment of national units. We need to do this without robbing Peter to pay Paul, that is, without taking units from the inner city in order to have units in west Dublin. There needs to be a greater focus on the armed support units and investment in them. People are shooting others in broad daylight, and they have the audacity to do this. We need to ensure there is law and order in that regard. I ask that there is focus on the armed support unit. Will the Minister provide an update on that?

Perhaps my next query does not relate to the An Garda Síochána or the Garda Vote. Funding

for the Criminal Assets Bureau, CAB, appears to have been reduced year-on-year. When we move on to that Estimate, I will ask about this.

Chairman: Yes, because that is a different point Deputy Chambers. I thank members for their co-operation in grouping their questions. I thank the Minister for noting them and responding to each as asked. This will help us to get through the business as efficiently as possible.

Deputy Charles Flanagan: On the query about the civilian staff in An Garda Síochána, redeployment to date is in the order of 260. This year it is the intention of the Garda Commissioner to redeploy a further 500. The Commissioner is confident this will take place in the course of the calendar year.

Recruitment of expertise is ongoing, especially in the area of ICT specialists, financial accounting experts and human resources in order to ensure the transformation programme and the various modernisation schemes are on target.

Deputy Chambers also asked about costs. It is estimated that reopening of the Stepside Garda station will cost €1 million. This is part of a bundle of six stations to be reopened, one of which is already opened in Donard in Wicklow. Other stations on target for reopening this year are Ballinspittle in Cork and Bawnboy in the Chairman's constituency of Cavan. Refurbishments are on target to be completed this year and the stations reopened.

Regarding hand-held technology, a further €1.5 million for this purpose will see the expansion of the project in Limerick in respect of automatic number plate recognition devices. That is working satisfactorily. Moving to the matter of armed support units, again the deployment of particular units is a matter for the Garda Commissioner. The Deputy is correct, however, that there is a particular challenge in the inner-city area and there is increased activity by a number of units, including the armed support units. I will highlight the importance of the Fitzgibbon Street Garda station capital project in that area, which is on target with redevelopment and refurbishment. Turning to the witness protection programme, the periodic draw-down of funding is at the discretion of An Garda Síochána. There was a relatively low spend in 2018, less than €200,000. In 2017, however, spending in the area was more than €500,000. We monitor that but it is at the discretion of An Garda Síochána to draw-down funding from time to time.

Deputy Clare Daly: I have one question regarding this Vote but it is incredibly important. I am referring to the protective services units and the plans to have one open in every division by the end of the year. I asked the Minister about this the last time he was before us and he said he did not have the answer to hand regarding funding for this initiative. He subsequently wrote to the committee and stated no funding was ring-fenced because it could not be quantified and it would be absorbed in the general Garda budget. That is an enormous problem. If funding cannot be quantified, that means plans for developing this scheme are not really that developed at all. We are now a third of the way into the year and we know that if funding is not ring-fenced, then overtime or other demands are likely to gobble it up.

I want to put on the record what Dr. Geoffrey Shannon told us. He said that one of the key messages to emanate from the almost 100 reports published over the last 20 years is the lack of inter-agency co-operation. He continued by saying that he hoped his would be the last report in which the issue had to be highlighted. Dr. Shannon made that statement in September 2017. These protective services units are a key element for child protection and for victims of sexual and domestic violence but it seems they are being treated as an afterthought. Why has no budget been allocated to this initiative? Will the Minister give us an update on the roll-out? How

many such units have been provided? Can the Minister stand over the commitment to have one in every Garda division by the end of 2019?

Deputy Charles Flanagan: Yes, is the answer to that question. This is a priority of mine and one I engage on regularly with Garda management. Members may be unaware of significant progress as far as these issues are concerned. Ten units have been established to date across nine Garda divisions. Three were established last year in the west Dublin, Louth and Cork City divisions. A further six units were established in January of this year in the south central Dublin, Waterford, Kerry, Carlow-Kilkenny, Limerick and Galway divisions. The stated target, and my stated objective, is that units will be established in all areas by the end of this year.

I recently visited the Cork south west division and I expect progress there during late spring and early summer. Garda management has stated that 64 gardaí are now assigned to the Garda National Protective Services Bureau. All established units are operating from appropriate and suitable accommodation. New equipment is in place as well as training and appropriate courses to ensure the required level of expertise is available, particularly in the context of new legislation this committee had a part in enacting. I mention, in particular, the new domestic violence code and the recent ratification of the Istanbul Convention on combatting violence against women and domestic violence.

I agree with Deputy Clare Daly as to the urgency and importance of the roll-out of the divisional units. The fact I am not in a position to put a costing tag on each individual unit should not detract from the objective and it does not in any way indicate that there is neither a will nor a budget. These units will happen and are happening progressively across the country. Six have already been established this year and I expect a few more during the spring and summer. The stated intention is that every Garda division will have a unit by the end of this year, that is within a mere seven months.

