Focused Policy Assessment: Seniors Alert Scheme

Finance and Evaluation Unit

Department of Rural and Community Development

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**An Roinn Forbartha
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Summary

Introduction

This paper presents the findings of an evaluation of the Seniors Alert Scheme (SAS). The purpose of the evaluation is to improve the understanding and future operation of the scheme. An overview of the SAS is provided below followed by a number of findings and recommendations.

Overview of the scheme

The aim of the SAS is to "enable older persons, of limited means, to continue to live securely in their homes with confidence, independence and peace of mind".

The scheme was established in 2010 and has been under the remit of Department of Rural and Community Development (DRCD) since 2017. Administration of the scheme has been undertaken by Pobal since 2015.

The scheme currently provides funding for Personal Monitored Alarms (a base unit and pendant), installation services, and one year's free monitoring for new participants. For an individual to be eligible to apply to the SAS they must be 65 years of age or older and satisfy a number of other criteria e.g. being of limited means and living alone for significant periods of time during the day.

Registered local community based voluntary and not-for-profit organisations send applications to Pobal on behalf of individual applicants. Once an application has been approved by Pobal, contracted service providers are contacted by the local community organisations to arrange for the installation of equipment for the approved participants. In addition to supplying equipment, service provides also operate monitoring centres which respond to activation of the alarms.

Between 2015 and 2020 over €19 million was allocated to the scheme. The scheme is funded by the Exchequer but over the last three years, €9 million (56%) out of a total of €16 million has come from the Dormant Accounts Fund. There were approximately 79,082 individuals approved for the scheme between 2015 and 2020.

Findings and recommendations

Nine findings and three recommendations are made in this paper.

1. **Delivery model**
    -   The current delivery model is generally functioning well. Service providers and local community organisations interviewed for this paper spoke positively about the scheme delivery mechanism.
    -   Currently local community organisations apply for the scheme on behalf individuals as it has a community based focus. There were 662 local community organisations engaged with the scheme at the end of 2020.
    -   Completed installations refers to the number of approved applicants that have had their personal monitored alarm systems installed by service providers. On average 18,000 installations have been completed each year over the last three years. The number of completed installations has not deviated more than 5% from the number of approved participants over this period, apart from in 2020 when completed installations were 10% below approved participants due to issues relating to Covid-19.
    -   There is a procedure for the return of equipment in section 8 of the SAS Reporting and Procedures Manual for community organisations. However, the number of installations re-using existing stock from non-active participants is low i.e. less than 1% of installations between 2017 and 2020.
    -   It is unclear how many reported participants remain active or engaged with the scheme once they have had their equipment installed. Official figures on the number of active users are considered to be overstated.

2. **Measurement and reporting**
    -   There is a range of data and information collected for the scheme and set out in the scheme's annual reports. However, this could be further improved.
    -   For example, there is either no data, or no uniform data / reporting on the number of active users, churn, and categorisation of user call logs.

3. **Profile of participants**
    -   The average age of scheme participants is over 80 years (52%) and most scheme participants are female (65%). The majority of participants who joined the scheme were living alone (57%), with 7% living alone for significant periods of the day. Many participants (51%) have stated healthcare as a basis for registering for the scheme.

4. **Geographic variation in participation**
    -   12% of those aged over 65 in Ireland participate in the scheme. However, there is significant variation in participation by county. Offaly (19%) has

the highest proportion of over 65s on the scheme and Louth (8%) has the lowest participation rate.

5. **Increasing demand**
   - Due to ageing demographics the scheme is likely to face increasing demand in the future. This will lead to associated funding pressures on the scheme. Based on estimations in this paper demand could increase by 42% and 85% in 2026 and 2036 respectively. This could potentially lead to scheme costs rising from €5 million in 2020 to €7.4 million and €8.5 million in 2026 and 2036.

6. **Scheme costs**
   - Hardware, installation, and monitoring services represent the most significant cost component of the scheme (85% of total grant funding in 2020). This cost category increased significantly in 2018 as a result of the introduction of one year's free monitoring services for new scheme participants from 2017 and increased take-up of GSM equipment. The next largest component of scheme costs is the administration fee paid to Pobal. This was 12% of total programme grant funding in 2020, down from a high[1] of 20% in 2016. Payments to local organisations represented 3% of grant funding in 2020.

7. **Potential cost savings**
   - One issue raised by stakeholders spoken to for this paper (i.e. service providers and local community organisations) is that there is an impression that more could be done to encourage the return and re-use of unused scheme equipment. This could potentially provide cost savings for the scheme.

8. **Impact**
   - It is difficult to assess the impact of the scheme. Call logs from suppliers indicate that the scheme facilitates summoning of emergency services for participants. In 2019, 62,000 calls (34% of calls) were made for reassurance or anxiety reasons, and 3,130 emergency calls (0.6% of calls) were made resulting in the Ambulance, Fire Brigade or an Garda Síochána being summoned[2]. While not fully clear, the remaining 65% of calls logged appear to be related to the operation of the alarms e.g. alarm testing.
   - Studies examining personal monitored alarms in other jurisdictions have found that they increase the length of time in which users can remain living independently in their own homes. If the scheme allows participants

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[1] This is a reflection of the set up and transfer costs associated with the first full year of scheme administration by Pobal.

[2] These figures are calculated using call logs for three out of the four service involved in the scheme. One service provider baskets most of their call logs into an 'other' category which if included in the base number would mask the identification of call types.

to live longer in their own homes it is significantly less costly compared to nursing home care paid by the State.
- Nonetheless, more work is needed to understand the impact of the SAS.

9. **Continued relevance**
- The scheme continues to be relevant on the basis that its rationale remains, there is increasing demand for the scheme, strong support in Government policy, and there is no publicly funded substitute to the scheme.

Recommendations

Based on the findings identified above three recommendations are made in this paper.

1. **Delivery model**
- More work could be done to address relatively low levels of take-up of the scheme in certain geographic areas. A new iteration of the scheme will be launched in Q3 2021, and this will involve consideration of what can be done to address under-represented areas. For example, this could involve working with Age Friendly Network officers in local authorities to encourage greater take-up of the scheme.
- Given, the low levels of re-installation of scheme equipment there is a need to encourage greater recovery and re-use of equipment. Improvements are being made in this area. For example in the next iteration of the scheme, Pobal have reserved the right to transfer the ownership of units from one local organisation to another to facilitate greater re-installation of returned units from different manufacturers. However, in the short to medium term existing procedures for return of equipment should also be reiterated by raising awareness and re-engaging with local community organisations on the matter.
- There is a need for a more formal consistent procedure to identify whether participants continue to be engaged with the scheme. As part of the new iteration of the scheme, service providers will be required to make test calls to users every month. This will help improve understanding of the number of active users on the scheme.

2. **Measurement and reporting**
- Certain metrics should be clarified for the scheme and included in annual reports. For example, the consistent inclusion of the number of active users, churn, and categorisation of user call logs would help improve transparency and understanding of the scheme.
- It is difficult to measure the impact of the SAS such as offering peace of mind to users. Nonetheless, the impact or benefit of the scheme could potentially be measured in a more systematic way. While challenging,

enhancing the reporting of call logs by service providers[3] to provide more detailed analysis of calls, e.g. number of unique callers and the average profile of calls, would help provide additional insight on the benefits of the scheme. This information would not fully represent the impact or benefits of the scheme but it could be used as a complement to other softer information on the scheme.

- Furthermore, a limited number of questions regularly asked from samples of participants could potentially be used to get their views on the operation of the scheme and the benefits of participation. These could be compared with the initial reasons they stated for joining the scheme to indicate whether perceived or expected benefits are being realised. In this respect, planned developments in this area will include case studies with local community organisations administering the scheme.

3. **Sustainability of the funding model**
   - Expected demographic changes suggests that the level of demand for the scheme is likely to increase in the future. This will place increasing pressure on funding the scheme. Since 2017, €2.3 million has been allocated to the scheme from the Exchequer on a yearly basis. This has been supplemented by up to an additional €3 million annual contribution from the Dormant Accounts Fund. Given that continued funding from the Dormant Accounts Fund is not certain on an ongoing basis, and the expected increase in demand outlined in this report, the current funding model is likely to be unsustainable in the medium to long term. As such, consideration should be given to improving the sustainability of the scheme-funding model, both in terms of the stability of the sources of funding, and financing increased demand into the future.

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[3] After the first year's free monitoring services expire, participants availing of the scheme enter a private relationship with service providers. Potential data collection from scheme participants may be limited as a result.

1 Introduction

1.1 Purpose of this paper

This paper is a Focused Policy Assessment[4] (FPA) of the Seniors Alert Scheme (SAS). The purpose of this paper is to assist with improving the understanding and future operation of the scheme. The SAS is funded by the Department of Rural and Community Development (DRCD).

The stated purpose of the SAS is to allow to "enable older persons, of limited means, to continue to live securely in their homes with confidence, independence and peace of mind".

The following areas of the scheme are examined in this paper:

- Background including policy context and operation of the scheme;
- Rationale and objective(s);
- Inputs - scheme funding;
- Outputs - approved participants and completed installations;
- Efficiency - comparing inputs relative to outputs and assessment of the operation of the scheme;
- Effectiveness - assessing the extent to which the scheme is meeting its objective(s); and
- Continued relevance.

1.2 Report structure

The structure of this report is as follows:

- **Chapter 2:** background, policy context, operation, rationale and objective(s);
- **Chapter 3:** inputs (scheme funding) and outputs;
- **Chapter 4:** efficiency and effectiveness;
- **Chapter 5:** continued relevance;
- **Chapter 6:** findings and recommendations
- **Appendix A:** notes to data;
- **Appendix B:** international approaches to the funding of personal monitored alarms; and

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[4] FPAs are part of the evaluation process for public sector programmes, which may examine various areas of a programme such as rationale, inputs, outputs etc.

- **Appendix C:** research on the effectiveness of personal monitored alarms.

1.3   Data and stakeholder consultation

Analysis of the scheme has been conducted using readily available data and information. The majority of the data and information used in this paper has been sourced from Pobal. The data examined in this paper relates to the years 2015 to 2020. Other data sources include DRCD, Oireachtas parliamentary questions and debates, and academic journals.

The following stakeholders were engaged to inform this review.

- **Pobal** who provide varying levels of management and support for a number of Department programmes including administration of the SAS;
- **Local Community Organisations** who sign up participants in their locality and interact with Pobal and their designated service provider as necessary. Those spoken include:
    - West Clare Family Resource Centre, Family Carers Ireland Limerick, SVDP Dundalk, Dunleek & District Text Alert, Cashel and District Social Services, and Castlebar Social Services CLG.
- **Services providers** who supply the personal monitored alarms[5], associated equipment and monitoring services. Those spoken to include:
    - Task Ltd, Tunstall Emergency Response Ltd, and Helplink South Ltd.

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[5] Personal monitored alarms refer to pendants or necklace/wristbands with a button that the user can press in case of an emergency. They are connected to a main unit, which allows for communication between a responder and the user. They are referred to by various names, including Personal Emergency Response Systems, Socially Monitored Alarms, Medical Monitored Alarms, and Safety Alarms Systems.

2 Background, rationale and objectives

2.1 Introduction

This chapter first sets out the background and policy context to the SAS. The operation of the scheme is then briefly discussed followed by the rationale and objective(s). International approaches to implementing personal monitored alarms in other jurisdictions are also highlighted for comparison.

2.2 Background

2.2.1 A SUPPORT FOR THE ELDERLY

Government policy aims to support the most vulnerable in society such as the elderly. The National Positive Ageing Strategy[6] targets a society in which "the equality, independence, participation, care, self-fulfilment and dignity of old people are pursued at all times". The 2020 Programme for Government[7] also emphasises government support for an ageing population to live independently for as long as possible. The SAS is one of a number of public supports put in place to support the elderly in Ireland.

2.2.2 ESTABLISHMENT OF THE SCHEME

The SAS evolved from the Community Support for Older People (CSOP) scheme, which was introduced by the Minister for Social, Community and Family Affairs in 1996[8]. The stated purpose of the CSOP was to provide funding for initiatives to improve security and social support for vulnerable older people (i.e. those aged 65 years and older).

Under the CSOP funding was provided for door locks, window locks, door chains, security lighting, smoke alarms and also towards the once off installation costs of personal monitored alarm systems[9]. The CSOP was suspended in 2009 to allow for a review of the operation of the scheme with a view to relaunching the scheme[10]. Average annual expenditure on the scheme had risen from an average of €2.3m between 2002

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[6] Department of Health, The National Positive Ageing Strategy, 2013.
[7] Programme for Government – Our Shared Future, June 2020.
[8] Pobal, Seniors Alert Scheme Annual Report 2018, October 2019.
[9] Oireachtas Debates, Social Welfare Benefits, 16 Oct 1996.
[10] Oireachtas Debates, Security of the Elderly, 22 April 2009.

and 2006 to €4.3m in 2008[11], adding emphasis for a review of the scheme in a time of fiscal constraint.

