



DÍOSPÓIREACHTAÍ PARLAIMINTE
PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

DÁIL ÉIREANN

TUAIRISC OIFIGIÚIL—*Neamhcheartaithe*
(OFFICIAL REPORT—*Unrevised*)

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DÁIL ÉIREANN

Dé Céadaoin, 14 Deireadh Fómhair 2015

Wednesday, 14 October 2015

Chuaigh an Ceann Comhairle i gceannas ar 10.30 a.m.

Paidir.

Prayer.

Leaders' Questions

Deputy Micheál Martin: Yesterday's budget gave a very strong indication that the Government has no concept, or sense, of the urgency of the homeless crisis in our society. The Government is not possessed of any sense of urgency in relation to it, as eloquently articulated yesterday evening by Fr. Peter McVerry in his reaction to the lack of any action in the budget on this matter. It is interesting to note that when Focus Ireland set up an action team in 2012, an average of eight new families were presenting as homeless in Dublin every month. This figure rose to 40 families per month in 2014. It has now risen to 65 to 70 families per month in the first half of 2015. More than two new families are becoming homeless every single day, yet there is no action from the Government to arrest the situation. The number of children sleeping in emergency homeless accommodation has almost doubled since October 2014. Groups such as the Simon Community, Threshold and many other non-governmental agencies are extremely frustrated by the lack of action on this particular issue.

In the immediate term, the Government could take preventative measures to prevent more families from becoming homeless by introducing rent certainty measures and increasing the rent supplement. There seems to be some extraordinary reluctance, if not a stubbornness, to move on the rent certainty issue or to increase the rent supplement. The Simon Community has stated that 92% of properties available to rent are priced beyond the reach of those in receipt of rent supplement. Will the Taoiseach explain why there was no action in yesterday's budget on homelessness? Why will the Government not make a decision on rent certainty and on increasing rent supplement for those who desperately need it to stay in a home or to get back into the housing market?

The Taoiseach: It is not acceptable that families and children, in particular, have to stay in bed and breakfast accommodation and hotel rooms.

Deputy Colm Keaveney: For shame. There are 30,000 of them.

An Ceann Comhairle: Will Deputy Keaveney stay quiet, please?

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The Taoiseach: In many cases, they are quite a distance from Dublin, in particular, and the families have to travel to schools and so on, which is not acceptable. It is not true to say that there was nothing in yesterday's budget for housing. The Minister for Finance signalled that NAMA will provide 20,000 houses between now and 2020. We will open 100 sites across the country in 2016 and will deliver at the mid-point of that up to 80 houses per week. There is a requirement for 10,000 units, whether houses or apartments, in the Dublin area per annum. Only 3,300 were delivered in the past year. Having land, its own money and contractors who build for it, NAMA can provide these units and 90% of them will be provided in the Dublin area. Some 75% of the units will be houses, mainly starter homes, which NAMA will deliver through its own developers.

Last year the Government put €2.2 billion on the table to deal with this legacy issue. Yesterday, in the budget, the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform added to that sum. This year €500 million is available to build or acquire new homes. The Government also increased the current allocation for social housing by a further €69 million to €440 million. Money is not the problem here.

Deputy Colm Keaveney: It is ideology.

The Taoiseach: The problem is the planning regulations and the planning permission process.

Deputy Barry Cowen: The Taoiseach is the problem.

The Taoiseach: Until we deal with the question of the provision of extra houses, in reality we cannot deal with this problem.

Deputy Dara Calleary: Then deal with it.

The Taoiseach: It is not true to say that the rent supplement has not been increased. The Department of Social Protection has dealt with thousands of cases over the past period where, in individual circumstances-----

Deputy Michael McGrath: So why are people homeless?

The Taoiseach: -----the rent supplement can be increased, thereby giving certainty to both the tenant and the landlord.

Deputy Barry Cowen: Where do they get it?

Deputy Jonathan O'Brien: It is not happening.

Deputy Sandra McLellan: They cannot give it if they do not have it.

Deputy Willie O'Dea: This is a complete distortion.

The Taoiseach: It is clear that interference in the market, to its detriment, is not something we should do.

(Interruptions).

The Taoiseach: While people are calling for what they call "clarity" on rent certainty, if we interfere in the wrong way, we will make matters worse.

(Interruptions).

Deputy Michael Healy-Rae: The Government will not do anything at all.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: Stage fright.

Deputy Dessie Ellis: I am glad the Taoiseach told that to his Labour Party colleagues.

The Taoiseach: As was pointed out by the Minister for Finance, we had three reports in the 1980s by Mr. Peter Bacon which were supposed to sort out all of this but things actually got worse. The Government will not interfere-----

Deputy Barry Cowen: No, it never interferes.

The Taoiseach: -----in a way that will make things worse. The Minister for the Environment, Community and Local Government, Deputy Alan Kelly, is working very hard on this issue and we hope we will be able to bring in a number of measures that will improve the position.

Deputy Sandra McLellan: This is not about interference. It is about action.

The Taoiseach: Believe me, I am frustrated about the fact that this is not moving in the way that one would want. We have PPPs, private builders, NAMA, social housing and modular units. Those are five issues. The money is in place and they should be moving.

Deputy Barry Cowen: The Taoiseach should have a word with Tánaiste Coonan.

Deputy Micheál Martin: With the greatest respect-----

(Interruptions).

An Ceann Comhairle: I call Deputy Micheál Martin. Will Deputy Cowen give his leader a chance to ask his question?

Deputy Finian McGrath: Watch Deputy Coonan watching him, a Cheann Comhairle.

An Ceann Comhairle: Will Deputy Finian McGrath stay quiet? He is not a leader yet.

Deputy Micheál Martin: The Taoiseach said that he did not interfere but the problem has got dramatically worse.

Deputy Dara Calleary: Correct.

Deputy Micheál Martin: The number of children who are homeless has doubled since October 2014. The same applies to the number of families in emergency accommodation. That is the point. He has done nothing.

Deputy Noel Harrington: Fianna Fáil privatised social housing.

Deputy Micheál Martin: He has not interfered and it is the absence of interference which is exasperating the problem. The Taoiseach spoke about the rent supplement. A decision has not been made to increase it. He mentioned discretionary powers of welfare officers. In Limerick, only six cases were successful in the past 12 months. The Taoiseach should stop with the fig leaves.

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Deputy Willie O’Dea: There were 500 applications, six of which were successful.

Deputy Micheál Martin: The Taoiseach throws a sop to the poor Minister for the Environment, Community and Local Government, Deputy Alan Kelly, saying he is working very hard, but he is not.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: A failure.

Deputy Micheál Martin: He was rebuffed by the Taoiseach and Fine Gael in the lead up to this particular budget but I am more interested in the figures since October 2014. If we look at the figures prepared by Threshold and the Simon Community, we have gone from eight families seeking emergency accommodation in October 2014 to a situation now where approximately 70 families seek such accommodation weekly. The problem with that is-----

An Ceann Comhairle: A question, please.

Deputy Micheál Martin: -----two new families a day are now seeking emergency accommodation with no action being taken on rent certainty or on rent supplement. Rents are projected to increase by 20% in Dublin alone over the next 12 months, with thousands more repossessions in line. The banks are talking about 25,000 repossessions next year. The inaction is the core of the issue. The Government has run out of road and ideas. There have been more announcements made than houses built. Ten local authorities did not build a single house last year. In 2009 there was approximately €670 million available.

An Ceann Comhairle: This is Leaders’ Questions. Will the Deputy, please, put his question?

Deputy Micheál Martin: That figure was reduced to €88 million last year.

The Taoiseach: It is all part of the legacy of destruction that the Deputy’s party left behind it.

Deputy Micheál Martin: No, it is not.

(Interruptions).

The Taoiseach: As the Deputy knows, the Minister for the Environment, Community and Local Government is taking action as a matter of urgency.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: Where?

The Taoiseach: First, 500 units of modular housing will be delivered in two tranches of 150 and 350.

Deputy Barry Cowen: How long will that take?

Deputy Mattie McGrath: Where and when?

An Ceann Comhairle: Deputies asked questions and they are getting answers.

The Taoiseach: They seem to think one can deliver these units overnight. There are processes that one must fulfil.

Deputy Barry Cowen: As the Government delivered nothing for five years, we would

hardly expect it to deliver overnight.

An Ceann Comhairle: Will Deputies, please, stay quiet and listen to the answers? They might not like them, but they should listen to them.

The Taoiseach: I never hear interviews with anybody who has been allocated a house that was a void and closed up and which has now been returned to proper condition. There were 2,333 units returned to use in 2014 and the most recent projections show that there will be 2,500 by the end of the year. Dublin City Council has reported that 633 vacant units have been returned to use to date, with a projection that the number will be 765 by the end of the year. To date Cork City Council has returned 64 units to use and is projecting that the number will be 215 by the end of the year. To date Cork County Council has delivered 30 units and will have 71 by the end of the year.

Deputy Sandra McLellan: That is nothing; it is a drop in the ocean.

The Taoiseach: To date the local authority in Waterford has returned 74 units to use and is projecting a figure of 148 by the end of the year.

Deputy Willie O'Dea: There are 5,000 on the housing list in Limerick alone.

The Taoiseach: These are places where people will be able to live. It takes a while to repair the destruction caused by the Deputy's party.

Deputy Willie O'Dea: The Government has had five years, but it is only starting now.

Deputy Barry Cowen: Five years of doing nothing.

The Taoiseach: The Minister has met local authority chief executives-----

Deputy Willie O'Dea: He starts four years and nine months down the road.

The Taoiseach: -----to discuss their targets, the money they have been given and the objective of getting on with the business to be done. Why is that when the Minister provides money and objectives and tells local authorities to get on with building social housing-----

Deputy Jonathan O'Brien: The Taoiseach knows why - the Government did nothing for five years.

The Taoiseach: -----that we are not seeing the results? Is it that some of them do not want to build? They might prefer to have agencies to do it for them. A sum of €37.16 million has been confirmed for the Dublin region which represents more than 70% of that figure. The Dublin Region Homeless Executive has confirmed that its expenditure has been €33.4 million. That is the money being spent and action is being taken-----

Deputy Dessie Ellis: But the problem is still growing.

The Taoiseach: Clearly, I admit there is a real challenge, but the challenge is not money.

Deputy Micheál Martin: It is a crisis, not a challenge. It is an emergency now, not in 2020.

The Taoiseach: It is the process by which the money can be spent and housing delivered. One will not deal with the issue until more houses are provided, that is, blocks and concrete, to provide houses for people.

Deputy Micheál Martin: The Government must increase the rent supplement to provide for this to happen.

Deputy Pádraig Mac Lochlainn: Since last weekend's tragedy at Carrickmines, disturbing information has come to light on conditions on halting sites across the State and the lack of investment by the Government and local authorities in recent years. A tremendous article by Kitty Holland was published in *The Irish Times* which made devastating reading. The Carrickmines site was overcrowded; 29 people were sleeping in cabins and caravans at the time of the fire. Dún Laoghaire-Rathdown County Council is one of 15 local authorities in the State that has drawn down no funding this year for Traveller accommodation. In the past seven years funding for accommodating members of the Traveller community has been cut by a shocking 93%, from €70 million in 2008 to €4.3 million this year. Of the 10,226 Traveller families in the State, 445 are living on unauthorised sites by the side of the road without anything but the most basic facilities. Some 104 families are living on basic serviced sites such as that on Glenamuck Road. A further 223 families are sharing halting site bays with other families, while 37 are sharing basic halting site bays with other families. In addition, 727 families are sharing houses with other families. A total of 1,536 families are living in overcrowded or unsafe conditions. This cannot continue. Will the Government immediately work with the Traveller representative groups to ensure lessons are learned from this tragedy and that Traveller families across the State will be provided with the safe and adequate accommodation they need?

The Taoiseach: The answer is "Yes". I visited the scene of the inferno at Carrickmines. The site, although a temporary site established eight or ten years ago, was very neat and clean. However, the units were located around the perimeter and made from the material that had caught fire, as a result of which ten people had lost their lives. It is an extraordinary tragedy and so sad for everybody involved.

The Deputy is aware that an audit is being carried out of all Traveller accommodation units and halting sites throughout the country, many of them in locations with which I am familiar. In Priory Hall, Longboat Quay and other locations around the country, places where all building regulations and planning conditions were supposed to be complied with, there have been fire traps. In this case I assume the corrosive smoke was responsible for people being unable to move when the fire occurred and it resulted in that difficulty.

Accommodation for Travellers is provided through a range of measures. There are the standard local authority housing units financed by way of the Department for the Environment, Community and Local Government's capital allocation for social housing. There is also Traveller-specific accommodation financed by the Department, while the purchase of private housing is assisted by the State and through Travellers' own resources. An approved Traveller housing body, CENA, has recently been launched and is due to commence operations shortly.

It is open to Travellers to opt for any form of accommodation. The 2014 annual count of Traveller families showed that of 10,226 families, the majority, 35%, were accommodated in standard social housing, 26% in private rented accommodation and 5% in assisted private housing, while 6% had been housed using their own resources. A total of 13% were accommodated in group homes or permanent halting sites and bays, 9% were sharing accommodation, 1% were on transient sites and 4% on unauthorised sites. That 4% represents a significant reduction from the first annual count which took place in 1999 and showed that 25% of Travellers were living on unauthorised sites. The reduction is due to significant investment in Traveller-specific accommodation such as group housing schemes and housing sites in recent years.