Deputy Jim O'Callaghan: I have three brief questions. The first concerns the Garda Reserve, and the Estimate for that is on page 10 of the document the Minister produced for the committee. He will note that the Estimate for 2019 is €1.3 million while that for last year was €250,000, of which only €165,000 was used. Why did the Garda not spend the money allocated to it for the Garda Reserve? I welcome the increase in the Estimate for the Garda Reserve this year but how can the Minister be satisfied that money is actually going to be used unlike in previous years?

My second question concerns civilianisation. I welcome the concept but the Minister will be aware there is concern that civilians are being given the role of crime scene investigator. Is the Minister satisfied the public is getting value for money in respect of that practice? Is he concerned that the expertise gardaí have in crime scene investigation should be availed of and maintained? My third question is in respect of a statement made ten days ago by a Minister of State regarding a conspiracy within An Garda Síochána to damage Members of the Government. The Minister might recall the statement. It would give rise to a significant damages claim against the State, if it was true. I note the Minister of State concerned subsequently withdrew his allegation. Will the Minister assure this committee that there is no substance to that extraordinary allegation?

Deputy Charles Flanagan: I very much assure this committee that there was no foundation to the comments made by the Minister of State, Deputy Finian McGrath. He stated as much when he withdrew his comments in their entirety. I was in agreement with the public commentary of Deputy O'Callaghan and other members of this committee. We enact legisla-

tion as a collective in the Oireachtas. It is incumbent on all agencies of the State to ensure enforcement of legislation but that is particularly the case for An Garda Síochána. Any suggestion otherwise would be unacceptable.

Turning to the Garda Reserve, a number of issues have not been dealt with in a way that some members of this committee might have expected. I refer to the current operation of the Garda Reserve and its future. A strategic review is under way. The report of the Commission on the Future of Policing in Ireland stated that recruitment to and expansion and further development of the Garda Reserve might be paused until such time as we might have a look at this review. We could then implement the strategy in accordance with commitments. I hope that can be done at an early date.

We have set targets for Garda Reserve numbers. A total of 100 Garda Reserve members commenced training in recent times. That is welcome, but I hope we will be in a position to roll out an enhanced blueprint for the Garda Reserve which will see it work hand in hand with An Garda Síochána at various public events, particularly sports and cultural events and festivals throughout the summer, with possible co-operation in carrying out traffic duties. I agree that we need to complete a strategic review and that everybody must work to ensure its implementation.

On civilianisation, we should not underestimate the task involved in introducing new work practices within An Garda Síochána and recruiting specialist expertise from outside the sworn Garda complement. This is very important in the modernisation of the Garda service. Achieving value for money is important. The practice can bring financial, human resources and corporate governance expertise into An Garda Síochána. The aim is to bring a significant complement of expertise into the Garda service to free up members of An Garda Síochána for redeployment to front-line duties. Administrative work previously handled by Garda members will be undertaken by Garda support staff who are not members of An Garda Síochána.

Chairman: I invite questions on Vote 21 - Prisons - from members in whatever order they indicate. Members may or may not wish to engage on specific Votes.

Deputy Clare Daly: I wish to briefly raise two issues, the first of which concerns the well aired problems faced by those suffering from mental health issues in the Irish Prison Service. The Minister might clarify who pays for the services. In January the new director general of the Irish Prison Service told the Committee of Public Accounts about the difficulty in recruiting forensic mental health staff and psychiatrists. Recruitment was sanctioned by the HSE, but the posts have not been filled. This exerts huge pressure on staff and prisoners who really need to be transferred to the Central Mental Hospital. It has been a disruptive influence on the Irish Prison Service. What is the difficulty in recruiting staff? Has the issue been addressed? Are particular schemes to improve the position on healthcare, particularly mental health care, for prisoners provided for in the budget?

The House supported my Bill to bring to an end the placing of prisoners in solitary confinement. However, there are still hundreds of prisoners across the State who spend 21 hours a day in their cell. Has any funding been invested to enable prisoners to leave their cell more? I refer, in particular, to prisoners who are subject to restrictive regimes for their own protection under Rule 63 of the 2007 Prison Rules. Obviously investment is required. It would mean the recruitment of more staff and the provision of better infrastructure. Will the Minister tell us a little more about what has been happening in that regard? Has the necessary investment been made?

Deputy Charles Flanagan: The Deputy has referred to the need for more staff and better

infrastructure. I point to the ongoing improvements since we last considered the Estimate for the prisons Vote. For example, in Portlaoise Prison there is a new unit, especially for violent prisoners. We have also been working to ensure prisoners subject to a regime of solitary confinement receive an appropriate level of treatment and are placed in solitary confinement for good and sound reasons. With infrastructural developments, I refer to the ongoing recruitment of new prison staff.