The CSOP was replaced by the Seniors Alert Scheme (SAS) in April 2010, under the remit of the Department of Community, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs. The initial plan for the SAS was to expand on the range of equipment provided to include interior emergency lighting with the possibility of more equipment being covered in the future. However, in March 2012, a decision was made to focus on the purchase and installation of personal monitored alarms at a maximum cost of €250 per alarm. This was in response to increased demand and budgetary constraints as the scheme was fully subscribed before the end of each year[12].

Responsibility for the administration of the scheme was transferred to the Department of Environment, Community and Local Government in 2011. In September 2015 the Department of Environment, Community and Local Government delegated responsibility for the day-to-day administration of the scheme to Pobal. As part of this work, Pobal developed and implemented an online system for registrations and applications.

2.2.3 TERMS AND CONDITIONS

Some of the key terms and conditions of the scheme are set out below. This includes:

- The equipment and services provided to participants;
- Payments to local community organisations; and
- Eligibility criteria for applicants and local community organisations.

Equipment and Services Provided to Participants

Currently grant funding is provided for Personal Monitored Alarms (a base unit and pendant), installation, and one year of monitoring costs. A variety of other home security equipment was initially funded under the SAS. However, in 2012 the decision was made to switch to offering only Personal Monitored Alarms rather than offering the variety of security equipment initially available in an effort to reduce costs. A maximum cost of €250 was also set per alarm to remove a more complex structure that was previously in place[13].

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[11] Department of Community, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs, Review of Scheme of Community Support for Older People, April 2010.
[12] Oireachtas Debates, Security of the Elderly, 13 June 2012.
[13] Under the CSOP, there were set grant levels per piece of individual equipment. A maximum grant level of €750 was available if all items available under the scheme were required. However, few applications of this nature were received under the CSOP.

With a relaunch of the scheme in 2017, one year's free monitoring services was provided to encourage greater participation in the scheme.

Payments to Local Community Organisations

Local Community Organisations register participants in their locality and interact with Pobal and their designated service provider as necessary. As part of the relaunch of the scheme in October 2017, local community organisations are paid a flat rate of €10 per approved application. Previously, a fixed rate of €7.50 had been payed per completed installation. However, local community organisations had argued that this amount was insufficient to cover the associated costs of processing an application and the amount was increased as a result.

Eligibility Criteria for Applicants and Local Community Organisations

For an individual to be eligible for the SAS they must satisfy the following criteria:

Be of an age 65 years or older, and

- Of limited means or resources;
- Living alone, living with another person who meets the eligibility criteria, living alone for significant periods of time during the day, or is a carer to someone else in their household;
- Resides within geographical area of the relevant registered local community organisation;
- Be able to benefit from the equipment supplied; and
- Prepared to maintain contact with the registered local community organisation.

Currently an organisation wishing to partake in the scheme must meet the following criteria:

- Be a community, voluntary and not-for-profit organisation;
- Have a recognised structure (trust, industrial and provident society, unincorporated association, a company limited by guarantee, limited company or a designated activity company);
- Demonstrate a track record of working with or providing services to older people within their community; and
- Accept the terms and conditions of the scheme.

The eligibility criteria for the scheme has remained mostly consistent since the launch of the CSOP. However, there have been some changes, which are set out in Table 1 below.

Table 1: Eligibility criteria, 1996 - 2017

Year	Changes to Terms and Conditions
1996	The CSOP was launched. For an applicant to be eligible they must be aged 65 or over, living alone or in a household comprised exclusively of other older persons, and be considered vulnerable. The latter was defined as being a person of advanced age, having a disability, living in social or physical isolation or a victim of crime. Local community organisations administering the scheme had to be community or voluntary in nature, and or provide community services and support for older people.
2010	The SAS was launched. The eligibility requirement that the individual must be classified as vulnerable (defined as being a person of advanced age, having a disability, living in social or physical isolation or a victim of crime) was removed. Other requirements were added including that the applicant must be of limited means or resources and be prepared to maintain contact with the local community organisation with whom they registered. Additionally, local community organisations wishing to partake in the scheme were required to have a recognised structure.
2015	Responsibility for day-to-day administration of the scheme was transferred to Pobal. Community and voluntary organisations wishing to partake in the scheme had to register with Pobal.
2017	The SAS was relaunched. Eligibility criteria were expanded to include over 65s living alone for significant periods of time during the day, or those who are a carer to someone else in their household. One year's free monitoring was introduced for new participants. Other minor changes were made to aspects such as the basis of payments to organisations, the process for assessment of applications, and the lot (geographic area) structure of the scheme.

Source: Review of Community Support for Older People and Pobal.

2.3   Policy context

The SAS is one of a number of Government supports aimed at benefitting the elderly in Ireland and as such has been referred to in a number of recent Government policies.

Government policy on community development refers to the importance of the SAS for social inclusion[14] with the scheme encouraging "community support for vulnerable older

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[14] Gov.ie, Community Development Policy, 15 November 2018.

people in our communities, so they can live securely in their homes with confidence, independence and peace of mind".

The SAS is also discussed in the Roadmap for Social Inclusion 2020-2025[15] as one of the supports that assists with social inclusion of the elderly. More recently, the Programme for Government - Our Shared Future[16] (2020) identifies the SAS as a measure that can help improve community development and social inclusion. The Programme (2020) commits to developing and enhancing the scheme to adapt to changing demographics and technological advancements.

2.4   Operation of the scheme

DRCD provides Exchequer funding to Pobal on an annual basis to administer the scheme on behalf of the Department. Monies from the Dormant Accounts Fund are also used to fund the scheme.

Pobal undertakes a periodic tender process for the hardware, installation and monitoring costs of security pendants provided to participants. Pobal have completed two tender processes to date (in 2014[17] and 2017[18]), and one is currently in process (2021[19]). Pobal also operates an online portal through which local community organisations register and submit applications.

Applicants apply for the scheme at a local level through registered community based voluntary and not-for-profit organisations. Individuals wishing to apply to the scheme must contact their local community organisations who are registered with Pobal. The local community organisation completes an online application[20] form on their behalf, which is then submitted to Pobal. When an application has been approved by Pobal, the registered organisation contacts a designated service provider to arrange the installation of equipment for the individual.

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[15] Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection, Roadmap for Social Inclusion 2020-2025, January 2020.
[16] Programme for Government – Our Shared Future, June 2020.
[17] ETENDERS, Contract Notice, 2014.
[18] ETENDERS, Telecare Equipment & Alarm Monitoring in Connection with the Seniors Alert Scheme, 2017.
[19] ETENDERS, Supply, Installation & Provisions of Telecare Equipment & Alarm Monitoring in connection with the Seniors Alert Scheme, 2021.
[20] A small number of local community organisations are paper-based with Pobal submitting applications to the online system on their behalf.

Local community organisations are paid a flat fee of €10 per approved application to cover the costs associated with registering applications. Local community organisations also act as an intermediary between participants and service providers, assisting in the installation process, having responsibility for organising the replacement of any equipment damaged and communicating with Pobal where necessary.

Personal monitored alarms are supplied by contracted service providers. Since 2018,[21] Ireland has been divided into seven lots (geographic areas) and each service provider is limited to providing services to a maximum of two lots. Access to these lots are provided for under a competitive tender process. They are designed to provide greater competition and continuation of service in the event of market exit by a service provider. As of November 2017, there are four service providers in place, three of whom supply services in two lots.

Service providers are contacted by local community organisations when an application has been approved, and must complete installations within 10 days. In addition to supplying equipment, service provides operate monitoring centres, which respond to activation of alarms.

The involvement of local community organisations in delivering the scheme is intended to allow for the provision of community support to participants. Local community organisations are to keep in contact with scheme participants and provide support where necessary. At the end of 2019 just over half (51%) of scheme participants had joined the scheme due to an existing health condition[22]. In addition, internationally, personal monitored alarms supplied under similar schemes are most commonly used for health-based emergencies such as falls[23]. The health benefits of the scheme were raised in conversations with stakeholders. For example, service provider call logs for 2019 highlight that up to 34% of calls were related to mental health e.g. anxiety / worries.

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[21] A tender process for the scheme was underway as this paper was being written. Under the tender rules the number of lots are to be reduced from seven to four, with service providers limited to providing services to a maximum of two lots.
[22] Pobal, Seniors Alert Scheme – Annual Progress Report 2019, May 2020.
[23] Stokke, R., 2016. The Personal Emergency Response System as a Technology Innovation in Primary Health Care Services: An Integrative Review. *Journal of Medical Internet Research*, [online] 18(7). Available at: <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/27417422/> [Accessed 5 January 2021].

A new iteration of the scheme is currently under development with plans to launch in Q3 2021[24]. It will feature revised terms and conditions that will slightly alter the operation of the scheme. For example, the number of lots in the new iteration of the scheme will be reduced from seven to four.

2.5   Rationale and objectives

As discussed earlier in this chapter the SAS was launched in 2010 having evolved from the Community Support for Older People (CSOP), a scheme which provided funding for initiatives to improve security and social support for vulnerable older people. The current stated objective of the SAS is to "to enable older persons, of limited means, to continue to live securely in their homes with confidence, independence and peace of mind"[25].

2.6   International approaches to funding personal monitored alarms

A comparison of approaches to the provision of personal monitored alarms internationally (the UK, Australia (the State of Victoria) and New Zealand) based on publicly available information is highlighted below. More detail can be found in Appendix B of this paper. These schemes offer a similar service to the SAS but vary in their rationale, terms, and conditions.

In the UK, some local authorities operate personal monitored alarm systems for older or disabled people. There is significant variance in the form that the schemes take on a local authority basis with differences in price, eligibility criteria and terms and conditions. The rationale for the schemes also vary by local authority. Most highlight a broad array of potential benefits, including security, peace of mind, and health.

The State Government of Victoria in Australia have an initiative called Personal Alert Victoria (PAV). This provides personal monitored alarms free of charge to frail, isolated older people, and people with disabilities to help them to remain living in their homes[26]. The applicant must meet a set of mandatory criteria, which is similar to the criteria of the SAS apart from additional medical criteria. The scheme has similar objectives to the SAS i.e. supporting older people and people with disabilities to live independently in

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[24] ETENDERS, Supply, Installation & Provisions of Telecare Equipment & Alarm Monitoring in connection with the Seniors Alert Scheme, 2021.

[25] Pobal, Seniors Alert Scheme, 2020.

[26] Victoria State Government, Personal Alert Victoria program and service guidelines, 2019.

their own homes. However, unlike the SAS the scheme has a healthcare basis as the applicant must have an underlying medical condition in order to be eligible for the scheme.

In New Zealand,[27] the government contributes towards the costs of a personal monitored alarm service for those suffering from ongoing or age-related health problems or for those with a disability caused by poor health or an injury. The applicant must also be eligible for publicly funded healthcare. The personal monitored alarms are referred to as "medical monitored alarms" and are functionally identical to those provided under the SAS. The initial cost of purchasing the equipment is borne by the applicant but the government pays for the weekly cost of the alarm service.

Therefore, while the SAS has some similarities to the examples listed above, it does not explicitly identify a health-based rationale, in contrast to similar schemes in New Zealand and Australia (State of Victoria) for example.

2.7   Summary and conclusions

The SAS was launched in 2010, having evolved from the CSOP. Policy responsibility has resided with DRCD since 2017. The scheme continues to have support in Government policy as evidenced by the commitment to the scheme in the Programme for Government (2020).

Pobal administers the scheme on behalf of the Department, including approving applications and tendering for scheme equipment and services. Service providers operating in distinct geographical areas (lots) provide equipment, installation and monitoring services as part of the scheme. Local community organisations are responsible for registering participants in their locality, and interact with Pobal and designated service providers as part of the process.

The purpose of the SAS is to enable older persons, of limited means, to continue to live securely in their homes with confidence, independence and peace of mind. A comparison of approaches internationally (the UK, Australia (the State of Victoria) and New Zealand) indicates that unlike the SAS such schemes primarily have a healthcare focus.

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[27] New Zealand Government, Personal Medical Alarms, October 2020.