The level of investment was reduced in recent years, similar to many other forms of investment. Notwithstanding this, €400 million has been invested in the provision and support of this type of Traveller accommodation over the period. Every local authority has a five year programme to accelerate the provision of Traveller-specific accommodation. This requires particular expertise in the consultation process in the provision of the type of accommodation required for Traveller families. The programmes started in 2000 and the current programmes run from 2014 to 2018. During the period of the last programme 500 accommodation units were delivered.

Every council has a local Traveller accommodation consultative committee comprising local authority officials, members of Traveller representative groups and other relevant bodies, including public representatives. The committees assist in the preparation of the five-year rolling programmes and oversee implementation where possible. The National Traveller Accommodation Consultative Committee, NTACC, is a national body appointed by the Minister. It comprises representatives of the different State agencies and so forth. It is the national platform for consultation.

The site in Glenamuck was not an unauthorised site. It was a temporary site, with services provided by the local authority, pending the putting in place of more permanent accommodation for the families. I understand a site at Glen Druid in Dún Laoghaire-Rathdown has been identified by the local authority in its Traveller accommodation programme for the period 2014 to 2018 for a group housing scheme of five units to meet the needs of the residents of Glenamuck. Funding approval has been granted by the Department of the Environment, Community and Local Government and work is expected to be completed in 2017-18. In the interim, the necessity for a fully serviced, temporary site in the area for these families is being discussed and negotiated with a view to it being ready for occupation in the near future.

Deputy Pádraig Mac Lochlainn: I trust the Taoiseach will address the investment issues I have raised and also the lack of leadership that has been shown, not only at Government level but also at local level across the State.

I have one more request to make of the Taoiseach today. For too long there has been a wall of distrust between the settled and Traveller communities in this State. Yesterday, some local residents in Glenamuck formed a blockade in protest at the plans to rehouse, on an emergency basis, those who have been left homeless by this inferno. It is a depressing spectacle but it reflects the wall of distrust that has been in existence for many years. We need citizens to show compassion and I hope the residents - who are meeting the council today - can facilitate this emergency arrangement.

There is a need for education and understanding between the two communities, and that is a two-way process. The Joint Oireachtas Committee on Justice, Defence and Equality recommended quite some time ago that this State recognise the ethnicity of our Traveller people, something that has been called for by international human rights bodies to which we subscribe. It is time for the State to respect the unique contribution of Traveller communities in terms of their music, their language and their adherence to the ancient nomadic ways. We need to teach their history in our schools and break down the barriers and the walls that exist. It is time for this State to build the bridges of understanding. It is time to build on the solidarity that is there after this horrific tragedy.

Will the Taoiseach stand up in this Chamber and recognise the ethnicity of the Traveller

people? Will he show the necessary leadership, although it will not just be required by him but by elected representatives across the State? Can we finally address the injustice of the report on itinerancy from the 1960s that perceived this as a dirty problem that had to be swept under the carpet? Can we once and for all be honest about the huge wall of distrust and take down the barriers? Can we recognise their ethnicity and start from there?

The Taoiseach: The first point the Deputy makes is important. Clearly, the vast majority of communities in this country are prepared to work with the local authorities and different agencies in their own interests. This is a very sensitive issue in that the funerals involved have not even taken place yet, although, to balance that, there has to be an explanation to any community of what a local authority intends to do as an emergency measure. I think that is only the normal courtesy that should apply in any circumstance and I hope that matter can be dealt with today in order to provide temporary accommodation for those remaining families at the Glenamuck temporary site.

In respect of the deeper question the Deputy raises, this is an issue that is reacted to in different ways in different parts of the country and, in many cases, it is based on unfortunate experiences that have taken place. The Minister of State, Deputy Ó Riordáin, has done quite a deal of work on this and has brought a report to the Cabinet sub-committee in respect of the question of ethnicity and whether that be recognised or not. I do not think there is any constitutional impediment to this but we have asked the Minister of State to examine a number of issues arising from his presentation. He will revert to the committee in due course on that matter.

Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice: This morning in Loughrea, County Galway, three people are in the dock, having been accused for defending their own private property. This has come about because, in 1997, at a time when the Taoiseach was a member of Government, the current President signed off on legislation that has caused major problems throughout the country. As I said, these people are accused of defending their own private property. The Peatlands Council has been set up for turf cutters. I spoke to the Taoiseach one night when he asked me to go to a forum. We co-operated every step of the way but, sadly, the drive and initiative is not there from the State body, the National Parks and Wildlife Service. Instead of trying to solve a problem, it is trying to make criminals out of people who have never been in trouble in their lives. This is not a solution to a problem and all it will do is create bigger difficulties. It is now recognised, not by us but by the so-called experts, that up to 40% of the science used is completely wrong. There are solutions, however. One of them may be that, given the announcement that Bord na Móna has 80,000 ha which it is talking of shutting down, some of that ground could be used to ensure that the burden on people's private property is alleviated. Taking legal action against people who never saw the inside of a court in their lives will not solve this problem.

I meet representatives from the National Parks and Wildlife Service every six weeks. I will put my shoulder to the wheel in resolving this matter, whatever way it needs to be resolved. However, the one thing we keep hearing every day is Europe. I ask the Taoiseach to use his influence with these technocrats in Europe - these faceless bureaucrats who are infringing on people's property rights. People are willing to co-operate but there is a fear among our civil servants that when they go over, they will be told "No". Does the Taoiseach want to see a resolution to this problem or does he want to see people in danger of ending up in jail, like this morning? Whatever it takes, will he go to Europe and explain that this is a complex problem? Farmers are being driven off their land and turf cutters are being driven off their bogs. This is in the so-called interests of Europe but it is not a fair way. There is a resolution. Will the Taoiseach consider there may be an option in regard to the Bord na Móna land to help resolve

the issue?

The Taoiseach: Yes, I spoke to Deputy Fitzmaurice about this previously and I spoke to his predecessor in the House, who had agreed a certain line of action and then decided to renege upon that. I cannot comment on any case that is before the courts, as the Deputy is well aware. The law of the land will apply and is determined by members of the Judiciary.

As Minister, Deputy Deenihan worked exceptionally hard to try to bring about a resolution to these kinds of cases. It is not that people are being driven off the land, as Deputy Fitzmaurice says. The central feature was that they wanted to be able to cut turf, as their forefathers did, on bogs which are determined to be part of a specific environmental entity. Offers were made - and have been accepted - in respect of either free turf or compensation for not cutting bogs and that scheme is still in operation.

Deputy Michael Healy-Rae: They do not want compensation or free turf.

The Taoiseach: Unfortunately, not all of the people involved, for their own very personal and sensitive reasons, wanted to comply with offers put forward.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: They have rights.

The Taoiseach: The Deputy says people are willing to co-operate. I take his point about the longer-term involvement of Bord na Móna in terms of peat cutting. The offers were there for alternative bogs to be made available so that people could either cut the turf themselves or have it cut for them. However, because of geography, it was not feasible to do that in many cases as there was not a suitable alternative bog available in the localities, as the Deputy is well aware.

I would like to see a resolution to this and I am glad to hear Deputy Fitzmaurice say he is willing to work towards that. Without going near the European personnel at all, I believe a degree of common sense might sort this out for everybody, whereby they can have access to turf and the compensation fund, because the determination of the environmental specifics of the boglands in question has been set for quite some time. I regret it has gone this far. I cannot and will not interfere in anything to do with cases before the courts. However, I would like to see a resolution to this from everybody's point of view.

11 o'clock

The boglands in question are not being taken from anybody, nor was that ever the intention. The Boora bog in the Midlands opened up further to tourists recently. It has significant capacity for tourism and offers a quality programme which explains to people from around the country and outside of it what bogs are about - their history, the important part they have played in Ireland over the centuries and their future from the point of view of hospitality and tourism.

Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice: The Taoiseach spoke about Bord na Móna and options, but would he move to a rented house if he owned his own house? He would not, but that was the option there for bog owners. Therefore, it was a non-option.

The Taoiseach must understand that there are 35 more of these areas coming down the line at the end of next year. Nothing has been resolved. In 17 years only two of those areas have been resolved and nothing has been resolved for 51 others. I welcome the Taoiseach's consideration of the option involving Bord na Móna, but I have spoken to officials time and again and over that time have heard the same response over and again: "We do not know what Europe will

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say or whether it will accept it or not.” Let us get one thing straight. The property is private people’s property. Either we own our land or we do not. Does Europe think it owns our land as well as the moneys we are paying it for bank debt?

Deputy Mattie McGrath: Hear, hear.

Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice: We must get clarity on this. Land has been designated - I am not talking just about bogs - and farmers cannot farm their land.

An Ceann Comhairle: Will the Deputy please put a question?

Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice: The Taoiseach is well aware of this. This is happening even in his county of Mayo. In Limerick and west Cork also there are problems where farmers in marginal lands cannot clean a drain or fence their lands.

The Taoiseach: The Deputy is way over time. He should put his question.

Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice: What can they do? Will the Taoiseach go to Europe and explain to these “people”, whoever they may be that we will not tolerate being bullied like this? We are willing to work with people, but it should not be up to them to make decisions. This should be done in the spirit of partnership, with people working together. It should not be them saying: “You have to get off your private property”, because that will not work.

The Taoiseach: The issue here is that turbary rights are a long-standing right in Irish law. It is not a case of getting people off the bogs, but of them not cutting turf. The objective is to have turf available.

Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice: Legally, farmers cannot walk on the bogs.

The Taoiseach: Most houses do not use turf alone for heat and the quality of Bord na Móna products is higher and of a better calorific burning standard than turf cut by conventional means. People retain their ownership and their turbary rights and there is no question of these being interfered with. The issue occurs if they decide to cut turf on an area that has been designated - for some time now - as a specific environmental entity. If the issue is about turf being available to them, the scheme in place is either for lorry loads of turf to be delivered or-----

Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice: It is about more than turf. They own the rights and want their heritage and tradition.

The Taoiseach: I understand that. The issue is that they want to continue to cut turf. However, the boglands in question have been designated in a particular way and that is the law that applies. What the Deputy is saying that it is about their opportunity and right to cut their own turf as distinct from having turf from another location provide heat for homes. However, those who have accepted the scheme, the compensation or the opportunity to have turf delivered to them are happy with that decision.

Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice: They are entitled to do that.

The Taoiseach: Others have a different point of view. I hope the Deputy’s influence in this area will be able to bring about a resolution. I know he has been intensely involved over the past number of years, but I hope the issue can be resolved in everybody’s interest.

Dáil Éireann
Order of Business

The Taoiseach: It is proposed to take No. 37, financial motions by the Minister for Finance - motion 5 resumed. It is proposed, notwithstanding anything in Standing Orders, that the following arrangements shall apply in relation to the resumed debate on No. 37: the speech of the Taoiseach, Tánaiste and the leaders of Fianna Fáil, Sinn Féin and the Technical Group, or persons nominated in their stead, who shall be called upon in that order, shall not exceed 30 minutes in each case and such Members may share their time and the speech of each other Member called upon, who may share time, shall not exceed 20 minutes in each case; the suspension of the sitting under Standing Order 23(1) shall take place on the conclusion of the leaders' speeches for one hour; the Dáil on its rising today shall adjourn until Tuesday, 20 October 2015 at 2 p.m.

An Ceann Comhairle: There are three proposals to put to the House. Is the proposal for dealing with No. 37, financial motions by the Minister for Finance, agreed to? Agreed. Is the proposal for dealing with the suspension of sitting agreed to? Agreed. Is the proposal that the Dáil on its rising today shall adjourn until Tuesday, 20 October 2015 at 2 p.m. agreed to? Agreed.

Deputy Micheál Martin: Will the Government give specific time for discussion of the health Estimates, because there is total confusion in terms of what health has received in this year's budget? The huge supplementary provision of €600 million illustrates the dishonesty that has been at the centre of health Estimates over the past three years. This has caused significant distress in hospitals and led to extended waiting times for both outpatient and inpatient cases.

Yesterday, the Minister, Deputy Varadkar, outdid himself in the spin department. He announced health funding of €13.175 billion for current expenditure in 2016, allegedly an increase of €900 million, but on budget day last year he announced Exchequer funding of €13.079 billion in current expenditure - a difference of approximately €96 million. Somewhere in between he has lost close to €800 million. Then, yesterday, the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform, Deputy Howlin, stated in the expenditure report that health was getting an increase of €280 million. He also said that health spending was now at pre-crash levels.

An Ceann Comhairle: I remind the Deputy that we are on the Order of Business.

Deputy Micheál Martin: However, the Minister for Health, Deputy Varadkar, explicitly denies that. Will the Taoiseach provide Government time for a debate on the health Estimate and on broader health issues, because there is chaos and a lack of morale in the system?

On the programme for Government legislative commitments on housing and distressed mortgages, it is interesting that it was written into the programme five years ago that the Government would convert the Money Advice and Budgetary Service, MABS, into a strengthened personal debt management agency with strong legal powers that would support families and make an honest effort to deal with their debts, including non-mortgage debt, and provide protection from creditors where appropriate so that families would have time to sort out their affairs. In order to do this, the personal debt management agency would have quasi-judicial status. When will that legislation be introduced and what is the position on it?