I readily accept what the Deputy said about the provision of medical care and attention in prison, particularly for prisoners with mental health needs. It poses a challenge. The Irish Prison Service is making arrangements to carry out a comprehensive healthcare needs assessment of the prison population. We need to ensure medical treatment is provided for anybody who requires it in prison. Prisoners receive medical care through the primary care system. Yes, there is a difficulty in staff retention, but I assure the committee that the care and rehabilitation directorate is taking all possible steps to recruit prison medical personnel on a permanent basis. I share the concerns of members about the large number of prisoners with mental health issues or who are suffering from a mental health disorder. It is important that appropriate psychiatric services be made available. This is an ongoing challenge. The National Forensic Mental Health Service provides mental health services on an ongoing basis in prisons in Dublin, as well as in the Midlands Prison and Portlaoise Prison. Current trends show that approximately 250 prisoners are in receipt of services weekly. The Deputy mentioned acute psychiatric services and the relationship between the Central Mental Hospital and the prisons. It is important that the Irish Prison Service and the Central Mental Hospital work together to ensure an appropriate level of service. There are persons in prison who would benefit from detention in a health, rather than a prison, institution. We need to deal with such persons on a case by case basis.

Deputy Clare Daly: I will not open a discussion on it, but there is a crisis in that regard. Its continuation will result in further assaults on staff and probably deaths among prisoners who need help. If the recruitment of forensic psychiatrists has been sanctioned for years and they have not been recruited, there is a bigger problem. We will return to the matter again.

Deputy Jack Chambers: The use of therapeutic communities within the Irish Prison Service has been discussed at a policy level for quite some time. Coolmine Therapeutic Community has a very successful recovery approach which is sometimes followed during the period of a prisoner's sentence in co-operation with the Irish Prison Service. Has a political decision been made to fund therapeutic communities which work really well in the United Kingdom? The initiative warrants the adoption of a proactive policy approach here. As we all know every prison has a complex history. Prisons needs to be properly funded. It is not just a headline about educational services or acute intervention, which are important, but it is the pathway out of prison that prevents recidivism and all the difficulties we see.

Is the Minister considering that option, would he agree to pilot or fund such an intervention because it is within his jurisdiction? This has been discussed but nothing substantive has been announced about trying it. I think if we were to do so, it would work well and will help the prison population and the broader communities that we live in.

Deputy Charles Flanagan: I agree with the importance of the point Deputy Chambers has made. I believe the Irish Prison Service, in conjunction with the private sector and with some public sector agencies, is always looking to what might be regarded as best practice in terms of ensuring the provision of aftercare for prisoners and that before they are released from prison, they are encouraged to engage in possible integration programmes. There is a challenge as far as housing and employment are concerned, but various voluntary agencies and agencies in the

private sector provide funding in order to ensure that prisoners are prepared for a return to the community. I do not have the figures for the prisoners who have benefitted from those programmes but I would be happy to provide that information to the Deputy.

Deputy Jack Chambers: What I was specifically referring to was the establishment of a pilot of a therapeutic community in a prison - in fact, in a wing of a prison where it would be run like a therapeutic community and run by prisoners. That model works really well in the UK and in other countries. There is a fantastic outcome for prisoners, for the general population and for communities but we are not doing that. We are funding siloed educational or health interventions, but we are not looking at the issue in a holistic way. It is not about funding some of the aftercare packages in Coolmine or in other institutions. Services, such as Coolmine Therapeutic Community, have been contacting the Department of Justice and Equality on a regular basis to look for a policy decision on the establishment of a therapeutic community in the prison system. The Minister should engage with the Irish Prison Service to try to do it because it will be a positive legacy for the Minister to have been the Minister to do this. I think we will see it rolled out across the board and I ask the Minister to look at this specific matter.

Chairman: Does the Minister wish to respond briefly to the proposition?

Deputy Charles Flanagan: I am not really sure about the proposition in the UK, to which Deputy Chambers refers. In terms of prison policy, I would not be looking to the UK in terms of best practice in prisons. I take on board what the Deputy said in terms of the provision of in-service programmes, be they in the areas of health and education. There are many programmes in our prison service. I point to the recently opened violent prisoner unit in Portlaoise which draws from expertise not only in the justice sector but across the health sector, in terms of psychiatric support and ongoing psychological monitoring and health services. This is an ongoing programme of work. Any specific programme that Deputy Chambers would like the Irish Prison Service to look at, I am sure it would be open to the suggestion.

Deputy Jack Chambers: The Taoiseach regularly visits Coolmine therapeutic centre in our constituency in Dublin West. He is very much in favour of therapeutic communities and I think the Minister should talk to him. I am not talking about the general prison model, but therapeutic communities work well in the UK and in other countries. I tabled parliamentary questions on this subject so I am surprised the Minister is not aware of it. I am not talking about specific programmes but about the general proposition. I will leave it there.