3 Inputs and outputs

3.1   Introduction

This chapter examines the inputs (grant funding) and outputs (approved participants and completed installations) of the scheme. The data examined in this chapter concerns the five-year period Pobal (i.e. 2015 - 2020) has administered the scheme. While the scheme has been in operation since 2010, previous iterations of the scheme covered a much broader range of interventions (e.g. door locks, security lighting etc.), and are not comparable to the current scheme which concerns personal monitored alarms only. Data relating to hardware, installation and monitoring services is examined based on two period's service providers were contracted to the scheme i.e. 2015 to 2017, and 2018 to 2020.

3.2   Inputs (Grant Funding)

The following data/information is examined in this section.

- Total Grant Funding;
- Application Stage Grant Funding;
- Administration Grant Funding; and
- Hardware, Installation and Monitoring Grant Funding.

3.2.1 TOTAL GRANT FUNDING

Total grant funding of the scheme is the sum of monies paid by the Department to organisations for processing applications, to Pobal for administration of the scheme, and to service providers for hardware, installation and monitoring services. Total grant funding does not include fees borne by participants themselves. As can be seen in figure 1, between 2015[28] and 2020, total grant funding amounted to over €19 million. Approximately 78% (€16 million) of this funding was provided between 2018 and 2020. The large increase in 2018 reflects increased take-up as a result of the relaunch of the scheme in 2017, and the introduction of one year's free monitoring services for new participants.

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[28] Pobal began administration of the scheme in September 2015 and as such data is only available for four months of 2015 (i.e. September – December).

**Figure 1: Total Grant Funding, 2015 – 2020**
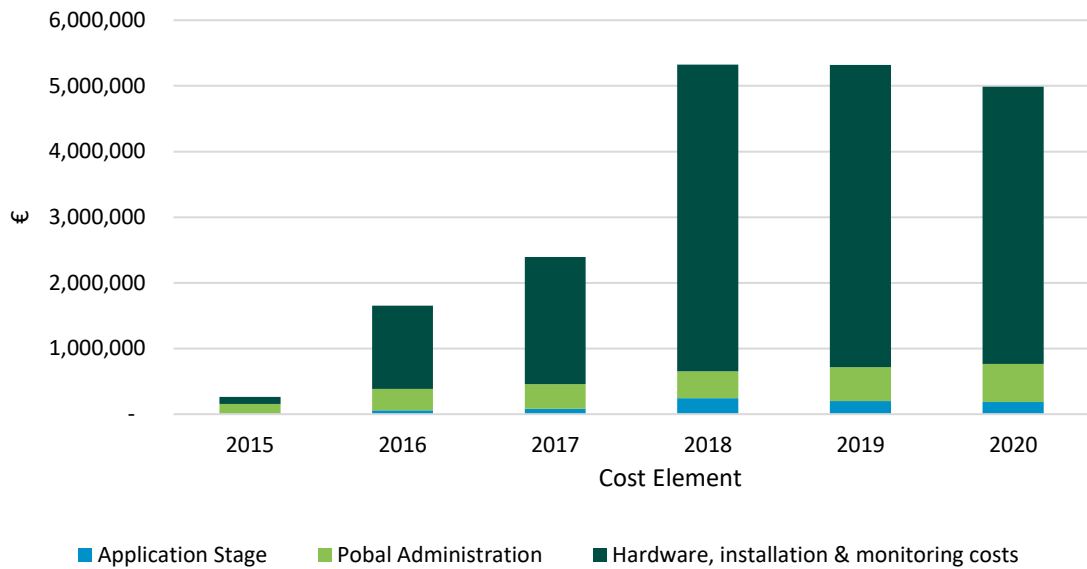
Source: Pobal

3.2.2 APPLICATION STAGE GRANT FUNDING

Payments to local community organisations are the costs payable for registering approved applications to the scheme. These costs are comprised of the fixed fee paid per completed installation and payments relating to the replacement of faulty equipment. Since 2017, local community organisations are paid a fixed rate of €10 per application of the scheme. Previously the fixed rate had been set at €7.50 per completed installation. However, this was changed as local community organisations had indicated that this amount was insufficient to cover the associated costs of processing an application.

The largest payment (€241,360) to local community organisations was made in 2018. As can be seen in figure 2, payments to local community organisations reached a peak in 2018, and has declined thereafter. This is a reflection of the number of approved participants on the scheme each year.

**Figure 2: Application Stage Grant Funding, 2015 - 2020**
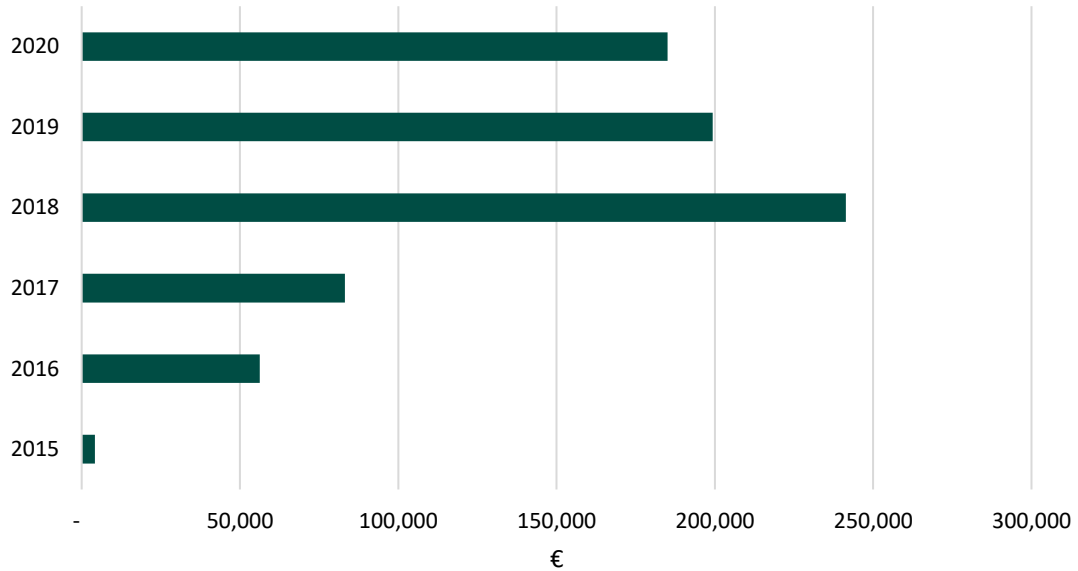
Source: Pobal

3.2.3 ADMINSTRATION GRANT FUNDING

Pobal has administered the SAS since 2015. An administration fee is to Pobal annually. The administration fee reflects staff costs, accommodation, and other corporate overheads. Between 2015 and 2020, €2.4 million was paid to Pobal. As in figure 3, the largest administration fee (€580,000) was paid to Pobal in 2020. The administration fee has consistently risen each year from a low of €331,000 in 2016, which was Pobal's first full year administering the scheme. The increase in administration costs reflects the significant rise in approved applications to the scheme since 2017.

**Figure 3: Pobal Administration Fee, 2015 - 2020**
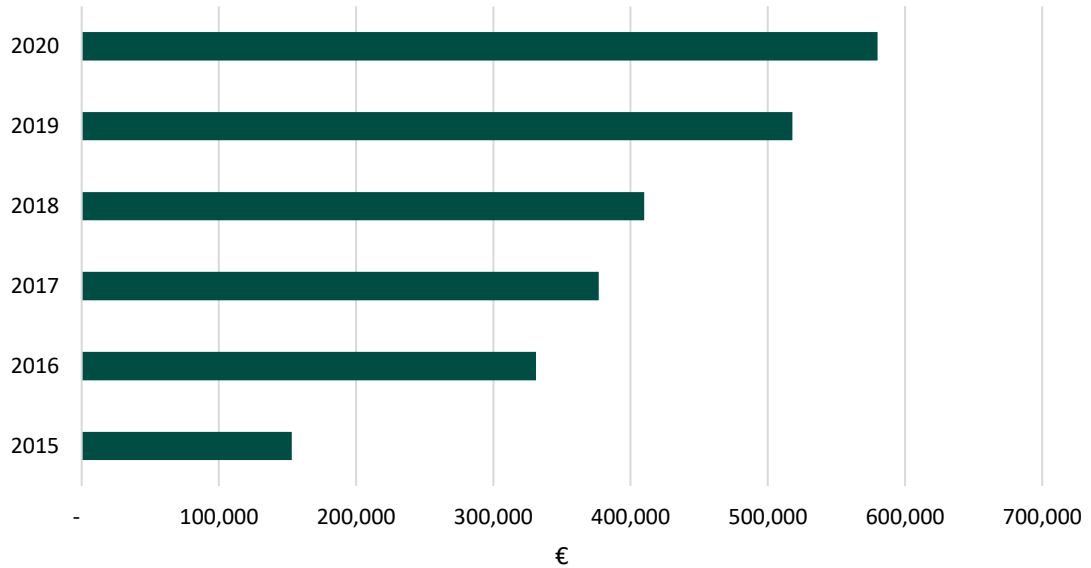
Source: Pobal

3.2.4 HARDWARE, INSTALLATION AND MONITORING GRANT FUNDING

Grant funding relating to hardware, installation and monitoring services are paid to contracted service providers. Increases in grant funding are a reflection of increases in approved applications to the scheme. The largest amount paid was in 2018 (€4.6 million). From November 2017, one year's free monitoring services was introduced for new participants. This increased hardware, installation and monitoring grant funding by an average of €57 per participant, and to a total of €1.1 million more in 2018 than would otherwise have been the case.

Figure 4: Hardware, Installation and Monitoring Grant Funding, 2015 - 2020
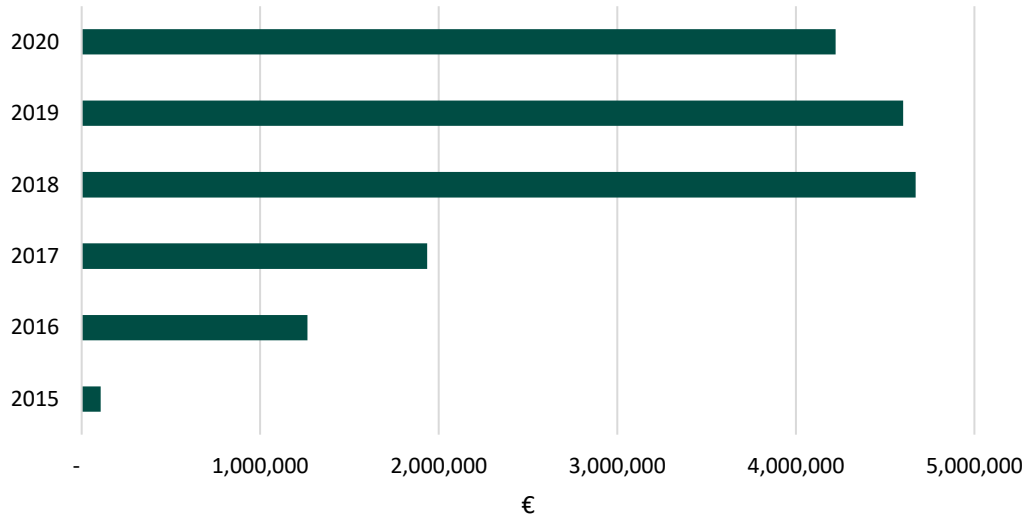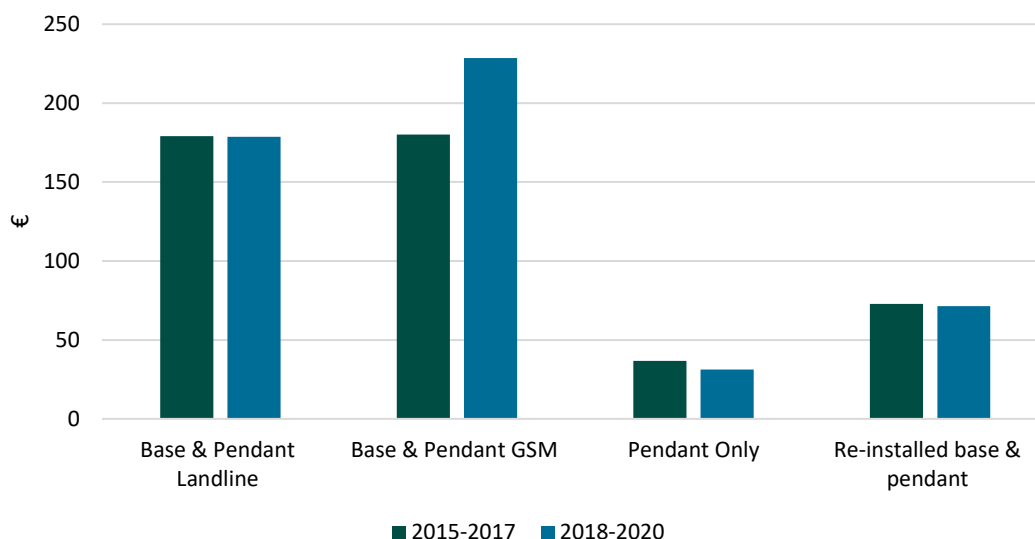

Source: Pobal

In terms of equipment, participants of the scheme are provided with a base unit and pendant. Base units come in two separate configurations. One configuration is designed to connect to a landline while the other connects to a mobile network using a sim card (GSM[29]). 84% of the scheme participants have chosen a base and pendant with a landline connection, while 16% of users have chosen a GSM base unit and pendant. On average, GSM units are €50 more expensive than a landline connection. Additionally, GSM units come with an additional fee (between €50 and €72 per year) borne by the participant, to enable the device to maintain a connection to a mobile network.