In regard to homelessness, a provision was made four and a half years ago in the programme

for Government that in line with the comprehensive spending review, the Government would alleviate the problem of long-term homelessness by introducing a housing first approach to accommodate homeless people. In that way, it would be able to offer homeless people suitable long-term housing in the first instance and radically reduce the use of hostel accommodation and the associated costs for the Exchequer. I respectfully suggest that the use of hostel accommodation has not reduced. Rather, hotel and emergency accommodation for the homeless has doubled, trebled or quadrupled. The Government said that by having a dedicated body to formulate policy across Government, it would target initiatives in cross-cutting areas to prevent, as much as possible, problems like homelessness. Can the Taoiseach indicate when the legislation for that cross-cutting body will be brought before the House as provided for in the programme for Government?

The Taoiseach: For 2016, the Department of Health will have funding from the Exchequer of €13.175 billion in current expenditure and €414 million in capital. Further funds come in from contributions from the HSE, from private insurance, car parks and so on. These amount to over €1 billion. This represents an increase of €880 million on the 2015 current expenditure budget set out in the Revised Estimates volume and €32 million on capital expenditure. In the last period the Tánaiste has nominated a number of MABS officers around the country to work in a more focused and structured way with people who have mortgage difficulties. This is paying dividends in the work they do. I will have to advise Deputy Micheál Martin in respect of the legislation to which he refers concerning the personal debt mediation, PDM, agency. The same applies to legislation on housing, an issue he has raised.

Deputy Micheál Martin: Does the Taoiseach have any idea at all of where they are? They were promised five years ago.

The Taoiseach: Suffice it to say that whenever the Deputy speaks about housing and the construction sector, the party he leads should be ashamed of itself for what it did.

Deputy Micheál Martin: That is a fantasy.

Deputy Paul Kehoe: It should be ashamed. They are straight out of the Galway tent.

An Ceann Comhairle: I call Deputy Pádraig Mac Lochlainn.

(Interruptions).

An Ceann Comhairle: Perhaps the Deputies were up late last night and cannot hear. I ask them to respect the Chair please. There is only one Deputy Pádraig Mac Lochlainn and I have called him.

Deputy Micheál Martin: We were not up late, actually.

(Interruptions).

Deputy Paul Kehoe: What about Fianna Fáil's housing policy?

Deputy Willie O'Dea: It is better than Fine Gael's. There are some 5,000 on the list in Limerick. That is its policy.

An Ceann Comhairle: Will the Minister of State, please, settle down? I will not ask him a second time. Everybody is treated equally in this Chamber. Will Deputies, please, stay quiet

and allow Deputy Pádraig Mac Lochlainn to speak?

Deputy Pádraig Mac Lochlainn: I have two issues that I wish to raise, the first of which concerns the Stormont House Agreement implementation Bill. As the Taoiseach knows, in the Stormont House Agreement the two Governments agreed to provide for truth recovery mechanisms for the families of victims of the conflict. Specifically, the Government has committed to legislating for an historical investigations unit and the creation of an independent commission for information retrieval. There has been consternation at the draft published by the British Government. Using the pretext of national security, it would give the British Secretary of State the power to block full disclosure. What are the Taoiseach's views on that issue and, more importantly, when will the Government publish a Stormont House Agreement implementation Bill? Why is there no date for implementation of the international treaty to underpin the independent commission for information retrieval?

The second issue concerns reformed and consolidated domestic violence legislation and the Istanbul Convention. The tragic events of recent days have focused our minds on this issue. Women's domestic violence groups have been raising the issue of the signing of the Council of Europe Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence against Women and Domestic Violence, known as the Istanbul Convention. I understand the Government took a decision on it yesterday. Will the Taoiseach confirm that the Government will sign the convention? We will then obviously meet our responsibilities in this important matter.

The Taoiseach: In respect of the Stormont House Agreement, we signed off on it before Christmas, with the intention that it would be implemented in full. As the Deputy is aware, there are some serious discussions ongoing. I think from speaking to the Minister, Deputy Charles Flanagan, that they will resume tomorrow. I do not want to say anything that would disrupt that process to any extent. Suffice it to say that, in respect of the criminal justice (Stormont House Agreement implementation) Bill, negotiations are at an advanced stage with the United Kingdom on concluding an international agreement that will set up the independent commission for information retrieval, a new body to be established in both jurisdictions. These are sensitive discussions and I do not want to say any more about them until we see what progress we can make. The Deputy is aware of other reports which are due to emerge shortly.

Regarding the Council of Europe convention-----

Deputy Pádraig Mac Lochlainn: That is right.

The Taoiseach: We gave approval at the Cabinet meeting yesterday for progress to be made on it. I think the Minister for Justice and Equality will report on the matter shortly. The intention is to move it forward in order that these matters can be ratified. I point out that in Ireland the view is taken that if we sign a convention and then have to ratify it, it is important to put in place the necessary legislation to allow it to be ratified. Other countries have signed conventions but have not ratified them in legislation. As in the case of the disability sector, there is a range of legislation which must be put in place before we can actually ratify the convention. This applies to the issues of domestic violence and violence against women. Such legislation is so appropriate in view of current circumstances.

Deputy Michael Healy-Rae: I ask the Taoiseach about the timing of the introduction of a tenant purchase scheme for local authority tenants. This matter has been ongoing for a long time and local authorities throughout the country are awaiting the introduction of the scheme,

while tenants are waiting to purchase their houses. Will the Government, please, move on the matter?

The Taoiseach: The Minister is to finalise the statutory instrument for consideration and expects this to take place soon. I think he wrote to the Deputy in September stating his intentions. Clearly, the tenant purchase scheme has always been important in the Department of the Environment, Community and Local Government and for local authorities. As the Deputy knows, such a scheme arises every number of years, depending on the interest shown and the conditions attached. I will follow up the matter with the Minister when I get an opportunity to do so.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: I want to ask the Taoiseach about the EirGrid Bill. People in Tipperary and other counties have been fighting against the might of massive companies for the past few years. There is a lot of subterfuge and we now have an announcement prior to a general election that it is being deferred or that it is to revert back to the old policy of using existing lines. People simply do not believe this. When will we see the EirGrid Bill and the reins being put on the people who are wrecking the lives of communities? They are only interested in big business and money, not the environment or anything else.

An Ceann Comhairle: The Deputy has made his point.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: When are we going to see them being reined in? When will we see the EirGrid Bill to have legislation dealing with this issue?

The Taoiseach: This question concerns a commercial body which has made its own decision. That decision has been welcomed, I think, by different groups in terms of being able to use more advanced methods to provide power.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: It is not believed. They have been there for 20 years.

The Taoiseach: I cannot give the Deputy an indication of when the legislation will be brought before us. I will advise him on the matter later.

Deputy Catherine Murphy: It is only in recent weeks that the commission of investigation into IBRC has actually started its preliminary work. There was a change in the personnel who would conduct the inquiry. When it was announced, an interim report was expected in December. Does the Taoiseach still expect to receive an interim report in December?

The Taoiseach: As the Deputy is aware, I cannot comment on the work of the sole member who will make his own arrangements, in which I cannot interfere in any way. Generally, there may be a request for either resources or extra time, but it is beyond my remit to interfere in any way once the sole member has been appointed to conduct the investigation.

Deputy Bernard J. Durkan: In the past few years I have raised on numerous occasions the question of the updating of the law on bail. I know that the Bill has been worked on and that the heads have been cleared. I understand the Bill will soon be ready. In view of the obvious and pressing need to update the law on bail, in line with the requirements of the 21st century, when are we likely to see the Bill in the House? I hope it will pass through the House as a matter of urgency.

The Taoiseach: The general Bill on bail was cleared in July and work is proceeding on it. On the other Bill on consecutive sentencing, the Minister has made decisions and the Bill is being put through the House. I will advise the Deputy on the state of play on the general Bill

on bail. To be honest, it will probably be early next year before it comes through the system.

Deputy Willie O’Dea: In view of the fact that there was little or nothing for people with disabilities in the budget announced yesterday, will the Taoiseach tell me when, if ever, the Government intends to restore the mobility allowance?

The Taoiseach has promised on a number of occasions to introduce legislation to extend the university franchise beyond the National University of Ireland, NUI, and Trinity College Dublin in order that graduates of the University of Limerick and regional technical colleges, including the one in his own home town, will be able to vote in Seanad elections. Can the Taoiseach tell us if that will be in place? Will those people be in a position to vote to elect people to the Seanad from university seats in the next election?

The Taoiseach: Will the Deputy repeat that question?

Deputy Willie O’Dea: The Government promised to introduce legislation to extend the university franchise for Seanad elections beyond NUI and Trinity College so that people who graduated from the institutes of technology and places like the University of Limerick will be in a position to vote in the election of those six university Senators. Will that be in place in time for the next Seanad election?

The Taoiseach: I cannot see it being implemented before the next election.

The mobility allowance is a complex area, as the Deputy is well aware. The important thing is, first, to protect the people who are in receipt of the mobility allowance. Detailed work has been done on this to introduce a subsequent scheme which would be as broad as possible. There are degrees in this that are very complicated. The first thing is to protect people who are in receipt of it and this is being done. The drafting is under way in respect of making a broader-based scheme that would accommodate the various needs that are there.

Deputy Peter Fitzpatrick: There are many families looking after loved ones with severe disabilities who cannot access public transport. In turn, they spend a lot of their time within the four walls of their houses instead of getting out and meeting friends, socialising, getting fresh air and making hospital appointments. We need to provide a scheme to make individual payments-----

An Ceann Comhairle: Where are we going with this?

Deputy Peter Fitzpatrick: I am referring to the health (transport support) Bill. We need a contribution towards the costs of people with severe disabilities who cannot access public transport. When can we expect the publication of the Bill?

The Taoiseach: This is more or less the same question Deputy O’Dea asked, which I have already answered. Detailed work is also ongoing in respect of rural transport provision, which would accommodate what Deputy Fitzpatrick is referring to.

Deputy Joe O’Reilly: The news in the budget that the maximum tax on an average heavy goods vehicle will fall from €5,000 to €900 is great news for hauliers in my area. In light of that news, could the Taoiseach give a commitment to the speedy enactment of the road transport Bill, which would reduce the administrative burden on people seeking to transport people or goods? There is a considerable administrative burden in this area so this Bill would be a great help.

The Taoiseach: This is part of the budgetary process and will be acted upon administratively. The Bill to which Deputy O'Reilly refers is due next year. The impact of the decision by the Government will follow through from the budget.

Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh: My first issue is a promised debate. The Government set up the Convention on the Constitution and promised that it would complete its remit within 12 months. I understand it did it in about 14 months. The motion passed by the Dáil setting it up said that the Government will provide in the Oireachtas a response to each recommendation by the convention within four months. The last report from the convention was in March 2014, a year and a half ago. It is not just the last report. There are four outstanding reports so four debates have been promised. It is an insult to those who took part. I urge the Taoiseach to set aside Government time over at least the next four weeks to debate the last four remaining reports from the convention.

There was talk here last week or possibly the week before about Longboat Quay and the need for an audit. Some of the responses seemed to suggest that there is forthcoming legislation that will ensure that there will be new standards and responsibilities. I have looked at the legislative programme and there does not seem to be any legislation that captures what is required. The nearest I could find that is coming up in this session is the Planning and Development (No. 2) Bill. However, the problem there is that it says that it is to provide for the implementation of the planning recommendations of the Mahon tribunal. Does the Taoiseach now intend to change that legislation to take account of the needs of the planning inspectorate and planning enforcement around Longboat Quay and other buildings that were built in that era and the need for an audit, ongoing inspection regime and a standard for Traveller sites in light of the recent horrific tragedy? Also, Taoiseach-----

An Ceann Comhairle: This is not the place for speeches.

Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh: It is not a speech. I am asking whether that Bill, which is very urgent, will address those issues. One key area that has not been addressed to date is the issue of young people in schools with prefabs. Can I ask that an audit be carried out on educational facilities around the country?

An Ceann Comhairle: That is a separate issue altogether.

Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh: It is not a separate issue.

An Ceann Comhairle: It is a separate issue. We are dealing with promised legislation here.

Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh: The promised legislation does not address it. The Dáil was led to believe it would be addressed but it is not contained in the legislation.

An Ceann Comhairle: There are other ways of raising the matter but not on the Order of Business. There are more people waiting to get in.

The Taoiseach: The Minister for Education and Skills has already set out the programme to do away with prefabricated buildings that in many cases have been in schools for many years. She will make announcements on that in the next two to three weeks. The Planning and Development (No. 2) Bill is due this session.

I will see if we can fit in a debate on the outstanding reports of the Convention on the Constitution before the end of this session. The convention has wound up. We thank it for its work.

I agree that we should have been able to discuss these things but the pressure of business here sometimes does not allow for that. I will see if we can fit it in before the end of the session.

Deputy Barry Cowen: Will the Planning and Development (No. 2) Bill contain legislation to give effect to fast-tracking the provision of modular homes that the Government announced again yesterday? In the absence of that legislation and an amendment to the Planning and Development Act, it will take 12 to 18 months to go through the procurement and planning process. That would be to hood wink people into thinking that these can be provided much earlier than that.