Chairman: Deputy Chambers could follow up with correspondence directly to the Minister.

Deputy Jack Chambers: I have actually. I have written many times to the Minister.

Chairman: That is fair enough. The Minister should note the Deputy's concerns and his proposal and see if there are any prospects in that regard.

Deputy Charles Flanagan: I would be happy to do so.

Chairman: I thank the Minister. I now call Deputy Jim O'Callaghan.

Deputy Jim O'Callaghan: I do not have a question. However, I welcome the increase in funding for educational services in prisons. I think that combined with Deputy Jack Chambers's proposal could have a very positive impact. We have to get drugs out of prisons. I know it is difficult but we must try to get education and training in.

Chairman: I thank the Deputy. That concludes the address of Vote 21 on prisons. We will now move on to Vote 22, the Courts Service. I invite questions from members.

Deputy Jim O’Callaghan: We have been going through hearings on the reform of the family law system and one of the major issues raised by many witnesses is that we need a proper physical structure to house the family law courts. I know that Hammond Lane had been identified as a suitable site for the family law courts. What is happening there? Will it go ahead? Will we have a specified and dedicated family law court centre in Dublin?

Chairman: Is that the Deputy’s only question?

Deputy Jim O’Callaghan: Yes.

Deputy Charles Flanagan: I am very keen that positive progress be reported on the Hammond Lane venture. I acknowledge there are particular challenges in the administration of family law in our courts, not only in terms of infrastructure but also in terms of management.

On the matter of infrastructure, I have a sum of money available to the order of €80 million. We have a vacant site. There are ongoing discussions between the appropriate stakeholders, my Department, the Courts Service and the National Development Finance Agency. I want to see real progress on the Hammond Lane family law project this year.

Chairman: I thank the Minister and Deputy O’Callaghan. As there are no other members indicating on the Courts Service, I propose that we close the address of Vote 22.

Chairman: Vote 24 is justice and equality. This Vote is made up of a number of different programmes, as members will have already noted, and I invite questions from them on this Vote.

Deputy Clare Daly: This is a major area and most of my questions come under this Vote. I will see how we get on taking them together.

My first question is on the office of the Inspector of Prisons. I notice a substantial reduction in the budget for this year. I wonder what is going on in that regard. We have a situation now where the Inspector of Prisons has a smaller budget than the Irish film classification office. Given that we have no prisoner complaints mechanism, this is an incredibly important role. I wonder why the budget of the Inspector of Prisons has been reduced to under €500,000, which is a small amount of money, yet a sum of €251,000 has been allocated to the judicial appointments commission and the judicial council, neither of which has been set up yet, which makes it doubly insulting. A number of groups have called for extra resources for the office of the Inspector of Prisons. She undertook an investigation into alleged unauthorised surveillance of prisoners and there was a call for her to be given extra resources to carry that out. I know from a response to a parliamentary question that she has finished the report. Will the Minister publish the report? When are we going to see it? Has it been sent to the Data Protection Commission and did the Inspector of Prisons get extra resources for that report? What is the reason for the drop in her budget?

I have a number of questions for other areas under this Vote but that is my only one of this topic.

Chairman: We will take that question quickly and we will then move on. We do not want to be here all day so I ask for co-operation from members.

Deputy Charles Flanagan: I acknowledge the importance of the role of the Inspector of Prisons. In particular, I welcome the appointment of the new inspector, Ms Patricia Gilheaney. I am concerned to ensure that her office is in a position to run effectively and efficiently. In fact, I intend meeting her in the next couple of weeks in order to discuss many of the issues that have been raised here.

On the matter of the report she has recently undertaken, I have received a copy and have forwarded it to the Attorney General which is the normal practice with such reports. I will make a decision regarding publication once I receive a copy from the Attorney General. The Inspector of Prisons was provided with a level of resources in order to ensure that the report could be carried out within a particular timeframe. The budget for the office of the Inspector of Prisons in 2018 was €391,000, this year the Revised Estimate is €496,000, an increase of €100,000. There was an increase in the Supplementary Estimate presented at the end of last year in the order of €172,000. I accept the Deputy's point that the Office of the Inspector of Prisons does need to be resourced. As I said, I have arranged to meet the inspector. The meeting with Ms Gilheaney will take place shortly.

Deputy Clare Daly: I will not labour the point, but my understanding was the total budget for last year was €563,000 and that it had been decreased to €496,000. If the Minister is saying that is incorrect, I will go back and look at my figures again, but what has been shown to me clearly shows that there has been a reduction. I do not know how extra resources can be given if the budget has been cut.

Deputy Charles Flanagan: I am not sure whether the Deputy has borne in mind the €172,000 provided for the office in the Supplementary Estimate.