The total average cost of a landline base and pendant package have remained similar between the two periods of the service provider tenders undertaken to date i.e. 2015-2017 and 2018-2020. However, the average costs of GSM base and pendant package has increased by 26% (an average of €48). Service providers have cited evolving technology as the reason for this increase in price, with newer GSM units required to connect to 4G and 5G networks.

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[29] GSM stands for Global System for Mobile Communication.

Figure 5: Equipment Item Cost Comparison (ex VAT), 2015 - 2017 and 2018- 2020[30]

Source: Pobal

As previously noted, with the relaunch of the scheme in 2017 one year's free monitoring services were introduced for new participants. Monitoring costs are paid on a yearly basis at a fixed fee and there is no difference in monitoring costs between unit type (i.e. landline or GSM). The average annual monitoring cost per participant in 2020 was €53.

One issue raised during conversations with stakeholders is the ability for re-use of equipment. The number of installations that occurred using recovered stock (voluntary returns by participants) was less than 1% of installations between 2017 and 2020. It is estimated that the average cost of installation of a base from existing stock and a new pendant (either landline or GSM) is €124[31] (including one year's free monitoring). This is 51% cheaper than the average cost of the installation of a new base and pendant which is €242 on average. However, it should be noted that this does not take account of the fact that there would also be costs associated with recovery and re-use of equipment.

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[30] Equipment item costs in this graph represent averages across the two periods in which service providers were contracted to the scheme i.e. 2015 to 2017 and 2018 to 2020.

[31] Pobal, Seniors Alert Scheme – Annual Progress Report 2019.

3.3 Outputs

The outputs of the scheme are assessed in this section by examining the profile of approved participants and the number completed installations between 2015 and 2020. It is important to note that the number of approved participants reflects the number of individuals who are registered for the scheme each year. However, after one year's free monitoring services, these individuals are deemed to have private arrangements with service providers. Because of this, there is limited information available on whether these individuals continue to avail of the service. Therefore, official figures on the number of active users are considered to be overstated.

3.3.1 PROFILE OF PARTICIPANTS
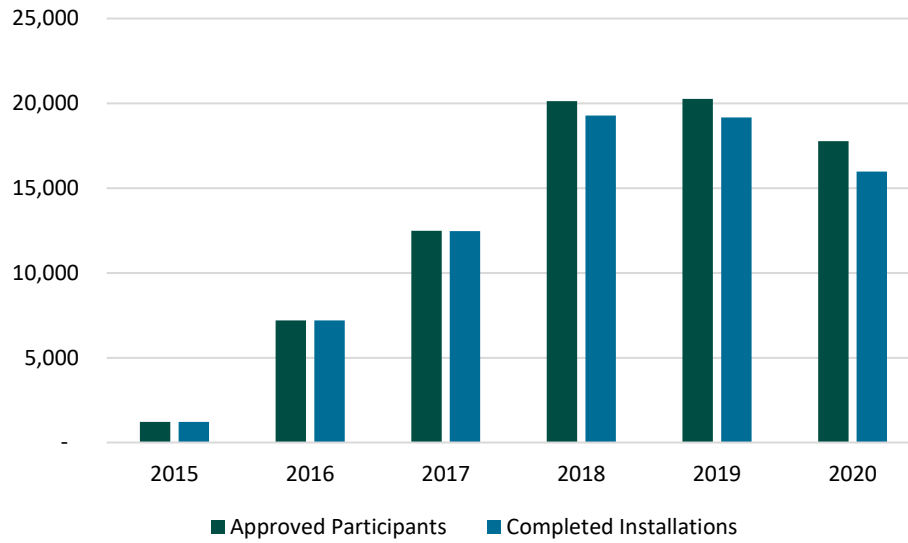**Total number of approved participants**

The number of approved participants refers to applicants who have had their applications processed and approved by Pobal since 2015. Between 2015 and 2020 79,082 participants were approved under the scheme and 820 participants had exited the scheme[32].

The number of approved participants per annum has increased significantly since 2015, when the scheme was transferred to Pobal. In the period of 2018 to 2020, there was an average of 19,390 approved participants each year. This figure is more than double the number of approved applicants in 2016, the first full year of Pobal's administration of the scheme. The re-launch of the scheme in 2017 included the introduction of one year's free monitoring services, and a significant publicity campaign. This resulted in increases in the number of people applying to the scheme. However, the number of approved participants decreased slightly in 2020. Conversations with Pobal indicate that this was because of the impact Coivd-19.

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[32] The 820 reported to have exited the scheme is likely considerably lower than the actual number due to the reasons outlined in section 3.3 of this report.

Figure 6: Approved Participants and Completed Installations, 2015 - 2020

Source: Pobal

Number of participants by county

Figure 7 shows the number of approved participants by county and the proportion of over 65s who have taken up the scheme in each county. The largest number of approved participants are in Dublin (17,589) while Leitrim is the county with the lowest number of participants (643). Based on county population statistics from the 2016 Census, 12% of all people aged 65 years and over have participated in the scheme to date. Offaly (19%) has the highest proportion of over 65s participating in the scheme while Louth (8%) has the lowest level of uptake.

Figure 7: Number of approved participants by county, 2015 - 2020
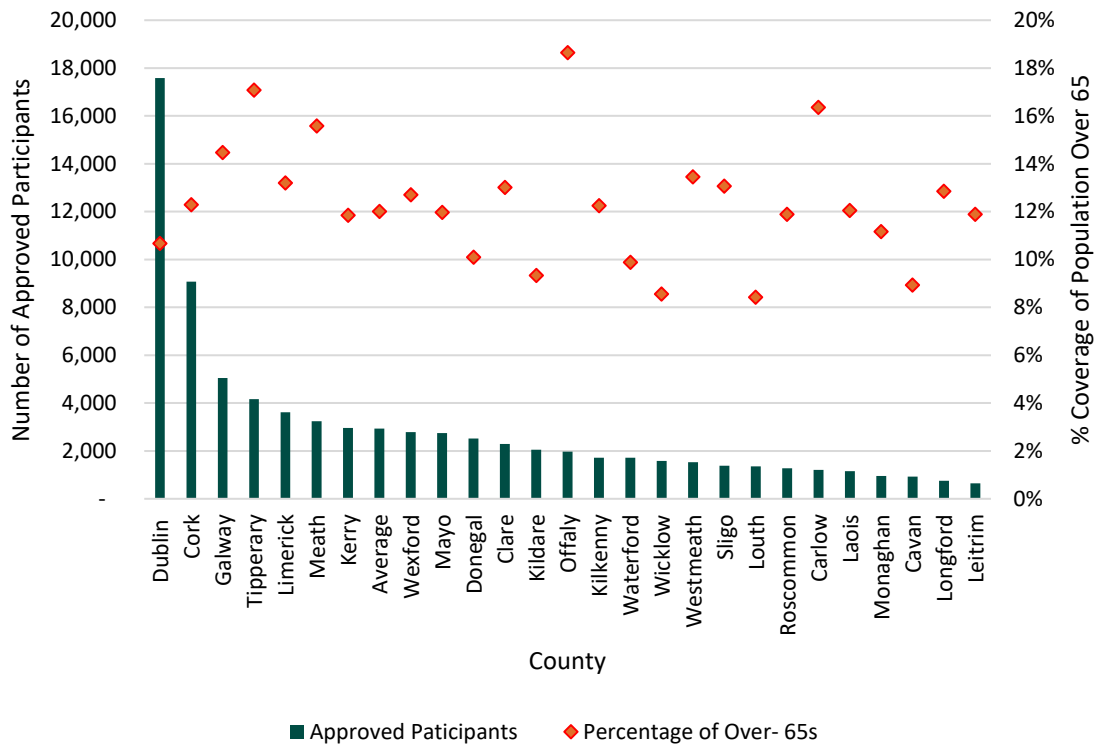
Source: Pobal

Figure 8 shows the percentage of the over 65 population that is covered by the scheme by county.

Fig 8: Percentage Coverage of Over 65 Population by County, 2015 - 2020
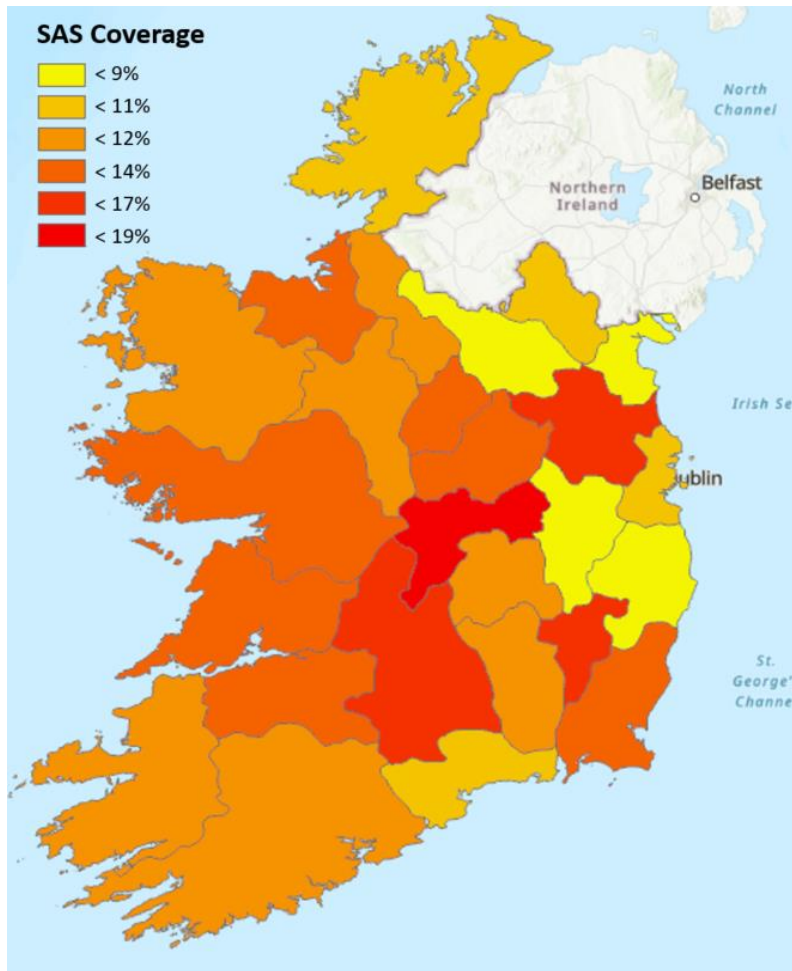
Source: Pobal

Living status of participants

The majority of participants who had joined the scheme were living alone (57%), with 7% living alone for significant periods of the day. This means that at the end of 2020 there were 43,444 people living alone who had joined the scheme, representing 28% of the over 65 population who live alone in Ireland[33].

A significant majority of participants (74%) had joined the scheme through organisations located in urban areas, with the rest (26%) joining the scheme through organisations

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[33] CSO, Census of Population 2016 - Profile 3 An Age Profile of Ireland

located in rural areas. This is despite the fact that 71% of local community organisations were based in rural areas, and 29% were located in urban areas.

Age and gender profile of participants

At the end of 2020, 52% of scheme participants were aged 80 or over. The average age of participants was 81 years. The age profile of participants has remained broadly consistent since 2015[34].

At the end of 2019, almost two thirds of SAS participants (65%) were female. This is a higher representation than the total number of females aged over 65 in Ireland (53%). However, the data shows that there is a slightly higher proportion of males aged over 85 (37%) participating in the scheme than in other age categories.