The Taoiseach: The Minister is working very hard to see that the 500 units of modular housing can be developed in two tranches of 150 and 350 in a very short time.

Deputy Shane Ross: Will the Taoiseach consider giving Government time to a Bill I have on the Order Paper today? It would deprive the Taoiseach and all future taoisigh of the power to dissolve the Dáil. This is introduced in light of-----

An Ceann Comhairle: I think we must move the Bill first before we can get to that. There is no point in getting time if the Bill is not passed.

Deputy Shane Ross: I understand that under Standing Order 26(3), I can raise this matter on the Order of Business today because it is on the Order Paper. It has nothing to do with the Taoiseach and the recent difficulties he has had with deciding the date of the election. I ask him whether he would consider amending the Constitution so that all future taoisigh do not have this absurd and very unfair power to call the date of the election.

The Taoiseach: Do you mean to have a referendum?

Deputy Shane Ross: Yes.

The Taoiseach: Thank you very much. If I was Deputy Ross, I would accept the advice of the Ceann Comhairle and move the Bill first.

Deputy Peter Mathews: I have two items to raise. Before I do, in light of the tragedy at Glenamuck Road and the Travellers who lost their lives, I want to take the opportunity to commend An Garda Síochána on the enormous compassion shown at the Sandyford Community Centre. In the aftermath of their own tragedy, the gardaí have been hugely supportive and shown great empathy for all the Travellers who have come to that centre and it should go on the record that in spite of their own troubles, they have been hugely compassionate to the community.

I thank the Taoiseach for clarifying that the election will be held on the other side of Christmas. This is because he wants to do the job and continue the job and mandate.

An Ceann Comhairle: What legislation is involved in that?

Deputy Peter Mathews: It ties in with the Taoiseach's stated intention last week when I raised the matter that the one-year bankruptcy Bill championed by Deputy Penrose be brought forward as quickly as possible because the Attorney General has given it the all clear, as I understand the Taoiseach is aware. Therefore there is no impediment, no obstacle, no distraction of an election before Christmas. This should now be the spearhead priority-----

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An Ceann Comhairle: I think the Deputy has made his point, thank you.

Deputy Peter Mathews: -----given that there are 38,000 deeply distressed mortgage householders who want to avail of this but cannot because they have family commitments and children in school.

The only tax that was imposed yesterday in the budget was a 5% increase in the price of a packet of cigarettes. Why, given that there is still dithering on the Gambling Control Bill, could the Government not have put a 2.5% levy on gambling turnover in Ireland which would have raised €125 million-----

An Ceann Comhairle: We cannot discuss the budget now. We are commencing the debate just after this.

Deputy Peter Mathews: Opportunity: open goal missed.

Deputy Finian McGrath: Beat up the smokers again.

The Taoiseach: I have already clarified the position in so far as elections are concerned between now and the end of the year. I commend Deputy Mathews' comments on the gardaí and their considered actions in regard to the tragedy at Glenamuck.

In respect of the bankruptcy Bill, we have to deal with the Financial Emergency Measures in the Public Interest legislation and the Public Service Stability Agreement 2013-2016, Had-dington Road, the Finance (Miscellaneous Provisions) Bill 2015 and the Social Welfare (Miscellaneous Provisions) Bill 2015.

Deputy Peter Mathews: Suicides could be avoided with the bankruptcy Bill.

The Taoiseach: With the help of the parties we could maybe move things through, such as the Garda Síochána (Policing Authority and Miscellaneous Provisions) Bill 2015 and the Legal Service Regulation Bill 2011. I will consult with the Chief Whip in respect of the bankruptcy Bill that the Deputy mentions.

Deputy Peter Mathews: What about the Gambling Control Bill 2013 and the 1.5% levy?

An Ceann Comhairle: Never mind the 1.5%.

Deputy James Bannon: Deputy Ó Snodaigh will be glad to know that the Minister for Education and Skills is opening the largest rural school-----

An Ceann Comhairle: That is very interesting but what about the legislation?

Deputy James Bannon: -----in the midlands tomorrow, in Edgeworthstown-----

An Ceann Comhairle: Are we all invited?

Deputy Eric Byrne: Will Deputy Bannon be there?

Deputy James Bannon: -----with funding provided by this Government.

In order that people are fully prepared for the new job opportunities in our improving economy can the Taoiseach update us on the status of the apprenticeship Bill? I have raised this issue before in the House.

The Taoiseach: I am glad to note that the largest school in the country will be opened at Edgeworthstown. Every time I pass there and see the statue of Maria Edgeworth I think of her famous book, *Castle Rackrent*. Deputy Bannon will be pleased.

The Bill in respect of apprenticeship matters is under discussion at the moment.

Deputy Seán Crowe: The ground rents issue affects tens of thousands of people around the country. I think there is cross-party consensus on trying to resolve this. Does the Government have any plans to introduce legislation to try to finally resolve this issue?

Deputy Finian McGrath: The Minister of State at the Department of Health, Deputy Kathleen Lynch, used to be against ground rents many years ago.

The Taoiseach: We had this problem for many years, whereby properties were subject to ground rents which were paid to absentee landlords. The Government changed the legislation many years ago to allow for those to be bought out, many were small in scale but that was changed. I will have to advise the Deputy on the question he raises.

Deputy Kathleen Lynch: It is a constitutional issue.

Deputy Mary Mitchell O'Connor: When does the Taoiseach expect the family courts Bill to be brought before the House? It will establish a dedicated family court structure. I ask in the context of domestic violence, the long delays for free legal aid and the long queues in Dolphin House. I have visited it and it is disgraceful that people are making decisions about their families in corridors. It is not acceptable and I would therefore like to see this Bill published as soon as possible.

The Taoiseach: I thank Deputy Mitchell O'Connor for her question. The heads of the Domestic Violence Bill 2015 have been cleared and the Bill is being processed. The family courts Bill will be next year.

Public Holidays (Lá na Poblachta) Bill 2015: Second Stage (Resumed) [Private Members]

An Ceann Comhairle: A division was challenged on Friday, 9 October 2015 on the question that the Public Holidays (Lá na Poblachta) Bill 2013 be read a Second Time. In accordance with an order of the Dáil of that day, that division must be taken now.

Question put: "That the Bill be now read a Second Time.

<i>The Dáil divided: Tá, 37; Níl, 82.</i>	
<i>Tá</i>	<i>Níl</i>
<i>Calleary, Dara.</i>	<i>Bannon, James.</i>
<i>Collins, Niall.</i>	<i>Barry, Tom.</i>
<i>Colreavy, Michael.</i>	<i>Breen, Pat.</i>
<i>Cowen, Barry.</i>	<i>Burton, Joan.</i>
<i>Crowe, Seán.</i>	<i>Buttimer, Jerry.</i>
<i>Daly, Clare.</i>	<i>Byrne, Catherine.</i>
<i>Doherty, Pearse.</i>	<i>Byrne, Eric.</i>

<i>Ellis, Dessie.</i>	<i>Cannon, Ciarán.</i>
<i>Ferris, Martin.</i>	<i>Carey, Joe.</i>
<i>Fitzmaurice, Michael.</i>	<i>Collins, Áine.</i>
<i>Fleming, Sean.</i>	<i>Conaghan, Michael.</i>
<i>Fleming, Tom.</i>	<i>Conlan, Seán.</i>
<i>Grealish, Noel.</i>	<i>Connaughton, Paul J.</i>
<i>Halligan, John.</i>	<i>Conway, Ciara.</i>
<i>Healy, Seamus.</i>	<i>Coonan, Noel.</i>
<i>Keaveney, Colm.</i>	<i>Corcoran Kennedy, Marcella.</i>
<i>Kelleher, Billy.</i>	<i>Costello, Joe.</i>
<i>Kitt, Michael P.</i>	<i>Creed, Michael.</i>
<i>Mac Lochlainn, Pádraig.</i>	<i>Daly, Jim.</i>
<i>McDonald, Mary Lou.</i>	<i>Deasy, John.</i>
<i>McGrath, Finian.</i>	<i>Deenihan, Jimmy.</i>
<i>McGrath, Michael.</i>	<i>Deering, Pat.</i>
<i>McLellan, Sandra.</i>	<i>Doherty, Regina.</i>
<i>Martin, Micheál.</i>	<i>Donohoe, Paschal.</i>
<i>Mathews, Peter.</i>	<i>Dowds, Robert.</i>
<i>Moynihan, Michael.</i>	<i>Doyle, Andrew.</i>
<i>Murphy, Catherine.</i>	<i>Durkan, Bernard J.</i>
<i>Ó Caoláin, Caoimhghín.</i>	<i>English, Damien.</i>
<i>Ó Cuív, Éamon.</i>	<i>Ferris, Anne.</i>
<i>Ó Fearghail, Seán.</i>	<i>Fitzpatrick, Peter.</i>
<i>Ó Snodaigh, Aengus.</i>	<i>Flanagan, Charles.</i>
<i>O'Brien, Jonathan.</i>	<i>Gilmore, Eamon.</i>
<i>O'Dea, Willie.</i>	<i>Griffin, Brendan.</i>
<i>O'Sullivan, Maureen.</i>	<i>Harrington, Noel.</i>
<i>Pringle, Thomas.</i>	<i>Harris, Simon.</i>
<i>Stanley, Brian.</i>	<i>Healy-Rae, Michael.</i>
<i>Wallace, Mick.</i>	<i>Howlin, Brendan.</i>
	<i>Humphreys, Kevin.</i>
	<i>Keating, Derek.</i>
	<i>Kehoe, Paul.</i>
	<i>Kenny, Enda.</i>
	<i>Kenny, Seán.</i>
	<i>Kyne, Seán.</i>
	<i>Lawlor, Anthony.</i>
	<i>Lowry, Michael.</i>
	<i>Lynch, Kathleen.</i>
	<i>McCarthy, Michael.</i>
	<i>McEntee, Helen.</i>
	<i>McFadden, Gabrielle.</i>
	<i>McGinley, Dinny.</i>

Dáil Éireann

	<i>McGrath, Mattie.</i>
	<i>McHugh, Joe.</i>
	<i>McLoughlin, Tony.</i>
	<i>Mitchell, Olivia.</i>
	<i>Mitchell O'Connor, Mary.</i>
	<i>Mulherin, Michelle.</i>
	<i>Nash, Gerald.</i>
	<i>Naughten, Denis.</i>
	<i>Neville, Dan.</i>
	<i>Nolan, Derek.</i>
	<i>O'Donnell, Kieran.</i>
	<i>O'Donovan, Patrick.</i>
	<i>O'Dowd, Fergus.</i>
	<i>O'Reilly, Joe.</i>
	<i>O'Sullivan, Jan.</i>
	<i>Perry, John.</i>
	<i>Phelan, John Paul.</i>
	<i>Quinn, Ruairí.</i>
	<i>Rabbitte, Pat.</i>
	<i>Ring, Michael.</i>
	<i>Ross, Shane.</i>
	<i>Ryan, Brendan.</i>
	<i>Shatter, Alan.</i>
	<i>Sherlock, Sean.</i>
	<i>Spring, Arthur.</i>
	<i>Stagg, Emmet.</i>
	<i>Stanton, David.</i>
	<i>Timmins, Billy.</i>
	<i>Tuffy, Joanna.</i>
	<i>Varadkar, Leo.</i>
	<i>Walsh, Brian.</i>
	<i>White, Alex.</i>

Tellers: Tá, Deputies Aengus Ó Snodaigh and Seán Crowe; Níl, Deputies Emmet Stagg and Paul Kehoe.

Question declared lost.

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An Bille um an gCúigiú Leasú is Tríocha ar an mBunreacht (Tréimhse Shocraithe le haghaidh Ré Dháil Éireann) 2015: An Chéad Chéim

Thirty-fifth Amendment of the Constitution (Fixed Period for the Duration of Dáil Éireann) Bill 2015: First Stage

Deputy Shane Ross: Tairgim:

Go gceadófar go dtabharfar isteach Bille dá ngairtear Acht chun an Bunreacht a leasú.

I move:

That leave be granted to introduce a Bill entitled an Act to amend the Constitution.

This is a very simple and straightforward Bill to amend the Constitution to provide for a fixed Dáil term and to remove the power of the Taoiseach to decide the date of the dissolution.

A Deputy: Or the Tánaiste.

Deputy Shane Ross: Or the Tánaiste, as the case may be. I am putting this forward because it is a matter of great public concern. This process has been brought into disrepute in recent times, particularly by the present Taoiseach. The equivocation about the general election and the frenzy which has followed have persuaded many that the system we operate, whereby the Taoiseach of this country has the power to dissolve the Dáil and choose an election date, is unfair and gives an unfair advantage to the party in power.

Deputy Derek Keating: Why would he not do it?

An Ceann Comhairle: Quiet, please.

Deputy Shane Ross: It also means-----

(Interruptions).

An Ceann Comhairle: Hold on-----

Deputy Shane Ross: It was those Fine Gael Deputies who last week were calling for a general election.

(Interruptions).

Deputy Shane Ross: They were the ones who were so disappointed with what the Taoiseach did last week. They are the ones who are cheering him so loudly today.