Deputy Clare Daly: I will go back and look at it.

While we are on the topic of prisons, I refer to a recent parliamentary question about OPCAT, in the reply to which I was told that the draft legislation was nearly complete. Has any money been set aside for its ratification? If money is being set aside for the Judicial Appointments Commission that has not yet been authorised, is anything being set aside for ratification of OPCAT?

May I quickly ask another question?

Chairman: We will take the question the Deputy asked first. I appreciate that we are dealing with a compendium of Votes.

Deputy Charles Flanagan: I do not have a specific figure, but I do know that the report we received takes account of the inspector engaging on OPCAT

Deputy Clare Daly: Will the Minister, please, come back to me on the issue? What I would like to know is whether money has been ring-fenced for independent inspection bodies for places of detention. Has any money been set aside for that purpose in this year's budget?

Deputy Charles Flanagan: It would be reflected in the current budget, but I will drop the Deputy a specific note on the matter.

Chairman: Will the Minister also address the note to the clerk to the committee, please?

Deputy Charles Flanagan: I will.

Deputy Clare Daly: Obviously, there has been an underspend on the INIS in the past few years as a result of the difficulties in recruitment. Will the Minister provide an update on staffing levels? Is the service still understaffed and, if so, why has it proved so difficult to recruit staff? Obviously, there are long delays in the system, which is soul destroying and incredibly stressful for the individuals concerned and their families. The problem really needs to be fixed. Will the Minister update us on the backlogs of visa, citizenship and asylum applications? In that context, with reference to the direct provision system, there is talk that Hatch Hall in Dublin will be closed. I believe the residents have been told that they need to be out by the end of the year as there are other plans for the building. What plans are in place to accommodate them elsewhere as part of the overall direct provision programme that is under way?

Chairman: Is that the Deputy's final question?

Deputy Clare Daly: I have one other question related to another area.

Deputy Charles Flanagan: On staffing at the INIS, the challenges arose from the successful recovery of our economic fortunes. It was a challenge to recruit staff, but I am pleased to say the backlogs are being addressed by dint of the recruitment of new staff, notwithstanding the challenges encountered. At the end of 2017 we were at a figure of 793 applications, which number had increased to 818 at the end of 2018. It is not so much a resources problem as a recruitment problem, but I am conscious of the issues involved and we are working to ensure applications will be processed as speedily and as effectively as possible.

Members of this committee are more aware than most of the challenges encountered in the direct provision system. I do not have a significant menu of options, but it appears that the long-term future of Hatch Hall is in question, having regard to a likely change of use. That will present a challenge, but the authorities and my Department are open to accepting offers of appropriate accommodation. To that end, we recently commenced a public procurement exercise in seeking public tenders for the provision of accommodation, not only in Dublin but also throughout the country. There has been a series of regional engagements. I am open to suggestions if an individual member or the committee wishes to offer a view on how best we might manage the direct provision system, but there is a significant number of people living in emergency accommodation. We have national and international obligations, of which I am conscious. In recent times a request has been received from EU colleagues in the context of emergency engagements in the Mediterranean which will continue to present challenges to us in the provision of appropriate and suitable accommodation.

Deputy Clare Daly: In some ways, that is frightening. I know a number of the individuals who are living in Hatch Hall and they are really worried about what it means for them. There is the prospect of hundreds of people being dispersed to who knows where. There is nowhere for them to go. Hatch Hall is to be turned into a luxury hotel, which is unfortunate, to put it as mildly as I can. A number of people living there have their papers. While they are allowed to stay here, there is no accommodation available for them. People who came here as youngsters, as unaccompanied minors, who want to continue their studies and take the leaving certificate examinations do not know where they will be going, which is serious. We will probably include the matter in our work programme in the run-in to the summer recess as we need to have a deeper conversation about it.

Before I ask my final question, on the staffing problems in the INIS, while the Minister states the delays are being dealt with, I am not really sure that is the case, particularly because I am dealing with cases which seem to be included in the backlog of asylum applications. Is the

issuing of the Minister's letter linked with some function in checking that has been outsourced and is there some blockage in the system because there seem to be delays in applicants getting clearance?

My final question is about Forensic Science Ireland and the €10 million being cut from its budget because of the cost overrun on the National Children's Hospital project. I raise the matter in the context of the figures produced at the end of last year which showed that in approximately 70 sexual assault and rape cases the processing of examination kits was awaited. We were told that the demands on the service would be alleviated in the move to Kildare and by the recruitment of 24 personnel. How does that tally with the cut of €10 million? Why were the jobs axed, particularly given the delays in dealing with rape and sexual assault cases which could be longer than one year, which is absolutely outrageous in such cases? How does that fit with the promise of improvements in dealing with sexual crimes and so on? Will personnel be recruited? Will the move to Kildare happen? That obviously ties in with the previous question asked by Deputy O'Callaghan about Garda and civilian staff.