Figure 9: SAS Age Cohorts and Percentage Coverage of over 65s in Ireland by age category, 2015 - 2020
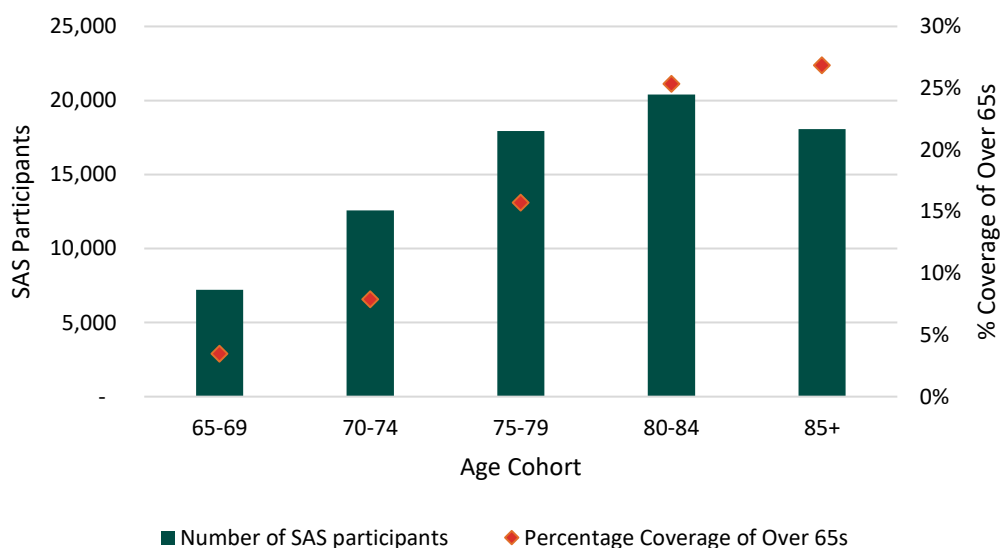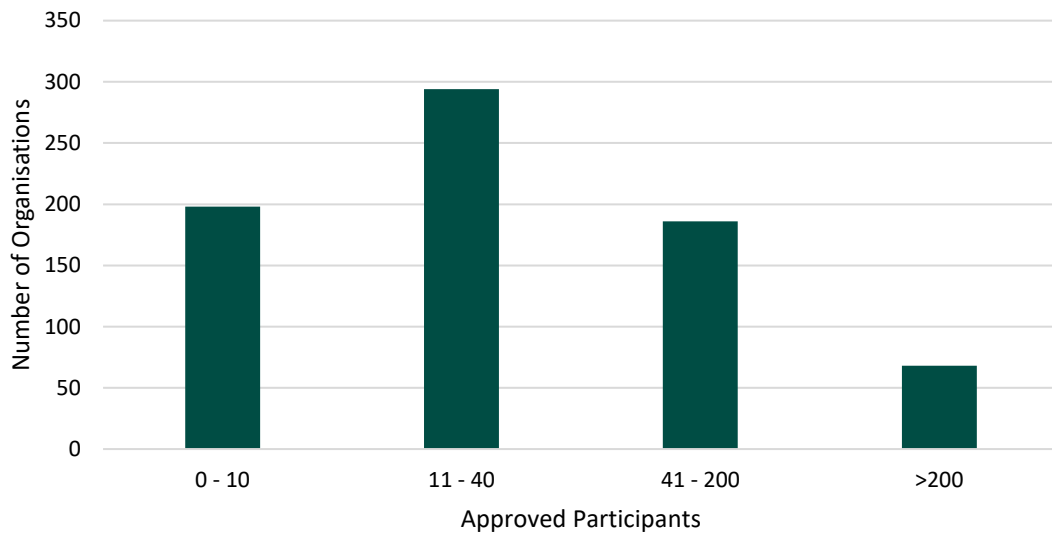

Source: Pobal

Approved Participants by Local Community Organisation

There is significant variation in the number of applicants approved per organisation. Of the 700 local organisations that have approved participants as part of the scheme since

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[34] Pobal, Seniors Alert Scheme – Annual Progress Report 2019

2015, 370[35] (53%) processed 25 applications or less in total. 34 organisations (representing 5% of total organisations) have processed 57% (43, 523) of total approved applications. One organisation has been responsible for processing 10% (7,712) of all approved applications.

Figure 10: Approved Participants by Local Community Organisation, 2015 - 2020

Source: Pobal

3.3.2 COMPLETED INSTALLATIONS

Completed installations refers to the number of approved applicants that have had their personal monitored alarm systems installed since 2015. The number of completed installations differs from the number of approved applicants, as there is a lag between approval and the installation of equipment. In addition, there is also a significant number of cancellations post approval, prior to installation[36]. Despite the notable increase in the number of approved applicants over the last three years, the number of completed installations has not deviated by more than 5% from the number of approved participants, apart from in 2020 when completed installations were 10% below approved participants due to issues relating to Covid-19. For example, there were 19,172 completed installations in 2019 out of a total of 20, 270 approved participants. It should

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[35] 56 of these local organisations are now listed as inactive i.e. they are no longer registered with the scheme as of 2020

[36] This is due to participants changing their mind e.g. when they realise they will have to pay for SIM Credit and/or for monitoring fees after the first year.

be noted that some participants approved at the end of a year would not have an installation completed until the following year.

3.4 Summary and conclusions

This chapter examined the inputs (grant funding) and outputs (approved participants and completed installations) of the scheme. The data examined in this chapter covered the five year period under which the scheme has been administered by Pobal i.e. September 2015 - December 2020.

Inputs

- Between 2015[37] and 2020, total grant funding amounted to over €19 million. Approximately 78% (€16 million) of this funding was provided between 2018 and 2020;
- Local community organisations are paid €10 per approved application. Payments to local community organisations reached a peak in 2018 (€241,360), and has declined slightly thereafter. Payments have reflected the level of demand for the scheme in a given year.
- An annual fee is paid to Pobal for administration of the scheme. The total administration fee paid to Pobal between 2015 and 2020 was €2,368,771. This service fee paid has risen year on year since 2015 in line with increases in approved participants;
- Participants of the scheme are provided with a base unit and pendant and one free year's monitoring services. Base units come in two separate configurations. Units that connect to a mobile network (GSM) are slightly more expensive (€229) on average than units connecting to a landline (€179). The average monitoring cost was €53 between 2018 and 2020;
- Grant funding on hardware, installation and monitoring peaked in 2018 at €4.6 million, more than doubling from €1.9 million in 2017. Grant funding has declined marginally thereafter.

Outputs

- Between September 2015 and December 2020, 79,082 participants had been approved to the scheme, representing 12% of the total population aged over 65. The number of approved participants per annum has increased significantly following a re-launch of the scheme in 2017;
- Dublin is the county with the largest number of approved participants (17,589) while Leitrim has the lowest number of participants (643). Offaly (19%) has the

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[37] Pobal began administration of the scheme in September 2015 and as such data is only available for four months of the year (Sept – Dec)

highest proportion of over 65s approved and Louth (8%) has the lowest proportion of over 65s participating in the scheme;

- The majority of participants who had accessed the scheme were living alone (57%). 7% of scheme participants were living alone for significant periods of the day;
- At the end of 2020, 52% of approved participants were aged 80 or over. People aged 80 or over accounted for half of all scheme participants.
- Almost two thirds of approved participants (65%) were female.
- There is significant variation in the number of applicants approved per local community organisation. 34 organisations (representing 5% of total organisations) have processed 57% of total approved applications. One organisation alone has been responsible for processing 10% of all approved applications.
- The number of completed installations has lagged the number of approved participants by 5% or less each year between 2015 and 2019. In 2020, the number of completed installations lagged the number of approved participants by 10% due to problems related to Covid-19.

4 Efficiency and effectiveness

4.1 Introduction

The focus of this chapter is on the efficiency and effectiveness of the scheme. The efficiency of the scheme is examined by analysing changes in grant funding per approved participant between 2016 and 2020[38]. A number of aspects relating to the operation of the scheme are also examined such as the registration procedure and re-use of unused equipment. The effectiveness of the scheme is assessed by examining the extent to which the scheme is meeting its objectives(s) identified in chapter 2.

4.2 Efficiency

The efficiency of the scheme is examined below based on:

- Grant funding per approved participant.
- The operation of the scheme (registration procedure and re-use of scheme equipment).

4.2.1 GRANT FUNDING PER APPROVED PARTICIPANTS

Grant funding per approved participant has remained stable over three last three years following an increase in 2018. Average grant funding per approved participant was €269 between 2018 and 2020, increasing from an average of €211 in 2016 and 2017.

In terms of registration costs, local community organisations are paid a fixed fee of €10 per approved application (this was €7.50 pre November 2017). This fixed payment ensures cost stability with the grant funding per approved participant remaining consistently at 3.4% – 4.5% of total programme grant funding between 2016 and 2020.

Feedback from local community groups and service providers on administration of the scheme was positive. In particular, quick processing of applications and accessibility of the system for submitting applications to Pobal were highlighted. Grant funding relating to the administration of the scheme by Pobal represented 11.6% of total programme grant funding in 2020, down from 20% in 2016. Administration costs per participant have

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[38] Costs per participant are examined since 2016 in this chapter for comparison purposes as this was the first full year the scheme was under the administration of Pobal. Figures relating to 2015 relate to only December of that year.

declined from a high of €46 in 2016[39] to €33 in 2020. However, annual costs per approved participant rose marginally in 2019 (€26) and 2020 (€33).

The hardware, installation and monitoring costs of the scheme represented the most significant cost component of the scheme (84.7%) in 2020. These costs increased significantly in 2018, rising from €155 in 2017 to €232 per participant. This reflects, in large part, the cost of one year's free monitoring services for new participants which was introduced in 2017. This increased grant funding by an average of €57 per participant. In addition, the scheme has seen an increase in the proportion of non-landline GSM alarms that are installed each year from roughly 10% of new installations in 2016 to 21% in 2020. GSM alarms are on average €48 more expensive to purchase than their landline equivalents.

Figure 11: Costs per Approved Participants[40]**, 2016 – 2020**
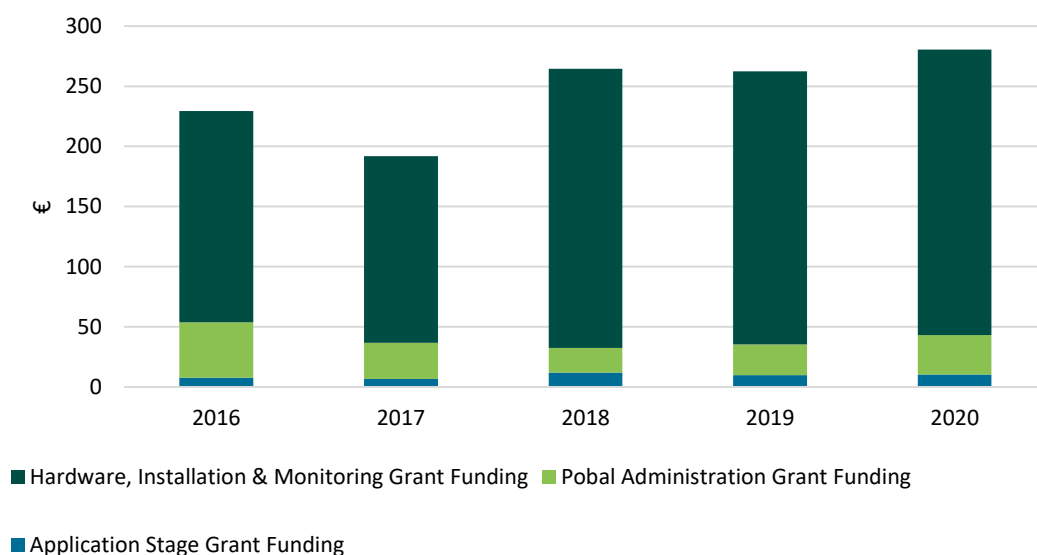
Source: Pobal

Under the current configuration of the scheme there are four service providers providing hardware, installation and monitoring services. The details of the costs per service provider between 2018 and 2020 are set out in figure 12 below. There is a significant

[39] This is a reflection of the set up and transfer costs associated with the first full year of the scheme's administration by Pobal.
[40] Payments relating to the application stage are paid retrospectively to organisations and also include payments for replacements of equipment not covered under warranty.

difference in costs between the cheapest (Supplier 2) and most expensive (Supplier 3) landline packages (€86 or 45%), with a smaller difference between the cheapest (Supplier 1) and most expensive (Supplier 4) GSM packages (€72 or 30%).