(Interruptions).

An Ceann Comhairle: Would Deputies, please, mind staying quiet?

Deputy Shane Ross: If the Taoiseach had been able to make up his mind on what day he would call the general election, they would not have been sitting there last week kicking up about it. The Labour Party contributed to this unseemly decision which was taken in the face of a media frenzy that the Taoiseach was conjuring up.

Deputy Marcella Corcoran Kennedy: The Deputy generated it.

Deputy Shane Ross: It encouraged it and-----

Deputy Billy Kelleher: It was flushed out.

Deputy Shane Ross: -----now today they are looking for a general election in February, not November. The Taoiseach has the power but equivocated. I am asking that we take it away from him.

Deputy Finian McGrath: Give it back to the people in a democratic revolution.

Deputy Anthony Lawlor: Your hero, Charlie-----

An Ceann Comhairle: Will the Deputy, please-----

Deputy Anthony Lawlor: I am sorry, a Cheann Comhairle.

An Ceann Comhairle: I have to sit through this also. I ask Deputy Shane Ross to proceed with his contribution.

Deputy Finian McGrath: It is very hard, a Cheann Comhairle.

Deputy Shane Ross: It is very difficult.

An Ceann Comhairle: The Deputy is well able for it. As his neighbour next door is an expert at it, he should get some tips from him.

(Interruptions).

Deputy Shane Ross: The problem is there is an abuse of executive power and it is embedded in the Constitution. Every Taoiseach has looked - as the Taoiseach did last week - at opinion polls-----

Deputy Paschal Donohoe: The Deputy looks at them. How much did he spend on them?

Deputy Shane Ross: -----and decided on the date of the general election, depending, simply and solely, on his own popularity.

Deputy Derek Keating: The Deputy would like to be Taoiseach without authority and responsibility.

An Ceann Comhairle: Will the Deputy, please, stay quiet?

Deputy Shane Ross: Last week the Taoiseach said he would make the decision in the national interest. One day he decided in the national interest that it would be held in November but the next he decided in the national interest that it would be held in February.

(Interruptions).

Deputy Shane Ross: What he was really deciding was that holding it in November would be in the interests of Fine Gael, but then the Tánaiste came in and put a bit of pressure on him. He backed off to the absolute disgust of his own backbenchers and decided to hold it in February. This behaviour must stop and there is only one way of doing so. It would mean removing

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that power from the Taoiseach-----

Deputy Billy Kelleher: And giving it to the Tánaiste.

Deputy Shane Ross: -----by amending the Constitution and providing for a fixed term.

A Deputy: Grandstanding.

An Ceann Comhairle: Will the Deputy, please, stay quiet?

Deputy Finian McGrath: Fixed terms - that would be a democratic revolution.

An Ceann Comhairle: Is the Bill being opposed?

The Taoiseach: It is not, but I remind the Deputy that it is the President who dissolves the Dáil on the request of the Taoiseach and that he can refuse, if he so wishes.

Deputy Shane Ross: I thank the Taoiseach.

Deputy Bernard J. Durkan: It is a major achievement.

Cuireadh agus aontaíodh an cheist.

Question put and agreed to.

An Ceann Comhairle: Since this is a Private Members' Bill, Second Stage must, under Standing Orders, be taken in Private Members' time.

Deputy Shane Ross: Tairgim: "Go dtógfair an Bille in am Comhaltaí Príobháideacha."

I move: "That the Bill be taken in Private Members' time."

Cuireadh agus aontaíodh an cheist.

Question put and agreed to.

2016: Financial Resolution

Financial Resolution No. 5: General (Resumed)

Debate resumed on the following motion:

THAT it is expedient to amend the law relating to inland revenue (including value-added tax and excise) and to make further provision in connection with finance.

- (Minister for Jobs, Enterprise and Innovation).

The Taoiseach: The main aim of the budget announced yesterday is to keep the recovery moving. It is not just a budget for 2016 but also another step in our plan to sustain the recovery in the years ahead. The past few years have been difficult for the people of Ireland, but their efforts have made it possible for the country to exit an international bailout, reduce our debts and safely progress into recovery.

There is no denying that the country still faces many challenges arising from the economic crash brought about by the previous Administration. In addressing these challenges the budget for 2016 mirrors the Government's goals for now and into the future: to make work pay and remove the barriers to work; to support more job creation and regional economic growth; and to rebuild a strong economy that can support better public services. Budget 2016 represents another affordable and sensible step in addressing many of these challenges. The Government I have the honour to lead will continue along the path laid out yesterday in order that we can keep the recovery going.

Our first priority is to continue to make work pay. While the Government has changed Fianna Fáil's bailout agreement to avoid future increases in income tax, it was clear that the existing level of tax on work and jobs was a drag on our recovery. Since the introduction of the universal social charge - a brutal tax - by Fianna Fáil, Ireland's taxation system has discouraged work and effort and is a barrier to economic recovery. It was wrong that the Government took more than half of every extra euro being earned by hundreds of thousands of low and middle-income families. Marginal tax rates on middle-income earners in Ireland are much higher than in the United Kingdom and other countries where many of our people have emigrated to and with which we are in competition for mobile talent and investment.

Making work pay more than welfare will also be an essential part of our plan to get Ireland working again. Today, there are too many families for whom work simply does not pay and it encourages an intergenerational cycle of joblessness and poverty.

We started the process of reducing the tax burden on work and jobs for low and middle-income earners in the last budget and have continued with that strategy. By reducing the universal social charge rates and bands we are reducing the marginal rate of tax to 49.5% for all earners earning under €70,000. This is a key milestone on the path to recovery. As the Minister for Finance indicated yesterday, it is the first time since April 2009 that the marginal rate has dropped below 50% for middle-income workers. While we continue to cap the benefit at €70,000, those workers earning more will benefit on the portion of their income below this level.

These tax changes are only a step in our plan to progressively abolish USC during the next term of office in order to secure full employment. If returned, the Government will take another step each year towards the abolition of USC by 2020.

The Government is also determined to make work pay more than welfare. We established the Low Pay Commission this year to make annual recommendations on the level of the minimum wage. It recommended to the Government that a 50 cent increase was justified and yesterday the Government approved the increase to the new level of €9.15 an hour to support workers. This will have a positive impact for the 75,000 workers earning the minimum wage. The Government will continue to listen to the annual recommendations of the Low Pay Commission to ensure low-income workers will not be left behind as the economy recovers. A single person on the minimum wage will benefit by more than €700 arising from the budget.

The Government has also long signalled its desire to end the unfair tax treatment of self-employed workers. The Government supports those who created their own jobs and have created jobs for others. They are the shopkeepers, tradesmen and farmers who, in many cases, lead our recovery efforts in the domestic economy. As a first step to end their unfair tax treatment, the Government is introducing an earned-income tax credit to the value of €550. To support and reward their work and effort, we will complete the tax equalisation for the self-employed

in the coming years, with other measures to support our job creators. This approach is in stark contrast to that of other parties in this House which want to tax job creators out of the country.

The Government will also prioritise more supports that will encourage and support working families. Not having a job is the biggest source of inequality in our society. Jobless households with children are at the greatest risk of experiencing child poverty and perpetuating a cycle of joblessness and welfare dependency, as often articulated by the Tánaiste. It is clear that excessive child care costs have become a barrier to work for many families. For this reason, the Government is making another first step in the budget to overhaul child care supports.

12 o'clock

We will now offer every child from the age of three a free preschool place until he or she begins primary school. In addition, the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs, Deputy Reilly, will extend the community child care subvention programme to help low income families remain in work and will also develop new after-school services.

I am particularly pleased the Government is introducing a suite of supports which will ensure children with a disability can meaningfully participate in, and fully reap the benefits of, preschool education. That is a most important step.

We have listened carefully to the concerns of parents and in conjunction with these new services we will also introduce a range of quality assurance measures for early education. Those will include audits, inspections and training. We will also extend free GP care to all primary school children of working families, subject to negotiations with the relevant organisations. Those are steps in the right direction, and in the years ahead, we will do more to support working families and their child care needs.

All the measures to make work pay are designed to help create more jobs and ensure that everyone has the opportunity to fill those jobs. Since entering office we have prioritised measures to create new jobs so that people can get their lives back on track. Since we launched the Action Plan for Jobs in 2012 we have seen the private sector add 125,000 new jobs in the economy. The recovery in jobs has accelerated in 2015 with more than 1,300 new jobs created each week. This budget will keep the jobs recovery moving in the right direction.

As part of the budget, we have published a capital plan to ensure all regions share in its benefits. This €27 billion investment plan for Ireland is essential to restore all the jobs lost in the recession by 2018 and to get unemployment rates down to 6% by 2020. It has been welcomed as an affordable and realistic plan that is also consistent with the Government plan to eliminate Government borrowing by 2018. The new investment planned in roads, public transport, education, health care, flood risk, enterprise and policing are all designed to alleviate growing pressures in the economy which could hold back recovery. However, the recovery is not complete and we must continue to manage the national finances carefully or risk falling back. We cannot afford everything we want but this plan represents the best of what can be delivered with the available resources.

New jobs will also be created from new business ventures. As a Government, we need to support those who take the risk to start new business, create more jobs and export to more countries around the world. We are extending the three-year corporation tax relief for new startup companies. That is to be welcomed. For those who are successful in creating a new company and who wish to use their success to start another business we are reducing capital gains tax

on a limited basis for those disposing of their interest in a business. The very successful home renovation scheme, which has supported thousands of construction-related jobs during very tough times, is being extended until the end of 2016. Our farming and food sector has been one of the main success stories of the recovery to date, but there are still many structural challenges facing the sector. To reflect that, we are extending the range of agri-tax reliefs until the end of 2018 and introducing a new succession partnership model to help pass knowledge and capital from one generation to another in an orderly fashion.

The tourism sector was in crisis when we entered Government in 2011. With the introduction of a number of measures to support its recovery, it has now reached new record levels. To keep the recovery going in the regions around the country, we will continue to maintain the 9% rate of VAT on tourism-related services.

In addition to supporting Irish business, we have also continued the strategy of attracting more foreign investment and jobs. In the first half of this year, IDA Ireland won 110 new investments and it expects to create 9,000 new jobs around the country by the end of this year. The continuation of our transparent and statute-based corporation tax regime remains an essential pillar of Ireland's enterprise policy. We now compete with a low tax rate of 12.5% applied to a wide base. Our success to date has been due to offering a best-in-class corporation tax regime on which enterprise can rely. In continuing this strategy, we are halving the rate of corporation tax on qualifying innovative products and services developed in Ireland. To reflect Ireland's positive international engagement with tax reform through the OECD, the knowledge development box will be the first OECD compliant offering in the world. It is set at 6.25%. That will offer more certainty and stability to business in the long term and make this country an even more attractive location for foreign direct investment.

The Government still needs to do far more to rebuild a sustainable economy with strong sectors that can support full employment. Our flagship in this regard has been the Action Plan for Jobs, designed to support enterprise achieve its goals in terms of jobs, exports and startups, access to finance, market penetration, innovation, access to talent and efficient public sector interaction. Its success can be seen in the jobs recovery to date which has been driven almost exclusively by increases in full-time positions. The jobs recovery is also broad based - with increases in 11 of the 14 sectors of the economy. To keep the recovery going, the Government is already drafting a new Action Plan for Jobs for 2016. We also need to take a longer term perspective to achieve our goals of replacing all the jobs lost by 2018 and to reduce unemployment to 6%. The Government has mandated the Minister for Jobs, Enterprise and Innovation, Deputy Richard Bruton, to bring forward a longer term enterprise strategy to Cabinet shortly. This new enterprise policy 2025 will set the strategic framework for a competitive, export-orientated economy that can support full employment.

The Government's plan of tax cuts and enterprise supports will help to rebuild a strong and sustainable economy. Reducing the high tax burden on low and middle income families helps to create jobs, put Ireland back to work and generates the revenue needed to support vital public services. It is not a case of one or the other; one supports the other. In last year's budget we cut the universal social charge, USC, and income tax rates, but the yield from those taxes was still up 6% in the first eight months because those measures have helped support the recovery. As a result, we have been able to fund additional spending in health, transport and education. In that sense, our plan is to deliver a virtuous circle of tax cuts on work, more jobs, and to improve public finances and services.

As the economy recovers we are now investing more in vital public services. In our hospitals, 880,000 day cases will be carried out by the end of the year - an increase of nearly 20% in the past five years. The Government has also protected front-line staff numbers. Since the beginning of last year we have hired approximately 1,000 extra nurses and as the recovery continues, we will continue to support and expand our health service where appropriate.

Next year we will recruit 2,260 additional teaching posts, including 600 new resource teachers. That will result in a reduction of the pupil-teacher ratio at primary level from 28:1 to 27:1, and at second level from 19:1 to 18.7:1. Next year we also plan to extend GP care without fees to all children under the age of 12, subject to negotiations.

In order to tackle crime we are continuing our recruitment strategy with 600 new gardaí next year in addition to the roll-out of vital crime fighting ICT equipment. We will continue to keep the Garda training college in Templemore open for the training of recruits.