Chairman: I thank the Deputy. Will the Minister, please, respond to her?

Deputy Charles Flanagan: I want to impress on the committee that the Reception and Integration Agency continues to work to expand capacity, both in existing centres and through the identification of new premises throughout the country. The appropriate agencies will seek a resolution of the issues related to Hatch Hall. There was a similar challenge in Clondalkin that was met by means of dialogue and people sitting around a table, ensuring sensitive issues could be dealt with by compassionate means, rather than inducing fear or panic.

There have been improvements in processing times and we will continue to strive for greater effectiveness. Four months is now the processing time for priority cases and eight to ten months for non-priority cases. Decisions issue within a period of eight weeks from the date of interview. Clearly there are some complex individual cases that from time to time take longer, but I am very conscious of the need to have a streamlined system in order that people can have an element of certainty on the timeframe involved.

On the forensic science matter, I acknowledge the progress made on site and the urgent need to move from the Phoenix Park to Backweston. Funding has been provided for it and there is no impact on the current building programme caused by any issue pertaining to the national children's hospital project. The sum of €10 million involved in the re-profiling was not funding that could have been spent this year under the capital programme.

Deputy Jim O'Callaghan: I have three questions, the first of which is related to the Garda Síochána Ombudsman Commission. The Minister is aware that a number of years ago it sought an increase in resources in order that it could have more investigators. Is the 10% increase a recognition that what it sought was legitimate and it has thus been granted?

The second question relates to the equivalence accorded in the Estimates to the judicial appointments commission and the judicial council. As the Minister is probably all too aware, the judicial appointments commission's responsibility will be to recommend to the Government approximately 15 people each year for appointment to the Bench. The function of the judicial council will be to train the 100 judges plus in the country, discipline judges who get into problems or against whom complaints are made and to issue guidelines for judges in dealing with personal injury cases. It will be a much more substantial body of work than that will be required of the judicial appointments commission. Will the Minister explain the equivalence? Does he

not recognise that the council will carry out much more detailed and extensive work?

On Forensic Science Ireland, my understanding is the resources are not available to allow small amounts of drugs seized to be tested. In effect, when people have small amounts of drugs seized, there is no prospect of them being prosecuted. Will resources will be allocated to Forensic Science Ireland to enable it to test small amounts of drugs seized?

Deputy Charles Flanagan: I hope Forensic Science Ireland will engage in the work it has been mandated to do, which involves the work described by the Deputy. The priority is to ensure the elaborate and exciting capital project can continue, leading to the opening in two years of the new centre at Backweston.

I acknowledge the increased allocation of funding to facilitate the recruitment of staff by GSOC. I understand 42 new staff are being recruited, some of whom are *in situ*. Members of the committee are aware of the legislative programme as a consequence of the report of the Commission on the Future of Policing in Ireland. Again, appropriate progress has been made in that regard. It involves a greater level of independence being accorded to the newly constructed police complaints body. This is something that will occur in the next 18 months or so.

The Deputy spoke about the judicial council and the judicial appointments commission. The moneys indicated in the Estimates are merely indicators and timeframes will be involved. It is unlikely that the mechanics of the judicial appointments commission will be in place in their entirety this year. However, I am very keen to make progress on the judicial council. The funding is merely indicative and, in many respects, reflective of the bodies starting up. The position will be reviewed from time to time.

Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire: I did not comment earlier on the Hammond Lane project, but I fully support the points made. It was one of the main matters which arose in our recent hearings on family law. One of the other issues raised by every speaker was the difficulty in obtaining legal aid. There are low thresholds and high minimum contributions. It is a problem in several areas but particularly in family law. My reading is that the Legal Aid Board's funding is more or less static and that criminal legal aid scheme funding is being reduced. Perhaps it is not the most popular issue in a political sense, but this is a retrograde step. There are backlogs in seeking legal aid and the minimum contribution to be made can put people off. This creates a real issue when it comes to seeking access to justice. It is becoming inaccessible for many.

Deputy Charles Flanagan: On civil legal aid and the work of the Legal Aid Board, they are demand-led schemes. The sum involved is in the region of €50 million. I am very keen to ensure the minimum waiting periods in the spread of centres throughout the country in the provision of legal aid will be tackled. I point to the progress made in that regard, particularly in the past 12 to 18 months. We are engaged in an ongoing review with the Legal Aid Board. I am very anxious to proceed with the Hammond Lane project, but I am also keen to ensure, from a legislative perspective, family law structures will be more streamlined. I accept that is a particular challenge in parts of the country because one has to wait for cases to be heard, or cases are partially heard and not completed. I am discussing these issues with both the Courts Service and the Judiciary. I hope to be in a position shortly, even in the next few weeks, to bring the general scheme of a Bill to the Government to set up a family law unit within the court regime. It is important that family law cases be dealt with by specially trained and expert family law judges. We should discontinue the current unacceptable practice, where from time to time family law cases are dealt with on the same day as criminal, civil law or licensing cases, etc.