Figure 12: Equipment Costs per Service Provider, 2018 - 2020 (ex VAT)
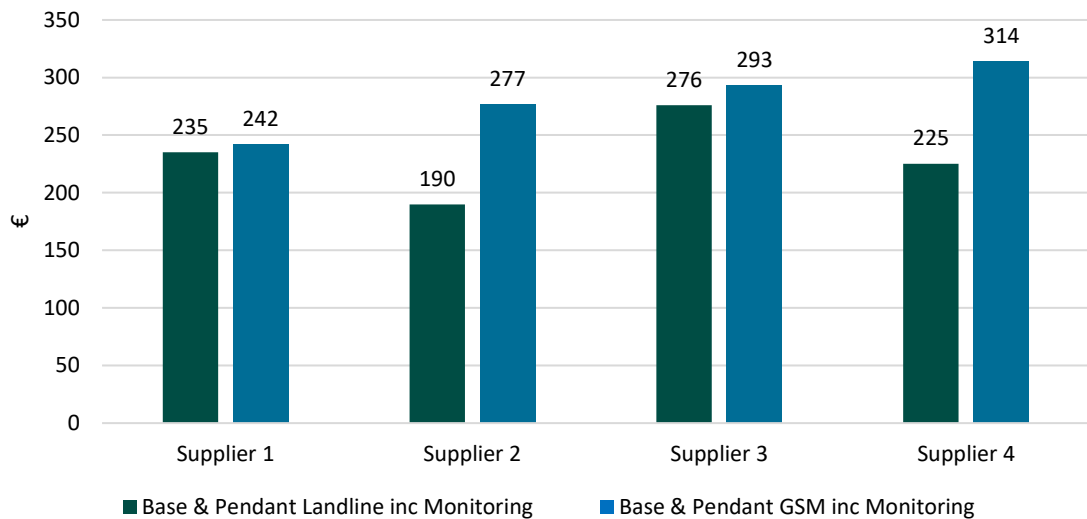
Source: Pobal

Figure 13 shows the average price per service provider for the installation of base and pendants and one year's free monitoring services which varies from €207 to €279. Supplier 3 represents the most expensive service provider per approved participant at €279. Supplier 2 is the cheapest service provider per approved participant at €207.

Figure 13: Average Cost per Participant, 2016 - 2020
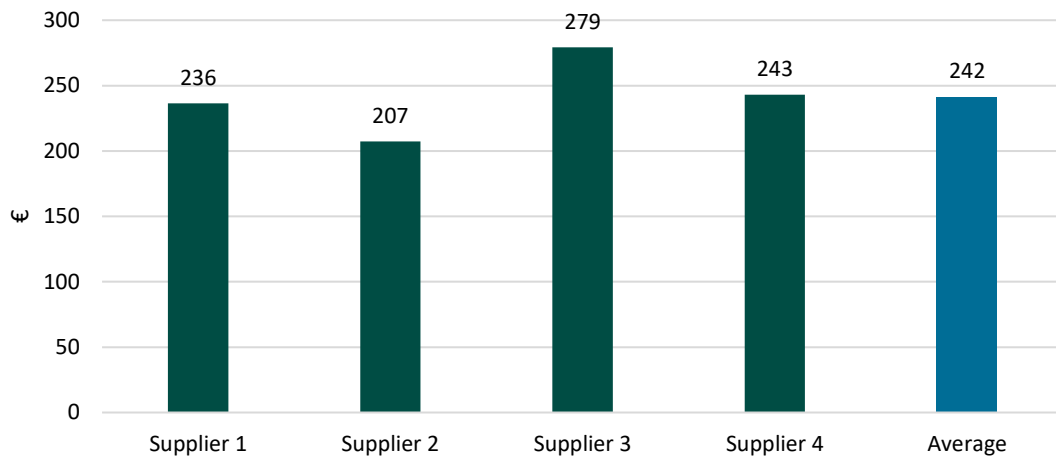
Source: Pobal

4.2.2 OPERATION OF THE SCHEME

Registration Procedure

There were 662 local community organisations active under the scheme at the end of 2020. These represent a wide variety of types of organisations ranging from national organisations to smaller organisations comprised of one or two volunteers. At the end of 2020, 84 approved organisations were listed as inactive.

There is a significant health component to the scheme with a large number referrals to the scheme coming from medical professionals (33% of participants in 2019 learned about the scheme through a public health nurse/health centre/HSE[41]) and 51% of individuals signed up to the scheme due to existing health conditions.

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[41] Pobal, Seniors Alert Scheme – Annual Progress Report 2019, p.14

Figure 14: Active organisations by county, (end of 2020)
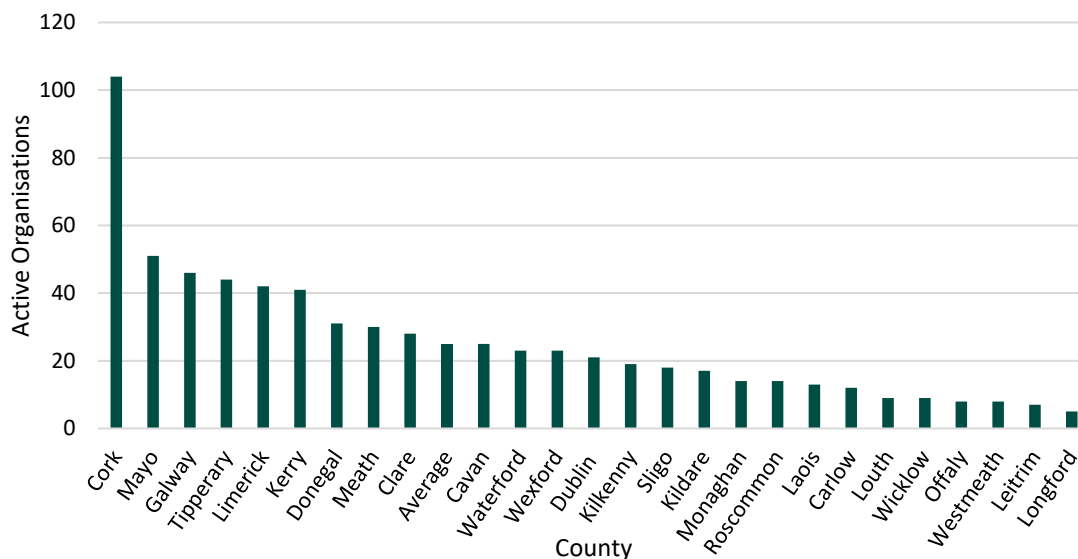
Source: Pobal

Re-use of scheme equipment

The re-use of unused equipment could have the potential to reduce installation costs. However, there is a lack of data on the number of active participants on the scheme. At the end of 2020, 820 participants (0.8% of total participants) had officially left the scheme since 2015. This figure is considered to be significantly understated.

There is an impression, from the service providers and local community organisations spoken to for this paper, of a need for greater return and reuse of unused equipment. While there is a procedure for the return of equipment in section 8 of the SAS Reporting and Procedures Manual for community organisations, the number of installations that occur using existing stock is low. For example, in 2019 there were 156 installations re-used from existing stock, representing less than 1% of completed installations. It is estimated that the average cost of installation of a base from existing stock and a new pendant (either landline or GSM) is €124 (including one year's free monitoring). This is 51% cheaper than the average cost of the installation of a new base and pendant which is €242 on average.

4.3 Effectiveness

Effectiveness refers to the extent to which the scheme is meeting its objective(s). Therefore, questions examined in this section are:

- To what extent is the scheme addressing demand for provision of personal monitored alarms for older persons of limited means?
- Does the scheme enable older persons to live securely in their own homes with confidence, independence and peace of mind?

4.3.1 DEMAND FOR PERSONAL MONITORED ALARMS

There continues to be demand for the scheme demonstrated by the consistent high level of applications for the scheme and full draw down of funding for the scheme each year.

The scheme has experienced a considerable increase in approved participants in recent years with 79,082 applications approved between 2015 and 2020 at a cost of €19 million in grant funding. This represents 12% of over 65's in Ireland based on figures from the 2016 census[42]. Approximately 9% of over 65s have been approved for the scheme between 2018 and 2020. The scheme is demand led and no applications have been refused access to the scheme since 2015.

Population projections from the CSO predict significant growth in the number of those aged over 65 in Ireland. By 2036 the number of over 65's is expected to have increased by between 79% and 82%[43] (498,000 to 517,100 persons). Assuming the uptake of the scheme remains consistent with approved applications in the last three years; the increase in the number of approved applicants per annum could range from 26,000 in 2026 to 34,000 in 2036[44]. When compared to the average between 2018 and 2020 this would represent an increase of 42% and 85% in 2026 and 2036 respectively.

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[42] CSO, Census of Population 2016 - Profile 3 An Age Profile of Ireland.
[43] CSO, PPopulation and Labour Force Projections 2017 - 2051opulation and Labour Force Projections 2017 - 2051
[44] Calculations premised on 3% of 65's applying for the scheme per annum, the average percentage of applications over the three years of the scheme.

Figure 15: Projections of Approved Participants, 2026 - 2036
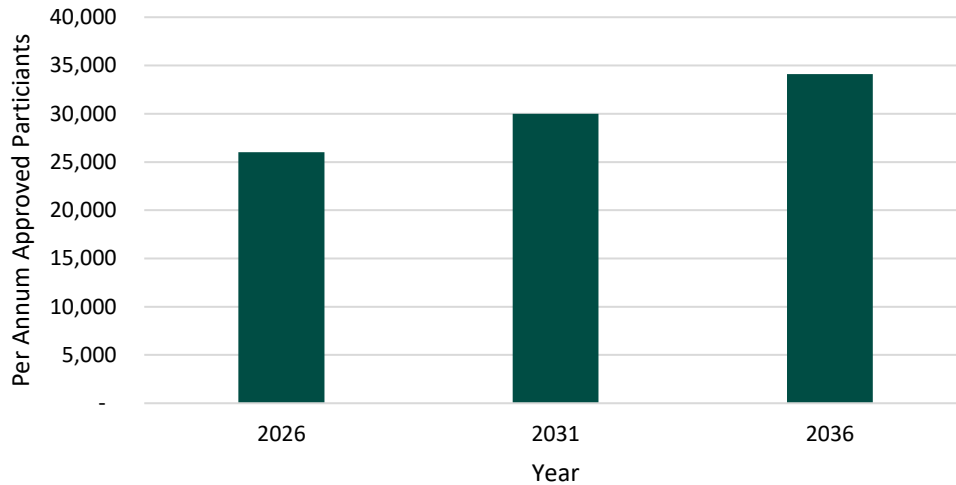
Source: Pobal, CSO

Increases in demand and approvals would lead to an increase in need for further scheme funding. Figure 16 shows the potential annual grant funding of the scheme based on the scenarios outlined above[45]. Annual scheme grant funding could potentially increase to approximately €7.4 million in 2026 and €9.7 million in 2036 assuming all else remains constant.

€2.3 million has been provided for the scheme on an annual basis over the last three years. A further €3 million has been drawn from the Dormant Accounts Fund each year for scheme funding. Future increases in the demand raises the question of whether this funding model is sustainable in the medium to long term.

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[45] Projections based on current scheme grant funding

Figure 16: Projected Scheme Grant Funding Needs, 2026 - 2036
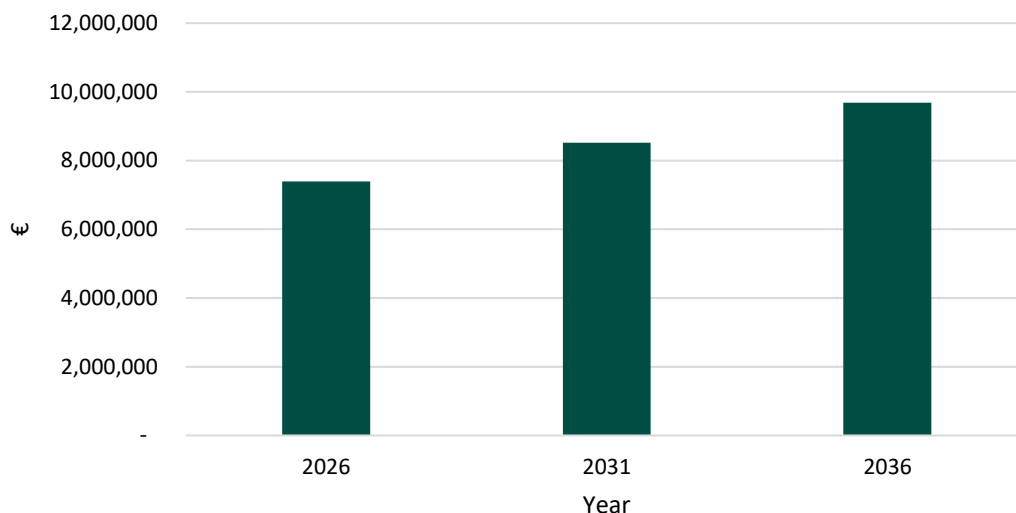
Source: Pobal, CSO

4.3.2 IMPACT OF THE SCHEME

The expected benefits of the scheme relate to enabling older persons, of limited means, to continue to live securely in their homes with confidence, independence and peace of mind.