All of those new investments are essential to keep the recovery going and to support economic growth and job creation. The budget is an affordable and sensible way to secure recovery. It signals an end to the boom and bust approach of previous Governments that put the economy at risk for electoral advantage. The Fianna Fáil Government increased gross spending by 139% between 2000 and 2008. In the run-up to the 2007 election, between 2005 and 2007, public spending was ramped up by more than 25%. By comparison, in 2016, public expenditure will be just 4% higher than in 2014. Over that time, tax revenues are forecast to increase by more than 14%, while the economy is set to grow by 18%. We are set to reduce the deficit to 2.1% in 2015, falling to 1.2% next year and to eliminate it entirely by 2018. In comparison, Opposition parties continue to make unfunded and reckless demands that would put the recovery at risk.

As we look forward and plan for 2016 and the years ahead, the opportunity now exists to secure the economic recovery and to build an enterprise economy and society that delivers secure and well-paid jobs, incomes and pensions, world class infrastructure, high quality public services and certainty and the opportunity for so many more people to move from the unemployment register into the world of work where work can be seen to pay.

As the end of this Dáil approaches, we are facing a fork in the road. One track points to continued stability and certainty about the future. The signposts along that way are now clear, namely, no booms, no busts but responsible increases in public spending within a reformed public service built on a solid platform of steady economic growth; the completion of tax equalisation for the self-employed and other measures to support job creators; more realistic and affordable increases in the minimum wage to make work pay; the progressive abolition of the universal social charge, USC, to reward work and effort and to make Ireland more attractive for mobile foreign investment and skills, including for returning emigrants; low interest rates for business and home owners, underpinned by further deficit and debt reduction and rising domestic and international confidence; and a robust defence of the 12.5% corporation tax as the linchpin of the Government's jobs policy.

As we face this division in the road, one surely can see that along the other track lies instability and chaos. The siren songs of ending austerity and fairer recovery will, in fact, mean the exact opposite. The stepping stones back towards the economic abyss are well laid out in alternative budgets published by the Opposition, namely, an Oireachtas unable to pass coherent budgets, sapping confidence and undermining economic discipline and job-killing tax increases on work and business to pay for reckless promises. In that context, I am surprised the Fianna

Fáil Party has moved so far from where the late Seán Lemass had placed it as a low-tax party that was confident and competent based on competitiveness and exports. Instead, one is faced with job-killing tax increases on work and business to pay for reckless promises coming from Opposition parties, as well as the prospect of confidence-destroying confrontation with our international partners and higher interest rates. In recent months, all Members have seen how quickly fragile economic recoveries unravel in the face of political instability and reckless economic management. The Opposition wants the country to go backwards but the Government of Fine Gael and the Labour Party guarantees that stability and further progress in the interests of all the people. This budget brings the country forward and secures the economic recovery and I commend it to the House.

Deputies: Hear, hear.

Tánaiste and Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Joan Burton): This is a carefully designed, responsible, interlocking budget in which different pieces come together to form the overall picture, that is, a picture of a country moving firmly in the right direction and of a society becoming more confident that both society and the economy can be restored. The budget is designed to help people back to work, to raise living standards in all homes, to help vulnerable people in society, to provide better services, to maintain the great progress the Government has made in restoring the public finances to health and to reducing the debt to sustainable levels and to capitalise on the opportunity we now have to deliver an Ireland that is better for all.

The budget is designed to improve the lives and living standards of every person and every family in the country, including the person on the minimum wage who, as a result of these changes, will be more than €700 better off next year and the middle-income family with two children who will be almost €1,000 better off because they will pay less USC and receive more child benefit. Moreover, if they have younger children, they also will benefit from additional early childhood care. It also includes the 66 year old carer who will receive an increase to his or her weekly payment and a 75% Christmas bonus and who will see the respite care grant restored in full to €1,700; the retired couple who will see their pensions increase and receive the 75% Christmas bonus; the jobseeker who desperately wants to get back to work but needs some help to get there; and the nurse, garda or teacher whose take-home pay will increase as the Government unwinds the financial emergency legislation and gradually restores public sector pay.

This budget is about progress and opportunity. It is about the progress that we, as a people together, have achieved in putting this country back on its feet. It is about the opportunity we now have to secure the recovery and raise living standards in a sustained way by continuing to follow the right path, that is, the path set out by the Labour Party and Fine Gael in government. Let me be clear: we are moving steadily in the right direction. The economy is growing at speed. As Tánaiste, Labour Party leader and Minister for Social Protection, my absolute priority is helping people back into work. In this context, 130,000 jobs have been added since the peak of the crisis and unemployment has fallen by more than one third from a rate of more than 15% to one of 9.4% at present. For the second budget in a row, the Government is raising living standards in a responsible and sustainable way that safeguards the public finances. It is investing in essential public services such as the expansion of the early childhood care and education scheme to give children the best possible start in life. In addition, the Government is reducing pupil-teacher ratios in schools to give children the best possible education and is funding the next phase of free general practitioner, GP, care for six to 11 year old children to ensure their parents need not worry about the cost of visiting the doctor.

However, while we are on the right path, we have not reached our destination yet, that is, an Ireland which is visibly better for all. Many people have not yet felt the recovery. They have family members and friends who still struggle with the after-effects of recession. Renewed prosperity has not yet reached all communities and any suggestion here today that the Government has dealt with all problems would be glib in the extreme. The depth and scale of the crisis was far too savage for that. The Government has a way to go, more work to do and significant problems yet to solve. However, it can be more than hopeful of doing so; it can be confident of so doing because the country now has the opportunity to do this and it must be grabbed with both hands. The Government has the opportunity to make this a better country for all, to invest in the services that will make this a reality and to create a strong economy, a decent society and thriving communities. This opportunity has been built on the work undertaken since 2011. Back then, Fianna Fáil had strung a wrecking ball through the economy and society. People's lives and hopes for their futures and those of their children had been flattened. When the Labour Party and Fine Gael came into government, they had a simple task, namely, to rescue the country from that ruin, to rebuild the economy and to repair society.

This is the Government's fifth budget. The first three, in particular the first two, were immensely difficult for people. However, they were necessary to restore the public finances to health, to help sustain, create and regrow employment and to chart a course towards strong economic growth; not the jobless growth of old recoveries but a job-rich growth which I am pleased to state is what has been achieved. At all times, the Government has sought to protect the most vulnerable in society to the greatest extent possible. Last year, much quicker than most economists had expected in 2011, the Government was able to introduce a budget that began the process of raising living standards and re-investing in communities. The Government kick-started the social recovery and is continuing that process this year. This is a budget for the people made possible by the people. This is a budget designed to help low and middle-income workers, families, retired people and vulnerable groups in particular.

The USC was a dreadful and difficult legacy of Fianna Fáil's wretched approach to the economy. In this budget, the Government is reducing USC for the second year running; it is reducing all three rates in order that low and middle-income workers benefit and it is capping the gains for the highest paid. We are also increasing the entry point for USC. This means that anybody earning less than €13,000 per annum will pay no USC from 2016 onwards. As a result of these changes from January next 700,000 low-income earners will be exempt from the USC and for middle income PAYE earners, the marginal tax rate will fall below 50%. This is an important milestone on the road to our recovery, both in terms of the message it sends out to people in Ireland and the message it sends out abroad. This is a highly progressive approach, one that, as Tánaiste and leader of the Labour Party, I am proud to have delivered together with the Taoiseach and Fine Gael.

If re-elected to government, the Labour Party will work to phase out USC for all low and middle income earners. By stark contrast, I note that Sinn Féin wants to retain the USC. It wants to retain this emergency tax in place despite the fact the emergency is over. The reason it wants to retain the USC is because it has realised none of its previous tax plans added up. While the totals in this regard have been checked off by the Department of Finance, frankly, I, and most other people who have reviewed them, find them difficult to make sense of. Meet Fianna Fáil Nua, formerly Sinn Féin. Fianna Fáil ran the country into the ground and Sinn Féin would return it there in no time at all.

By contrast, this Government is delivering a budget that raises living standards in a fair and

sustainable way. The overall effect of the changes is that the biggest gains are made by the bottom 30% of earners and the smallest gains are made by the top 10%. Families will particularly benefit. The child benefit increase of €5 will benefit more than 623,000 families and almost 1.2 million children. I make no apologies for retaining child benefit as a universal payment because, overwhelmingly, it is paid to mothers whether working in or outside the home. It is a crucial support. As a result of the USC and child benefit changes, a family with one parent working and earning a salary of €45,000 per annum will be more than €830 better off next year. As a female leader, I am particularly pleased that this Government has been able to announce progressive change for mothers working in the home or in the workplace. I am tired of approaches that seek to pit one woman against the other, as if there is a perfect model that every mother, every family, should adopt, as though there were not times when people want to care at home and other times when people want to be fully involved in a vibrant way in the workforce and labour force. There are different stages in people's lives within a family situation.

Deputy Marcella Corcoran Kennedy: Hear, hear.

Deputy Joan Burton: It is important to remember that fathers who work in the home, of which there are a growing number, will benefit from the changes in the same way. I am pleased that we are announcing an increase in the home carer's credit from €810 to €1,000, which will offer better options to families at different stages in their lives. The days are rightly gone when child-rearing or caring for a relative was considered solely the woman's prerogative. Many men now take some time off work to help with child-rearing at home. The time has long since past since this was considered solely a woman's prerogative.

At the same time, we are investing heavily in child care to increase options for families where both parents are in the workplace. This includes the extension of the early childhood care and education scheme, which has been a long-standing priority for me. In addition, I am allocating €5 million in 2016 for a new paternity benefit scheme. This will allow fathers in employment, from next September, to take two weeks paternity leave. This will be paid at the rate of €230 per week, based on the same PRSI contributions as required for maternity benefit.

This budget will raise living standards and improve services for workers, families and children. It will also increase incomes and provide greater security for retired people. Throughout the worst of the crisis, we protected the State pension. I am pleased that in this budget, we are announcing an above-inflation increase of €3 per week for pensioners aged 66 and over. This was a priority of mine and of the Taoiseach. This is the first weekly rate increase for pensioners since 2009 and is long overdue. In the years since, many pensioners have supported their adult children and their families throughout very difficult times. They deserve to see their income in retirement increase now that we have some room to do so.

I am glad that pensioners will not only receive a rate increase but will also benefit from the 75% Christmas bonus. The least well-off pensioners will also benefit from the increase in the fuel allowance. I am glad to say that this amounts to a solid three-part package for many of our retired citizens. I make no apologies to those who question the logic of the spend on the Christmas bonus. As Tánaiste and Labour Party leader, my focus is on ensuring we improve things for every person, not just a few. Fair dues to Fianna Fáil of former days and the late Mr. Haughey who introduced the Christmas bonus, which as a child I recall was of great importance to my great aunts and uncles and of great significance to people who find Christmas spending a particular challenge. The people of this country deserve immense credit for ensuring that social solidarity remained intact throughout the crisis, when it fractured in other countries. This

solidarity is based on the simple concept, that age-old Irish tradition of looking out for someone less fortunate than oneself. The bonus is not just a welcome assistance to retired people at a financially stressful time of year, it also helps a range of other vulnerable people, including lone parents, long-term jobseekers, carers and people with disabilities. For a single person on disability allowance, this will mean a bonus payment of €141 at Christmas. For a pensioner couple, both in receipt of the non-contributory State pension, it will mean a bonus payment of €327.50. As we all know, the bonus is largely spent in local economies countrywide. It provides a boost not only for the individuals and families who receive it, but also for local businesses and the community. In other words, it is money well spent in every conceivable way.

While the bonus is an important measure for vulnerable groups it is not the only important measure. Carers play an incredibly important role in our society. I am, therefore, pleased to be increasing the respite care grant by €325 to €1,700 per annum. In addition, people in receipt of carer's allowance will continue to receive their payment for an additional six weeks subsequent to the death of the loved one for whom they were caring. I am conscious that when the person for whom a carer has been caring dies this can be an enormously traumatic time. We have been in discussion with the Carer's Association in relation to the provision of options for people following that period. This will bring the total grace period from six weeks to 12 weeks.

Carer's allowance recipients aged 66 and over will benefit from the €3 per week increase announced for pensioners. We are also in a position to increase another very important support for vulnerable households, the fuel allowance. It will be increased by €2.50 a week to €22.50 for the duration of the fuel season. This means targeted payment targets households with the most need for income support. This increase will benefit almost 381,000 low income households. There is not a Deputy in the House who does not know some elderly person or some other person living on their own perhaps in rural Ireland. The fuel allowance is incredibly important for them. As things improve for us, it is appropriate that the Government has agreed to resource that in a better way.

The social protection system has long ceased to be solely about income supports. Since 2011, the Department has also become a public employment service offering services to employers to identify and hire the right people. We have some of the best people who unfortunately are still without employment. In some cases they have engaged with the networks to find employment having lost their job and not being able to find another.. That is critical because secure and fairly paid work is the single best protection against poverty in the long term. It is the single best path to financial independence for a person or a family. The Labour Party has always been the party of work, and the party of workers' rights. This is another pro-work budget, another budget designed to ensure that work pays. The increase in the minimum wage to €9.15 an hour from January is a hugely important measure for low-paid workers.