The current funding allocation for the Legal Aid Board is €40 million. The additional resources provided in recent years included €3 million for the provision of legal advice under the Abhaile scheme, which is of benefit to persons dealing with challenges in cases involving the family home. I am in ongoing contact with the appropriate agencies here and I am very keen that the new Hammond Lane family and child loss centre will be a flagship for family law throughout the country.

Chairman: Does Deputy Ó Laoghaire have a further question?

Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire: I do. There is some commentary, correctly, on the worrying trend relating to sexual crimes and the reporting of same. The funding for Rape Crisis Network Ireland, which provides support for the various rape crisis centres, is very modest at less than €100,000. Has that been considered for any increases? More generally, is there proposal to increase funding for rape crisis centres? Does the Attorney General's office fall within this subhead?

Deputy Charles Flanagan: No.

Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire: Does it fall within any justice subhead in this regard?

Deputy Charles Flanagan: No.

Chairman: Can the Minister clarify that position, please?

Deputy Charles Flanagan: I understand that much of the funding for many of the advocacy organisations comes from my colleague, the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs, Deputy Zappone, who I understand will make an announcement this morning in that regard. I keep in very close contact with all the advocacy groups. I acknowledge their assistance in ensuring there is an appropriate information campaign on what is the new regime now as far as sexual violence, and domestic violence in particular, is concerned and our obligations having regard to the fact that we recently ratified the Istanbul convention.

There will be ongoing resource issues in terms of the Garda Síochána and in terms of ensuring that victims' organisations, for example, are properly and adequately funded. I acknowledge the work of this committee in that regard in ensuring we have a climate of zero tolerance in this country towards any form of domestic or sexual violence.

Chairman: Has the Deputy covered the issue he wanted to address?

Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire: I have but I am not sure that the Minister is correct. I always thought the Department of Justice and Equality provided that funding. I would like the Minister to clarify that. I may be mistaken but my understanding is that rape crisis centres and Rape Crisis Network Ireland funding was provided by the Department of Justice and Equality.

Deputy Charles Flanagan: No. My understanding is that the funding comes from Tusla and also that it is quite substantial at in excess of €25 million. Tusla's primary relationship is with the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs, Deputy Zappone. These are issues I would discuss on a regular basis with the advocacy groups and the rape crisis groups as well as support services such as Victims of Crime. The HSE is involved in a form of funding but the main funding stream is from the Child and Family Agency.

Chairman: That clarifies the matter.

Deputy Colm Brophy: I welcome the range of increased funding contained in what we have been discussing this morning. It is very welcome across the range of areas the Minister spoke about. I want to specifically ask him about an issue I have raised previously, namely, the funding for Irish Naturalisation and Immigration Service, INIS. I appreciate the Minister made some comments on that earlier. I have to be honest and say that the way in which INIS is processing visa applications is totally unsatisfactory. There are inordinate delays across the board from fairly mundane visa applications to people looking to come to live in our country. Some of that needs to be addressed through increased support and funding but I would make the point to the Minister that, operationally, some of it seems to be an unacceptable way of delivering the service to the people using it. I have highlighted previously, and directly for the Minister, that people making very reasonable requests for visas for, say, family members to enter the country for a short duration have been left waiting many months for an answer. Will the allocation increase, which I believe is approximately 11%, address the current problems in INIS?

Deputy Charles Flanagan: It is important to put that in context, which is that applications in excess of 250,000 per year are being dealt with by INIS. Members of this committee will be well aware of the diverse and varying functions of the body but I am very keen to ensure that any timeframes are kept at a minimum. Members will agree that there is need for certain scrutiny and for security issues to be taken into account but the increased staffing will allow for a greater throughput of cases in a shorter timeframe.

I acknowledge the importance of the service improvement plan, which is indicative of an admission on the part of the group that improvements could be made. I am not sure if the committee had an opportunity to discuss that plan in detail but it might be worthwhile doing so in the meantime. I assure the Deputy of a further investment in technology, increased staffing numbers and a customer focused disposition on the part of everybody in INIS to ensure that the service is efficient and effective.

Deputy Colm Brophy: I welcome the Minister's comments. We had an opportunity to engage with INIS as a committee and I hope now we will start to see the results come through because some of the cases I deal with as a result of my constituents contacting me are unacceptable in terms of the delays they have been put through. That is not because of a particularly difficult or problematic issue. These are ordinary applications that are being processed by neighbouring jurisdictions within a matter of weeks and we are taking many months to process them.