No assessment on the impact of the scheme has taken place to date. However, information from service provider reports suggests that the scheme is offering emergency support and the peace of mind to scheme participants. Alarm activation reports from service providers in 2019[46] indicate that roughly 34% of calls were made for reassurance or anxiety reasons. Conversations with service providers suggest that such calls relate to loneliness and fears. The 2019 activation reports indicate that 3,130 (0.6% of total calls) emergency calls were made, resulting in the Ambulance, Fire Brigade or an Garda Síochána being summoned[47]. Of these emergency calls, calls for an ambulance was the most prevalent emergency assistance required. While not fully clear,

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[46] Alarm activation reports detailing the number and types of calls made by participants have been submitted by Service Providers to Pobal for 2018 and 2019.
[47] These figures are calculated using call logs for three out of the four service involved in the scheme. One service provider baskets most of their call logs into an 'other' category which if included in the base number would mask the identification of call types.

the remaining 65% of total calls logged appear to be related to the operation of the alarms e.g. alarm testing.

Understanding whether the scheme enables participants to remain living independently in their homes for longer than they would without the use of personal monitored is very difficult to ascertain. However, studies examining personal monitored alarm users in other jurisdictions have found that they do increase the length of time in which users can remain living independently in their own homes (see Appendix C for more details). Other benefits highlighted in the literature include a reduction in activity restriction due to fears of falling, increased confidence in performing everyday activities, increased sense of security and a reduction in the occurrence of long lies (more than one hour spent on the ground after a fall).

If the SAS allows participants to live longer in their own homes then it offers significant savings to the State compared to the cost of nursing home care. The average weekly charge for public nursing homes in 2018 was €1,564 and the average maximum price chargeable for private or voluntary homes was €968[48]. The average weekly cost per approved participant on the SAS was €5 or €288 for the year in 2020.

Despite difficulties in measuring the impact of the scheme, information could be collected to better understand the benefits of the scheme. For example, supplier call logs introduced in 2019 could potentially be expanded upon to identify the number of unique callers. These logs could be compiled annually to show the number of calls made and the reasons for these calls. While this information would not fully represent the impact or benefits of the scheme it could be used as a complement to other softer information on the scheme. A limited number of questions regularly asked from samples of participants could also potentially be used to get their views on the operation of the scheme and the benefits of participation. These could be compared with the initial reasons they stated for joining the scheme to indicate whether perceived or expected benefits are being realised.

4.4   Summary and conclusions

Efficiency

- Grant funding per approved participant has remained stable over three last three years following an increase in 2018. Average grant funding per approved

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[48] Office of the Comptroller and Auditor General, <u>Special Report 110 - Nursing Homes Support Scheme (Fair Deal)</u>, August 2020

participant was €269 between 2018 and 2020, increasing from an average of €212 in 2016 and 2017;

- Payments to local community organisations represented 3.4% - 4.5% of funding per approved participant between 2016 and 2020.
- The service fee paid to Pobal for the administration of the scheme was 11.6% of total programme grant funding in 2020, down from a high of 20% in 2016;
- The hardware, installation and monitoring grant funding of the scheme represents the most significant cost component of the scheme at 84.7% of total grant funding in 2020. This cost category increased significantly in 2018 (rising from €153 in 2017 to €243 in 2018), as a result of the introduction of one year's free monitoring in 2017, and an increase in the number of more expensive (compared to landline) GSM alarms installed;
- The re-use of existing stock from non-active participants is low. There is an impression from the service providers and local community organisations spoken to in this paper of a need for greater return, and re-use of unused equipment.

Effectiveness

- There continues to be demand for the scheme demonstrated by the consistent high level of uptake to the scheme and full draw down of grant funding each year. 79,082 applicants were approved in a five year period (2015-2020) at a cost of €19 million in grant funding. This represents take-up of 12% of all over 65's in Ireland (based on the 2016 census);
- Due to ageing demographics the scheme is likely to face increasing demand in the future. This will lead to associated funding pressures on the scheme. Based on estimations in this paper demand could increase by 42% to 85% in 2026 and 2036. This could potentially lead to scheme costs rising from €5 million in 2020 to €7.4 million and €8.5 million in 2026 and 2036 respectively;
- Call logs from suppliers indicate that the scheme has facilitated the summoning of emergency services for participants. In 2019, 62,000 calls (34% of calls) were made for reassurance or anxiety reasons. 3,130 emergency calls were made (0.6% of calls); resulting in the Ambulance, Fire Brigade or an Garda Síochána being summoned[49]. While not fully clear, the remaining 65% of call logged are in relation to the operation of the device.
- Assuming the scheme allows participants to continue to live securely in their own home, it offers significant cost savings to the State, when compared to costs of public nursing home care;
- Improvements could be made to better understand the benefits of the scheme. The planned use of case studies will assist in this regard.

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[49] These figures are calculated using call logs for three out of the four service involved in the scheme. One service provider baskets most of their call logs into an 'other' category which if included in the base number would mask the identification of call types.

5 Continued relevance

5.1 Introduction

This chapter examines the continued relevance of the scheme based on the preceding analysis in this paper.

5.2 Continued relevance

The continued relevance of the scheme can be examined by assessing the scheme's rationale, level of continued demand, and whether there are other public supports in place that provide an alternative or substitute service to the SAS.

As discussed in Chapter 2 of this report, the current stated objective of the SAS is to "to enable older persons, of limited means, to continue to live securely in their homes with confidence, independence and peace of mind"[50]. This rationale continues to remain relevant. Studies examining personal monitored alarm systems in other jurisdictions have found that they do increase the length of time in which users can remain living independently in their own homes.

Supplier call logs show that participants have used the scheme for emergencies e.g. 3,130 calls resulted in the summoning of emergency services in 2019. Furthermore, the scheme offers reassurance to the elderly with roughly 34% of calls being made for reassurance or anxiety reasons in 2019[51]. 51% of scheme participants joined the scheme due to an existing health condition.

Demand for the scheme has increased since 2015. In 2016, there were 7,201 approved participants rising significantly to 20,270 in 2019 and 17,776 in 2020[52]. Due to Ireland's ageing demographics the proportion of the population over 65 is expected to grow in the medium to long term. Therefore, assuming all else remains constant, demand for the scheme can be expected to increase. Estimations in this paper suggest demand could rise to approximately 26,000 applications in 2026, and 34,000 in 2036.

The SAS continues to receive strong government support. For example, the scheme has been committed to in the Programme for Government 2020. Furthermore, while there

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[50] Pobal, Seniors Alert Scheme, 2020
[51] Alarm activation reports detailing the number and types of calls made by participants have been submitted by Service Providers to Pobal for 2018 and 2019.
[52] Pobal, Seniors Alert Scheme – Annual Progress Report 2019, May 2020

are a number of government schemes that aim to support the elderly, none of these schemes provide the same service as the SAS.

Having considered the above, the scheme continues to be relevant on the basis that its rationale remains, there is increasing demand for the scheme, strong support in Government policy, and there is no publicly funded substitute to the scheme.

6 Findings and recommendations

6.1   Introduction

This chapter concludes this paper with nine findings and three recommendations. These are set out in the following areas:

Findings
- Delivery model;
- KPIs and scheme reporting;
- Profile of participants;
- Geographic variation in participation;
- Increasing demand;
- Scheme costs;
- Potential cost savings;
- Impact; and
- Continued relevance.

Recommendations
- Delivery model;
- Measurement and reporting; and
- Sustainability of the funding model.

6.2   Findings

FINDING 1: DELIVERY MODEL

There are five main findings related to the delivery of the scheme as set out below.

- The current delivery model is generally functioning well. Service providers and local community organisations interviewed for this paper spoke positively about the scheme delivery mechanism.
- Currently local community organisations apply for the scheme on behalf individuals as the scheme has a community based focus. There were 662 local community organisations engaged with the scheme at the end of 2020.
- Completed installations refers to the number of approved applicants that have had their personal monitored alarm system installed by service providers. On average 18,000 installations have been completed each year over the last three years. The number of completed installations has not deviated by more than 5% from the number of approved participants over this period.
- There is a procedure for the return of equipment in section 8 of the SAS Reporting and Procedures Manual for community organisations. However, the

number of installations re-using existing stock from non-active participants is low i.e. less than 1% of installations between 2017 and 2020.
- It is unclear how many reported participants remain active or engaged with the scheme once they have had their equipment installed. Official figures on the number of active users are considered to be overstated.

FINDING 2: MEASUREMENT AND REPORTING

There is a range of data and information collected for the scheme and set out in the scheme's annual reports. However, this could be further improved. For example, there is either no data, or no uniform data / reporting on the number of active users, churn, and categorisation of user call logs.

FINDING 3: PROFILE OF PARTICIPANTS

Persons aged 80 or over account for 52% of scheme participants. The age profile of participants has remained broadly consistent since 2015. At the end of 2019, almost two thirds of participants (65%) were female, which is higher than the proportion of the total female population aged over 65 in Ireland (53%). The majority of participants who had joined the scheme were living alone (57%), with 7% living alone for significant periods of the day. Many participants (51%) have stated healthcare as a basis for registering for the scheme.

FINDING 4: GEOGRAPHIC VARIATION IN PARTICIPATION

12% of all those aged over 65 in Ireland participate in the scheme. However, there is significant variation in participation by county. Offaly (19%) has the highest proportion of over 65s on the scheme and Louth (8%) has the lowest participation rate. The largest number of participants are in Dublin (17,589) while Leitrim is the county with the smallest number of participants (643).

FINDING 5: INCREASING DEMAND

There has been a significant increase in demand for the scheme since its re-launch in 2017. In the period of 2018 - 2020, there was an average of 18,371 new participants per year, more than double the number of approved applicants in 2016.

Due to Ireland's ageing demographics, the scheme is likely to experience increased demand over the coming years. Assuming the uptake of the scheme remains consistent with demand in the last three years, the increase in the number of applications per annum could range from 26,000 in 2026 to 34,000 in 2036. This would represent an increase of 42% and 85% when compared to the average between 2018 - 2020. This

could potentially result in scheme costs rising from €5 million in 2020 to €7.4 million in 2026, and €8.5 million in 2036.

FINDING 6: SCHEME COSTS

Hardware, installation, and monitoring services represent the most significant grant-funding component of the scheme (85% of total grant funding in 2020). This funding category increased significantly in 2018 because of the introduction of one year's free monitoring services for new scheme participants from 2017, and increased installation of GSM equipment. The next largest component of scheme costs is the administration fee paid to Pobal. This was 12% of total programme grant funding in 2020, down from a high of 20% in 2016. Payments to local organisations represented 3% of grant funding in 2020.

FINDING 7: POTENTIAL COST SAVINGS

There is an impression from the service providers and local community organisations spoken to in this paper of a need for greater return and reuse of unused equipment. As mentioned previously the number of installations that occur using existing stock is low (less than 1% of installations between 2017 and 2020).

FINDING 8: IMPACT

It is difficult to assess the impact of the scheme based on the data and information currently gathered under the scheme. Call logs from suppliers indicate that the scheme facilitates summoning of emergency services for participants. In 2019, 62,000 calls (34% of calls) were made for reassurance or anxiety reasons, and 3,130 emergency calls were made (0.6% of calls) resulting in the Ambulance, Fire Brigade or an Garda Síochána being summoned[53]. While not fully clear, the remaining 65% of calls logged appear to be related to the operation of the alarms e.g. alarm testing.

Among other benefits, studies examining personal monitored alarms in other jurisdictions have found that they increase the length of time in which users can remain living independently in their own homes. The scheme is significantly less costly if it allows participants to live longer in their own homes compared to nursing home care paid by the State. However, improvements could be made to better understand the benefits of the scheme.

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[53] These figures are calculated using call logs for three out of the four service involved in the scheme. One service provider baskets most of their call logs into an 'other' category which if included in the base number would mask the identification of call types.

FINDING 9: CONTINUED RELEVANCE

The scheme continues to be relevant on the basis that its rationale remains, there is increasing demand for the scheme, strong support in Government policy, and there is no publicly funded substitute to the scheme.

6.3 Recommendations

RECOMMENDATION 1: DELIVERY MODEL

While the scheme delivery model is generally functioning well, a number of suggested improvements are set out below.