I pledged earlier this year that if we increased the minimum wage, we would address any PRSI effect that would arise from such an increase. We are doing precisely that in this budget. I am introducing a new tapered PRSI credit for class A PRSI employees earning between €352 and €424 in a week. This will reduce the weekly PRSI bill for over 88,000 employees and will be on top of the gains from the USC changes announced in the budget. In addition, the lower 8.5% class A rate of employer PRSI will be extended to over 26,000 employers as we increase the employer threshold from €356 to €376. To further support families in work, the income thresholds for family income supplement will be increased by €5 a week for families with one child and €10 a week for families with two or more children. This will result in an additional €3 or €6 per week for low-income working families in receipt of the family income

supplement. This measure will benefit some 60,000 families who, among them, have more than 131,000 children. In addition, lone parent families who transitioned from the one-parent family payment to the jobseeker's allowance transitional arrangements will benefit from changes to the latter, increasing the disregards and lowering the calculation of the means. Put simply, these measures will ensure additional income for lone parents in the workforce and help them build towards financial independence over time. Both the family income supplement and the changes in regard to the lone parent transitional payment are particularly designed to improve the situation for low income households and to encourage them in a situation where no one in the household is working to get at least one of the people in the household out working for a significant amount of time.

Coupled with all these measures are very significant investments in our schools, in health care, in housing and in other essential public services. For example, since the beginning of 2012, we have invested more than €1.25 billion in school buildings. We have built 102 new schools and completed 71 large-scale school extensions. Our primary schools have achieved the best reading and mathematics results in 30 years, thanks to the great work done by the former Minister, Deputy Ruairí Quinn-----

Deputies: Hear, hear.

Deputy Joan Burton: -----and now his successor the Minister, Deputy Jan O'Sullivan, is equipping primary and post-primary schools for the next wave of improvement.

This budget will deliver more than 2,200 new teachers and reduce the pupil-teacher ratio by one point at both levels. This is something that people involved in teaching have strongly recommended. We agreed with the recommendation but we did not have the resources to implement it. I am delighted to say that we do have them now. Again, this is about both progress and opportunity, the progress in making our schools better, and the enhanced opportunity that this provides in turn for our children. In all of this, we are investing in our future, investing in Ireland's potential, and we are doing it in a responsible and sustainable way. Our deficit will fall to just 1.2% of GDP and our debt-to-GDP ratio will fall to 93% next year. I know those figures do not seem incredibly important but they are. It means that next year our debt level will have fallen to just slightly below the eurozone average. People have seen that in recent days we borrowed €1 billion on the debt markets for 15 years, which is very long-term money, at an interest rate of 1.65%. This budget is firmly based in having the structure that meets the requirements of the EU treaties. Our debt-to-GDP ratio for 2015 will have fallen to 97% from the high that we inherited of over 120%. That means that we are bringing down the debt as we grow the economy. That is precisely the way the Keynesian and social democratic economists approach the business of putting an economy and a society back on its feet. We are doing this.

The difference could not be clearer. The single most striking thing about the Opposition's response to this budget has been the sense of absence and the sense of confusion. By "absence" I mean the absence of any serious idea to address the hard issues of the debt and deficit, which we have to do, in order to be able to borrow money at cheap rates. At the same time we have to be ambitious, to improve both the tax situation in terms of people at work and the provision of vital services for everybody in our country as well as providing solid income supports for people like pensioners who rely on social welfare in retirement. When I took over from the previous Minister for Social Protection, I faced a deficit, or a hole, in the Social Insurance Fund that was rapidly approaching €2 billion. I am happy to say that this year it will be down to a figure of just over €120 million. With the rate of job creation for which we are so ambitious

to achieve, and which involves the people who come back to work contributing to PRSI, we should be in a position to have a surplus in the Social Insurance Fund next year.

Deputies: Hear, hear.

Deputy Joan Burton: That is important for people who are paying for a contributory pension. Rather than every commentator writing about the hole in the Social Insurance Fund as they did prior to Fianna Fáil leaving office, we can now say that we have restored the security and stability of that fund and we can fund and pay pensions to people in retirement.

Deputies: Hear, hear.

Deputy Joan Burton: I am disappointed at the Opposition's contribution because I expected more vision, more thoughtfulness and more solutions from it. Instead, what we got was just like the nursery rhyme and Old Mother Hubbard's cupboard - it was bare. Fianna Fáil and Sinn Féin have offered a cupboard which is actually bare of any ideas. More importantly, neither party appreciates the concept of sustainability or meeting the different targets which have been set for us.

All of this has been the work of the people up and down the country who have faced some very difficult years. This is the year in which we, as a society, can breathe again. The Government can seek to make it better, not as much as it would like, but much better for most.

We have an enormous capital programme, the largest in the recent history of the State. We also have the largest housing programme in the history of the State.

Deputies: Hear, hear.

Deputy Micheál Martin: Listening to the speeches of the Taoiseach and the Tánaiste, Deputy Willie O'Dea reminded me of the dictum, "I can take any amount of criticism as long as I can consider it unqualified praise."

This budget is the last throw of the dice by a deeply unpopular Government desperate to be re-elected. It is not a budget to shape Ireland's future but one to help two parties get through an election campaign. Instead of a plan to address deep problems which have developed in recent years, what we have is a series of policy soundbites. This, fundamentally, is why Fine Gael's and the Labour Party's last throw of the dice will fail. This Government has debased the budget process through its extreme manipulation of figures and its policy of always hiding the negatives.

This year the Government has set a new standard of cynicism in seeking credit for partly restoring cuts which it promised the people it would never make in the first place. Every little did hurt. No matter how successful the Government is at getting its lines covered, the legacy of broken promises and unfair decisions remains. People have had enough of the constant overspinning by the Government. They are sick of the never-ending abuse of language where there is no relationship between what is announced and what is actually provided for on the ground. They have had enough of a Government which has failed to anticipate or address any of the major crises which have arisen in recent years. Most of all, they have come to understand that one can trust almost nothing this Government says.

After six months of hype and stories planted daily in our newspapers, the sum of what was announced yesterday is a cynical budget, full of inflated claims which are already unravelling.

It is clear now why Fine Gael was so eager to run to the country in four weeks' time. Its Ministers know the impact of this budget will disappear as soon as people see how many problems are not being addressed, how they have no plans to tackle them and how many of their regressive policies will remain in place.

The budget fails to provide a credible long-term approach to any major problem. For child care, support for the elderly, health, homelessness, education, employment conditions, community development, drugs, rural crime, disability supports or any other important societal issue, the very most that has been announced is a token provision. The shambles and waste of Irish Water did not even merit a passing reference. The horizon is purely to get through election day while all other considerations have been pushed aside.

To listen to the Ministers' speeches yesterday, one would have imagined that everything is fine. The scale and impact of crises which are hurting hundreds of thousands was completely ignored. There was not even a token acknowledgement of the health service shambles, the acute pressures felt by the elderly or the mounting evidence of a two-tiered recovery where some get ahead but too many are being left behind.

The growing cynicism of Fine Gael's and the Labour Party's budgets is well beyond a joke. They have radically reduced the amount of information available to assess the impact of the announcements. In presenting figures, even the reduction or maintenance of current funding is claimed as an increase. The Minister for Finance, Deputy Michael Noonan, and the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform, Deputy Brendan Howlin, went as far as to refuse to produce core data on the income distribution effects of budget measures. This information was a basic part of budget documentation for 20 years until they decided it might get in the way of their political claims. All that we get now is their info-graphics showing a part-picture of what happens for a small selection of households. Even including the increase in the minimum wage as a budget measure when employers will pay it, was a claim too far.

The Ministers have done everything possible to hide the true impact of their budgets because their record is one of actively increasing inequality. In every single one of their budgets, the highest benefit has gone to the highest earners. This is particularly true when one factors in the significant impact cuts targeted against the weaker sections of society have. Up to 60% of income earners get below €30,000. That is why this budget is fundamentally lacking in equality.

The speeches of the Minister for Public Expenditure, Deputy Brendan Howlin, are always masterclasses in how to hide reality in a cloud of smoke. Yesterday's performance was among his most brazen. Clearly, the Labour Party has been hurting from the claim it has supported deeply regressive policies in government. The Minister decided to claim that the Labour Party had, in fact, been incredibly fair. The proof of this is, he claimed, the fact that Ireland has one of the most progressive income tax regimes in Europe. What he did not say is that 100% of this is accountable to budgets introduced by Fianna Fáil but voted against by Fine Gael and the Labour Party.

Every single independent study of budget policy from 2007 onwards has stated Fianna Fáil's budgets made the wealthiest pay the most, while Fine Gael's and the Labour Party's have given them the most. The studies also stated the clear majority of budget corrections were implemented before Fine Gael and the Labour Party took office. It takes a peculiar brand of political cynicism to attack people at the same time as trying to claim credit for their policies.

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The Labour Party will never get out of the hole it has dug for itself until it is willing to accept the evidence, understood by everyone in this country, that this has been an unfair and divisive Government, obsessed with politics and oblivious to the damage caused by its policies. Every one of the past four budgets was announced with a claim that it was fair. Looking back at some of the claims made, however, one will see Ministers living in a parallel universe where they imagined that nobody would notice the reality of tax after tax levied with no concern for ability to pay. Fine Gael's obsession with pretending not to have increased tax has been central to this crude, right-wing approach to tax.

This year yet again, the highest benefit has been felt by the highest earners. The tax changes result in a gain of 1.9% for an earner on €75,000 but only 0.8% for someone on €20,000. The Minister did not even try to defend that yesterday. Dress it up any way one wants, but this is not a progressive tax policy. There is still no direct tax relief for parents to help with the huge cost of child care.

One of the innovations this year is for Ministers to claim the minimum wage increase in its budget giveaway figures for households. It is now the official policy of the Labour Party and Fine Gael to balance wage increases paid by employers to the low paid with tax reductions for the highest paid. It was an extraordinarily cynical act. The Government does not pay the minimum wage; the private sector does.

Deputy Kevin Humphreys: Fianna Fáil cut the minimum wage by €1.

Deputy Joan Burton: Yes, that was Fianna Fáil's bright idea.

Deputy Micheál Martin: With the greatest respect, we increased it to the highest level in Europe prior to the crash.

The clawing back of €300 million through the failure to index tax bands is a significant policy decision. This was not announced yesterday; it is buried in the documentation. The obvious purpose of this was to give space for changes which might win a few more headlines.

At the conclusion of five budgets, the net impact of the income policies of this Government is entirely clear. It has significantly increased inequality. It squeezed the middle further and then failed to relieve it in spite of endless stories promising action. The Government has put political positioning ahead of everything else during its term. It entered office with the objective of claiming credit for the recovery which it knew would come. Selling the fairy tale of a decisive Government coming into office and turning things around quickly, no matter what the impact, was its single guiding obsession. It did not seek to shape a recovery which would benefit all parts of our society. It merely wanted to play politics with recovery.

To the mounting fury of many Government members and backbenchers, the public have been reluctant to shower them with laurels and re-elect them by acclamation. The problem is that everyone knows that the Government did not deliver this recovery. The economy is growing today at roughly the long-term trend rate predicted by all major research bodies. This is growth built on the foundation of skills and enterprise developed by the people over decades. Ireland is recovering because of its core strengths, not because of a politically obsessed Government which has no interest in long-term issues. The Government did not deliver recovery, but it did make it unfair and divisive. It also allowed crisis after crisis to develop because of a refusal to engage in even basic planning on fundamental issues and its addiction to short-term action.

One of the major problems for the Government is that it is trying to claim credit for growth it does not understand and did not predict. For the first half of its term, growth was lower than it had predicted and now it is higher. The majority of measures to fix the structural deficit were in place before the Government took office. That is a fact which cannot be disputed. If it wants to claim that fiscal retrenchment delivered recovery, the Government has an enormous problem of having campaigned and voted against it budget after budget.

Ireland has a great economic story to tell the world of a dedicated and skilled people and solid foundations, but the Government is refusing to tell it because it gets in the way of its political strategy. The Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform, Deputy Brendan Howlin, was absolutely right when he said those who promised to simply throw out tough policies were making promises which were both unrealistic and foolish. It does, however, take some neck for the Government to attack the policies of the far left here and say, "Who speaks of Syriza now?" It was the Labour Party and Fine Gael who were promising the radical alternative in 2011. It was they who promised "not a red cent" and "Labour's way or Frankfurt's way." They were the Syriza of 2011-----

Deputy Willie O'Dea: They were.

Deputy Micheál Martin: -----but with one major difference - the Labour Party and Fine Gael did not even try to implement their promises. Year after year, Deputies who now lecture us, all from the Government benches, were on their feet demanding more tax cuts and more spending. It is quite striking that in their recent appearances before the banking inquiry the leaders of Fine Gael and the Labour Party could not find anything wrong with their own policies or priorities before the financial crisis. All that the parties on the left are doing today is copying the Kenny-Gilmore model; therefore, a little less of the smug sanctimony would be in order.

As it comes to the end of a five-year term, the Government is distinguished by the fact that it has never produced a long-term statement of economic policy. It has maintained a fiscal plan it once attacked as unacceptable and has produced a mountain of self-serving economic commentary, but it has never set out a vision for the future of the economy and the society we want it to support. The capital investment programme is a loose collection of projects thrown together with no sense of vision and no clear objectives.

Deputy Colm Keaveney: It is fantasy.