Deputy Charles Flanagan: I acknowledge the hard work, dedication and leadership within INIS realising there are challenges but pointing, for example, to the setting up of a change management unit within INIS, which is delivering reform. It might be worthwhile, perhaps after the summer, for the Deputy to have an opportunity of engaging to see and hear at first hand from the management in INIS the nature of the challenge but also, equally important, the manner in which that challenge is being addressed by increased investment and changes in management structures to deliver a high level of service to the customers.

Chairman: The Minister's remarks and urgings are noted. I thank him for that. I thank the members for their co-operation in respect of Vote 24 - justice and equality, which now concludes.

We move on to Vote 25 - Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission. I invite questions and contributions from members. As no one is offering, I propose to move on to the final of the six subheads, Vote 41 - Policing Authority. Are there any members offering?

Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire: It is not the most relevant question on financing but it relates to the Policing Authority. The Commission on the Future of Policing envisions significant structural change to the oversight bodies. Presumably, that requires legislation. Can the Minister give an update on the legislation required to give effect to that? I probably will not agree with all of it but it would be useful to have an update. Related to that, the Minister has had some commentary on the Commission on the Future of Policing in Ireland and the appointments process for the strategic threat assessment centre and co-ordinator, although I understand he is considering another title now. Will that require legislation or will he establish it through some form of secondary legislation?

Deputy Charles Flanagan: In respect of the new legislative regime and the policing and community safety Bill, we have an implementation plan for delivery on the recommendations in the report of the Commission on the Future of Policing in Ireland. The expectation is that the general scheme of the policing and community safety Bill will be published by the end of the third quarter of this year. That will allow for its introduction early next year, perhaps, but I will keep the committee informed of developments. The new body in respect of the security of the State will be under the remit of the Department of the Taoiseach in the first instance, and that is where the implementation group for the overall body is. Again, I will be happy to keep the committee informed on the legislative requirements in that regard. I understand from the Taoiseach's office that it is not anticipated that the new security regime will require specific legislation.

Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire: It may not require it but I believe it should be possible to bring forward some type of legislation or to bring the proposal to the Dáil for consideration. This is an important issue. It is a significant change to policing and security arrangements in this jurisdiction and it requires further oversight and discussion in the Dáil and perhaps in this committee.

Deputy Charles Flanagan: If the committee wishes to carry out a form of pre-regulatory scrutiny, perhaps along the same lines as it does pre-legislative scrutiny, I will be happy to accommodate it.

Chairman: Deputy Clare Daly has nothing further to add in this instance. We have completed addressing the Revised Estimates for 2019 covering Votes 20, 21, 22, 24, 25 and 41. I thank the Minister and his officials for assisting the committee with its consideration of the Revised Estimates.

Before we conclude, it is only fair to ask the Minister to note that members regularly express disappointment and exasperation regarding Private Members' Bills. It arose again this morning. We receive correspondence from you advising that there is ongoing consideration of the money message and that a decision on the matter will issue after a memorandum is brought to the Government's attention. The regularity of this and its effect of kicking Private Members' legislation, or non-Government legislation, down the road are causing significant vexation in this committee. There was a substantial expression in that at the earlier meeting this morning. I am bringing that to your attention as this is the first opportunity I have to do so. I ask that a more favourable and well-disposed disposition be adopted in respect of Private Members' Bills, just as we demonstrate towards all Government legislation you ask us to address, most often expeditiously, and which we continue to schedule in line with your requests. That sums up the situation.

Deputy Charles Flanagan: I take it the imminent departure of members means they do

not want me to reply.

Deputy Clare Daly: What the Chairman said speaks for us all.

Chairman: I was not putting you in the spot to give a reply but if you can and will, please do so.

Deputy Charles Flanagan: We currently have 50 justice and equality Private Members' Bills and 11 of them require a memorandum to the Government on the matter of a money message. I am very keen to engage in a positive way with the committee, notwithstanding the challenge I have. While I have 50 Private Members' Bills I have in excess of 50 Government Bills on programme for Government commitments on my desk. It is a total of 117 Bills. Many of those have been approved by this committee. I am keen to work with you, Chairman, and the members. You used the word "exasperation". It would trouble me if members of the committee were in a state of exasperation with the Government so I will see what I can do to assist.

Chairman: I have not exaggerated. I have accurately reflected.

Deputy Clare Daly: Absolutely.

Chairman: To conclude, respecting co-operation is a two-way street. You will have ours but we would appreciate yours in return.

Message to Dáil

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

The Select Committee on Justice and Equality has completed its consideration of the following Further Revised Estimates for public services for the year ending 31 December 2019: Vote 20 - An Garda Síochána, Vote 21 - prisons, Vote 22 - Courts Service, Vote 24 - justice and equality, Vote 25 - Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission and Vote 41 - Policing Authority.

Under Standing Order 89(2) the message is deemed to be the report of the committee.

The select committee adjourned at 12 noon *sine die*.