- More work could be done to address relatively low levels of take-up of the scheme in certain geographic areas. A new iteration of the scheme will be launched in Q3 2021, and this will involve consideration of what can be done to address under-represented areas. For example, this could involve working with Age Friendly Network officers in local authorities to encourage greater take-up of the scheme.
- Given, the low levels of re-installation of scheme equipment there is a need to encourage greater recovery and re-use of equipment. Improvements are being made in this area. For example in the next iteration of the scheme, Pobal have reserved the right to transfer the ownership of units from one local organisation to another to facilitate greater re-installation of returned units from different manufacturers. However, in the short to medium term existing procedures for return of equipment should also be reiterated by raising awareness and re-engaging with local community organisations on the matter.
- There is a need for a more formal consistent procedure to identify whether participants continue to be engaged with the scheme. Currently the number of active users on the scheme is considered to be overstated. As part of the new iteration of the scheme, service providers will be required to make test calls to users every month. This will help improve understanding of the number of active users on the scheme.

RECOMMENDATION 2: MEASUREMENT AND REPORTING

Certain metrics should be clarified for the scheme and included in annual reports. For example, the consistent inclusion of the number of active users, churn, and categorisation of user call logs would help improve transparency and understanding of the scheme.

It is difficult to measure the impact of the SAS such as offering peace of mind to users. Nonetheless, the impact or benefit of the scheme could potentially be measured in a

more systematic way. While challenging, enhancing the reporting of call logs by service providers to provide more detailed analysis of calls, e.g. number of unique callers and the average profile of calls, would help provide additional insight on the benefits of the scheme. This information would not fully represent the impact or benefits of the scheme but it could be used as a complement to other softer information on the scheme.

Furthermore, a limited number of questions regularly asked from samples of participants could be used to get their views on the operation of the scheme and the benefits of participation. These could be compared with the initial reasons they stated for joining the scheme to indicate whether perceived or expected benefits are being realised. In this respect, planned developments in this area will include case studies with local community organisations administering the scheme.

RECOMMENDATION 3: SUSTAINABILITY OF THE FUNDING MODEL

The SAS has experienced a significant increase in the level of demand in recent years. Demand for the scheme is likely to increase further in line with expected demographic changes. This will place increasing pressure on scheme funding with annual scheme expenditure potentially increasing from €5 million in 2020 to €7.4 million and €8.5 million in 2026 and 2036 respectively.

Since 2017, €2.3 million has been allocated to the scheme from the Exchequer on a yearly basis. This has been supplemented each year by an additional €3 million sourced from the Dormant Accounts Fund. Given that continued funding from the Dormant Accounts Fund is not certain on an ongoing basis, and the expected increase in demand outlined in this report, the current funding model is likely to be unsustainable in the medium to long term. As such, consideration should be given to improving the sustainability of the scheme-funding model, both in terms of the stability of the sources of funding, and financing increased demand into the future.

7 Appendices

Appendix A – notes to the data

Table 1A details the seven lot areas and associated service providers under the current iteration of scheme.

Table 1A: Seniors Alert Scheme Lot/Geographic Area Structure, 2018 - 2020

No.	Lot/Geographic Area	Service Provider
1	Dublin	TASK Limited
2	Cork	Tunstall Emergency Response Limited
3	Clare; Limerick; Kerry	TASK Limited
4	Carlow; Kilkenny; Tipperary; Waterford; Wexford	Tunstall Emergency Response Limited
5	Kildare; Laois; Meath; Wicklow	Helplink South Limited
6	Galway; Mayo; Sligo	Care Direct 24/7 Limited
7	Donegal; Leitrim; Cavan; Monaghan; Louth; Roscommon; Longford; Westmeath; Offaly.	Care Direct 24/7 Limited

Source: Pobal

Table 2A details the number of SAS participants by age cohort and the percentage share of total SAS participants.

Table 2A: SAS Participants Age Profile, at end of 2020

Age cohort	Number of SAS participants (as of year end 2020)	% Share of SAS participants
65-69	7,220	9%
70-74	12,583	17%
75-79	17,945	24%
80-84	20,404	27%
85+	18,066	24%
Total	**76,218**	**100%**

Source: Pobal

Table 3A provides information on active organisations and approved participants by county.

Table 3A: Active Organisations and Number of Approved Participants by County, at end of 2020

County	Active Organisations	Approved Participants
Average	**25**	**2,934**
Carlow	12	1,203
Cavan	25	934
Clare	28	2,296
Cork	104	9,069
Donegal	31	2,523
Dublin	21	17,589
Galway	46	5,049
Kerry	41	2,965
Kildare	17	2,053
Kilkenny	19	1,721
Laois	13	1,157
Leitrim	7	643
Limerick	42	3,618
Longford	5	748
Louth	9	1,354
Mayo	51	2,742
Meath	30	3,238
Monaghan	14	957
Offaly	8	1,974
Roscommon	14	1,276
Sligo	18	1,387
Tipperary	44	4,166
Waterford	23	1,715
Westmeath	8	1,529
Wexford	23	2,791
Wicklow	9	1,589
Total	**662**	**76,286**

Source: Pobal

Table 4A details the over 65s population and the number approved participants by county.

Table 4A: Approved Participants as a Percentage of over 65 Population, at end of 2020

County	Over 65 Population (2016)	Approved Participants	Percentage
Carlow	7,357	1,203	16%
Cavan	10,464	934	9%
Clare	17,655	2,296	13%
Cork	73,843	9,069	12%
Donegal	24,989	2,523	10%
Dublin	164,984	17,589	11%
Galway	34,906	5,049	14%
Kerry	25,034	2,965	12%
Kildare	22,014	2,053	9%
Kilkenny	14,053	1,721	12%
Laois	9,608	1,157	12%
Leitrim	5,409	643	12%
Limerick	27,418	3,618	13%
Longford	5,824	748	13%
Louth	16,077	1,354	8%
Mayo	22,909	2,742	12%
Meath	20,788	3,238	16%
Monaghan	8,577	957	11%
Offaly	10,591	1,974	19%
Roscommon	10,743	1,276	12%
Sligo	10,624	1,387	13%
Tipperary	24,398	4,166	17%
Waterford	17,371	1,715	10%
Westmeath	11,370	1,529	13%
Wexford	21,985	2,791	13%
Wicklow	18,576	1,589	9%
Total	**637,567**	**76,286**	12%

Source: Pobal, CSO

Table 5A shows the living status of SAS participants at year-end 2019.

Table 5A: Living Status of SAS Participants at year end 2020

Living Status of SAS Participants	Percentage of Participants
Living Alone	57%
Living with another eligible person	36%
Living alone for significant periods of time	7%
Carer	1%

Source: Pobal

Table 6A details the grant funding of the scheme by cost element and year per participant.

Table 6A: Grant Funding Per Approved Participant, 2016 - 2020

Cost Element	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020
Application Stage Grant Funding	€7.81 (3.4%)	€6.66 (3.5%)	€11.99 (4.5%)	€9.83 (3.7%)	€10.41 (3.7%)
Pobal Administration Grant Funding	€45.97 (20%)	€30.17 (15.7%)	€20.37 (7.7%)	€25.56 (9.7%)	€32.63 (11.6%)
Hardware, installation & monitoring Grant Funding	€175.50 (76.5%)	€154.94 (80.8%)	€232.11 (87.8%)	€226.97 (86.5%)	€237.54 (84.7%)
Total	**€226.14**	**€189.93**	**€276.84**	**€278.31**	**€298.32**

Source: Pobal

Table 7A details the number of emergency calls made in 2019 and the type of assistance required.

Table 7A: Emergency Activation Calls by Service Required, 2019

Emergency Calls	Number of Calls
Fire brigade Required	133
Ambulance Required	2,053
An Garda Síochána Required	944
Total	**3,130**

Source: Pobal

Table 8A details the grant funding for the scheme by year and cost element.

Table 8A: Total Grant Funding, 2015 – 2020

Cost Element	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	Total
Application Stage Grant Funding	€4,147	€56,231	€83,180	€241,360	€199,260	€185,080	€769,258
Pobal Administration Grant Funding	€153,000	€331,000	€376,771	€410,000	€518,000	€580,000	€2,368,771
Hardware, Installation & Monitoring Grant Funding	€106,388	€1,263,789	€1,934,903	€4,671,300	€4,600,604	€4,222,557	€16,799,541
Total	**€263,535**	**€1,651,020**	**€2,394,854**	**€5,322,660**	**€5,317,864**	**€4,987,637**	**€19,937,570**

Source: Pobal

Appendix B – International Approaches to Personal Monitored Alarms

UNITED KINGDOM

In the UK, some local authorities operate personal monitored alarm systems for older or disabled persons. These schemes are commonly referred to as lifeline or community alarms. While a number of local authorities run schemes that cover a variety of telecare equipment, the community alarms (lifelines) are often offered as a standalone service. There is significant variance in the form that the schemes take with differences in price, eligibility criteria and terms and conditions. The rationale for the schemes also vary by local authority. Most however highlight a broad array of potential benefits, including security, health and peace of mind.

AUSTRALIA (STATE OF VICTORIA)

The state government of Victoria administers an initiative called Personal Alert Victoria (PAV), which provides personal monitored alarms free of charge to eligible frail, isolated older people, and people with disabilities. The aim is to help them to remain living in

their homes[54]. An applicant must meet an initial set of mandatory criteria similar to the criteria of the SAS but it also has additional medical criteria. The scheme requires the participant to confirm their wellbeing by pressing their alarm at a set time each day. If the person fails to press the button on the pendant by a set time then monitoring centre staff will ring and check on the wellbeing of the participant. The scheme has similar objectives to the SAS i.e. supporting older people to live independently in their own home. However, the scheme in Victoria is focused on healthcare. The applicant has to display strict health vulnerabilities in order to be eligible for the scheme.

NEW ZEALAND

In New Zealand,[55] the government contributes towards the costs of a personal monitored alarm service for those suffering from ongoing or age-related health problems or for those with a disability. The applicant must also be eligible for publicly funded healthcare. The personal monitored alarms are referred to as "medical monitored alarms" and are functionally identical to those provided under the SAS. The Ministry of Social Development maintains a list of accredited service providers of monitored alarms, which the applicant is directed towards. The initial cost of purchasing the equipment is borne by the applicant but the government pays for the ongoing weekly costs of the medical alarm service. The scheme is explicitly focused on providing monitored alarms for healthcare purposes as reflected by the scheme's eligibility criteria.

Appendix C – Research on the Effectiveness of Personal Monitored Alarms

There has been a significant number of studies on Personal Emergency alarms. In a review of Personal Emergency Response Systems, Stokke[56] (2016) reviews 33 studies, which looked at the experiences and consequences of having and using the alarm and how the technology changes caring practices.

Stokke finds that the typical alarm user is an old, fragile woman, living alone, over 80 years old with physical problems and in need of assistance. The most common type of emergency that the alarms were used for was falls though other medical emergencies

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[54] Victoria State Government, Personal Alert Victoria program and service guidelines, 2019
[55] New Zealand Government, Personal Medical Alarms, October 2020
[56] Stokke, R., 2016. The Personal Emergency Response System as a Technology Innovation in Primary Health Care Services: An Integrative Review. *Journal of Medical Internet Research*, [online] 18(7). Available at: <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/27417422/> [Accessed 5 January 2021].

were also cited. Many users in the studies were happy with their service overall and found it easy to use. The most common reason for getting an alarm was the possibility of getting quicker help in an emergency. Other issues such as living in isolation, poor mobility and concerns for personal safety were also cited.

Miguel et al[57] (2015) highlights how research on personal emergency alarms has shown that they do provide people with quicker assistance during emergencies. Research has also shown that they provide a sense of security and reduce anxiety about falling, increase confidence in performing everyday activities and extend the time that people are able to remain living independently in their own home. Miguel et al (2015) find that that alarm users did not restrict activity due to fear of falling.

Stokke[58] (2016) finds that there is mixed evidence on whether the alarms improve the wellbeing of users and that there is a variance in what percentage of users will actually use the alarm in an emergency. Miguel et al (2015) also found that owning an alarm did not reduce the number and length of hospital admissions. Stokke points to a significant proportion of the elderly being less likely to use the alarm when in need, especially confused persons.

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[57] De San Miguel, K., Lewin, G., Burton, E., Toye, C., Boldy, D. and Howat, P., 2015. Exploring risk profiles and emergency frequency of purchasers and non-purchasers of personal emergency alarms: a prospective cohort study. *BMC Geriatrics*, 15(1).
[58] Stokke, R., 2016. The Personal Emergency Response System as a Technology Innovation in Primary Health Care Services: An Integrative Review