Deputy Micheál Martin: It sets out no service standards to be achieved and has no sense of what the bigger picture is. All major projects involve completing plans made by previous Governments. Fine Gael's decade old commitment to compulsory health insurance is a shambles which the party's Ministers and backbenchers are now too embarrassed to talk about. The Government is even trying to change the language around it. Other than that, all we have seen is public relations initiatives. Many publicly funded bodies have been closed down in order to be reopened and renamed by Ministers. Basic everyday activities have been rebranded and public servants put under orders not to allow anything to happen without a Minister present to announce it. In fact, the entire machinery of government which should be focused on anticipating and addressing real problems has become dominated by ministerial obsessions with public relations. This has shown itself particularly strongly in the enterprise sector, where announcements which used to be seen as run-of-the-mill are now held up until the right branding is produced and half the Cabinet can attend.

One of the biggest components of the Government's economic fairy tale is that it claims to have "delivered" or "created" tens of thousands of jobs. In the first weeks of his Administration, the Taoiseach signalled his intention in this regard by demanding that salary caps be lifted in order that Fine Gael's most senior press officer could be placed in the Department of Jobs, Enterprise and Innovation with a special brief to relentlessly sell the Action Plan for Jobs as the source of all new jobs. The fact is that the OECD reviewed the Action Plan for Jobs and stated it was impossible to show that it had created extra employment and that the bulk of employment growth was, undoubtedly, down to other economic fundamentals. In fact, there are elements of the action plan which actually represent reduced activity and, therefore, lost jobs. This is, for example, the position in the case of research, where a major exodus of scientists has been under way, although it has not stopped the Action Plan for Jobs road show.

In IDA Ireland's 66 years, it has never had such a clamour from the Government to make a media event out of every announcement. Once again, the core long-term strength of a State agency and policy is undermined by the focus of political spin. Even during the worst years of the crisis, inward investment continued and was resilient. The export sector performed strongly and led the return to growth to the point where Government policies were suppressing domestic demand.

The action plan also introduced a policy now common in all Government actions of renaming existing activity in order to claim something new. The most cynical example of this was the closing of the county enterprise boards and their rapid reopening with a new name. Job growth has been and will remain strong in the medium term. However, this is where the real force of the two-tiered recovery is being felt. A drift towards almost separate labour forces is under way, where one has access to highly paid, secure jobs, while the other is caught in low-paid and insecure jobs. It took three years before the Government even admitted this was happening. In spite of lots of inflated claims, yesterday there was no indication of a genuine commitment to address it. In addition to the banning of exploitative contracts, we need an all-out effort to stop people from getting caught in low-paid, low-security jobs.

We can talk about talent and having to reduce the marginal tax rate. There is a lot of talent.

The Taoiseach: Yet the Deputy wants to keep taxes at more than 50%.

Deputy Micheál Martin: Young graduates would love to be in a position to find a job with a salary of more than €25,000.

The Taoiseach: Yet the Deputy wants to keep the taxes at more than 50%. He has moved away from the policies of Seán Lemass.

Deputy Micheál Martin: There are thousands of graduates in low-paid employment.

The Taoiseach: Fianna Fáil wrecked the country.

Deputy Colm Keaveney: The Government wrecked services.

Deputy Micheál Martin: I heard the Taoiseach speak for 30 minutes. He should listen to some hard facts to know what the reality is on the ground.

The Taoiseach: The Deputy wants to keep taxes at more than 50%. There has not been one constructive suggestion made here today - not one.

Deputy Micheál Martin: Nothing in the budget deals with the two-tiered economy. There are thousands of people with low-hour contracts and on low pay.

The Taoiseach: The numbers have come down and are moving in the right direction.

Deputy Micheál Martin: That is a fundamental problem with how the labour force is developing. That is the reality.

The Taoiseach: The Deputy wants to keep taxes at more than 50%.

Deputy Micheál Martin: I spoke to the ESRI about this issue and it is very concerned.

The Taoiseach: The Deputy will vote against these tax cuts.

Deputy Micheál Martin: The gulf between the upper, middle and lower levels is expanding dramatically. We need to improve provision significantly for apprenticeships, both in terms of numbers and regional spread. We need an initiative to give people access to generous support in upskilling.

The Taoiseach: We are doing that.

Deputy Micheál Martin: We also need comprehensive child care provision, an issue to which I will return.

Deputy Willie O’Dea: The Government is not doing that.

Deputy Micheál Martin: A number of half-measures were included in the budget to help the SME sector, but they come nowhere near showing a vision to relieve the pressures felt by the sector and set out a model for its development. Every single target to make credit available to SMEs has been missed. They continue to be squeezed by State-owned banks which are being fattened for a rapid sale. If Ireland is to have a long-term balance and sustainability in its economy, it needs to have a vibrant and innovative SME sector. This work has barely started. In addition, the Government’s capital gains tax moves are too little, too late and in no way make us competitive in terms of what is happening to new companies and the CGT treatment they receive in the United Kingdom.

One of the striking things about current industrial and employment policy is how little it has changed. The core strategies of the main agencies are largely those which were put in place a decade ago. They target the same general activities and have evolved rather than reinvented supports. Given just how much has changed in this period, this suggests we need more innovation in policy and less innovation in publicity. A long-term policy which has unequivocally worked for Ireland is the decision to invest heavily in advanced research. When the last Fine Gael-Labour Party Government left office, the entire dedicated budget for basic research in the education sector was zero.

I o’clock

In the following decade this area was transformed. It dramatically improved the work of our universities and provided the foundation for the huge expansion in research activity in business. The budget documents talk solely about activities already in place, so we must assume that this Government’s policy of drift and damage to our research base is going to continue. In an unprecedented petition signed by 800 scientists earlier this year the Government was warned

that some of the best scientists who have ever worked on this island are leaving because of a short-sighted and damaging set of policies implemented by the Government. The so-called new world class research centres are anything but new. Most of them were established 12 years ago and all are funded under a competition launched over five years ago.

Basic research, which is funded in every country that has a high standard of living, is being undermined. One research centre which is ranked first in the world in the critical area of immunology was refused funding because of this Government's policy. Professor Bill Campbell is the first Irishman to win a Nobel Prize in a science area for 64 years. This Government's policy means that his studies could not be funded in Ireland. Clearly, the Government decided that there were not enough votes to be bought in committing to long-term industrial and research policies, and our country will suffer as a result.

Before she became leader of the Labour Party, the Tánaiste went to great lengths to present herself as a radical alternative to Deputy Gilmore. However, beyond this rhetoric was the reality of a Minister implementing cuts which were almost designed to maximise the hurt which they caused. After this budget, 38 of the 40 major cuts implemented in social protection schemes will remain in place. There is a Fine Gael agenda for helping the highest earners, but none for those hit by the social protection cuts.

The Taoiseach: Explain that.

Deputy Micheál Martin: The €3 pension increase is a case of doing something in order to claim the Government cares, rather than to acknowledge the real issue. The Taoiseach should go out and speak to the pensioners. They will be insulted and angry at this. The reason is the €1,200 that was taken from them in the last two to three years and the flat taxes and charges that were levied, including property tax and water charges, with no connection to ability to pay. There was the abolition of the telephone rental scheme, cuts to fuel allowance, the change to the household benefit schemes and the medical prescription charge increasing to €25 a month. All of these had a savagely corrosive impact on the weekly pension. That is what people will tell him.

The Government also removed 16,000 people over 70 years of age from the medical card scheme.

The Taoiseach: The Deputy's party is the high tax party.

Deputy Micheál Martin: Then it decided to give them a GP card.

Deputy Barry Cowen: The Tory party.

The Taoiseach: Seán Lemass would not stand for that.

Deputy Micheál Martin: The Taoiseach is fond of meeting people. I met a woman the other day who told me that her biggest problem was the cost of medicine.

The Taoiseach: The high tax party.

Deputy Micheál Martin: It was not the card or going to the GP. She told me she could manage one or two visits to the GP, but not the cost of her prescribed respiratory drugs.

That is the type of spin and media management the Taoiseach continually engages in. He

took 16,000 medical cards from people over 70 years of age-----

The Taoiseach: The high tax party had nothing to do with it.

Deputy Micheál Martin: -----and he increased the prescription charge by 400%.

What about the Taoiseach's and Tánaiste's anti-women initiative?

Deputy Sean Sherlock: This from Fianna Fáil.

Deputy Micheál Martin: In 2012, the Government changed-----

The Taoiseach: Ask Senator Power about that and Fianna Fáil's leadership.

Deputy Micheál Martin: -----the eligibility criteria for women for their pensions. The Taoiseach got a letter yesterday-----

The Taoiseach: A leader with no followers.

Deputy Micheál Martin: -----from a woman who is a former employee of Aer Lingus. The Taoiseach does not like to hear the truth. I did not interrupt him.

Deputy Willie O'Dea: A Leas-Cheann Comhairle, will you stop these interruptions from the Taoiseach? He can give it but he cannot take it.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Deputy Martin has the floor.

The Taoiseach: I am quoting his party's Senator. I thank Deputy O'Dea for his assistance.

Deputy Micheál Martin: The Taoiseach and the Tánaiste changed eligibility and it has cost many women who had to spend time at home after having worked up to 30 or so years. It has cost them an entitlement to a pension. They changed that sneakily in 2012, along with 100 other sneaky, underhand cuts.

Deputy Willie O'Dea: It is kicking in now.

Deputy Micheál Martin: The Taoiseach got a letter yesterday which he should read.

The Taoiseach: From whom?

Deputy Micheál Martin: It is from a woman who is retired. She had to leave the workforce to look after her elderly mother and aunt for a number of years. In previous years she would have been eligible for a pension as her contributions would have been up to the criterion. However, she could not believe it when she discovered that she was no longer entitled, because of the sneaky change introduced by the Labour Party and Fine Gael in 2012. That is the reason older people among the public are angry. They can see through all the fog and spin in their daily lives.

The Minister for Finance, Deputy Noonan, announced the end of the private pensions levy as if it were some major concession. It has been both socially and economically damaging. It was morally wrong. Many people with pension funds outside the public service are very angry about what was done. Their pensions were raided, with no planning put in place for the pensions crisis that is about to hit us. It was a bad policy which probably cost the State more than it collected due to reduced investment. It should never have been introduced in the first place.

Overall, no significant improvements or reforms have been proposed for social protection, which is an appropriate symbol of five years of neglect and regressive cuts by this Government.

Child care is another area where the Government continues to make it up as it goes along. It clearly decided that it had to announce something on child care but it was unable or unwilling to do it comprehensively. The announced scheme is a mess which does not extend child care in a sustainable way. Three hours of care for 38 weeks a year means that working parents will still have to put in place almost full-time arrangements paid for from their own pockets. A comprehensive child care system is urgently needed and it is affordable. That is the reason Fianna Fáil gave priority to child care in its budget proposals. I have no doubt that this will be a major issue during the coming election campaign.

Fine Gael and the Labour Party spent four years sitting on their hands as an entirely avoidable housing emergency developed. As soon as public outrage reached boiling point, they started announcing emergency measures. Yesterday, we had the sixth housing announcement of 2015. It is still too little and too late. The Minister, Deputy Noonan, made the entirely false claim last night that, “there was not a single social housing unit built under Fianna Fáil”.

Deputy Willie O’Dea: Untrue.

Deputy Micheál Martin: In fact, in every year under Fianna Fáil the funding and output of social housing was higher than in any year of this Government’s term. This year, with a housing and homelessness emergency under way, the allocation is less than one third of the allocation in 2010.

The Government is the sole author of the housing emergency. The Tánaiste instituted cuts and denied any change to the rent supplement scheme, which directly drove, and is still driving, people out of homes. The Government had projections of housing demand but did nothing. It failed even to plan, let alone fund, urgently needed housing units. Ten local authorities have not built a single house this year. There are 1,500 children in emergency accommodation. This is a national disgrace.

The failures of the Government on housing have been so complete that it has resorted to fixing the figures. There are 130,000 households on the social housing list, 40% higher than the Minister for the Environment, Community and Local Government, Deputy Alan Kelly, will admit. Did the sixth housing announcement of the year provide a route to meeting the social housing need or making home ownership affordable for the squeezed middle? No, it did not. It was another policy soundbite designed to get through a tricky period.

The Government ends its term with a full-scale crisis in the health system and no idea how to deal with it. First, it said it had the answer to everything and the Taoiseach claimed that everything was heading in the right direction. Last year, he made a scapegoat of the former Minister for Health, Deputy Reilly, and installed a new tough-talking Minister who said he would quickly get things under control as he had a better bedside manner. There have been two massive supplementary budgets, trolley crises in emergency departments, waiting times and waiting lists exploding even after they have been manipulated downwards and chaos in recruitment to vital jobs. This is what the new broom has delivered. In fact, he has seen a 550% increase in inpatient day cases which are waiting for over a year. Today, his principal policy appears to be, “I don’t know how to deal with it but heads will roll if you embarrass me this winter.” That is his new policy. Clearly, this is the reason he was a leading member of the November election

caucus.

The budget provides for no significant new activity in health next year. Simply put, the rate of decline is being managed. A few million euro is being thrown at a GP card initiative which will almost inevitably not be delivered next year. Other than that, nothing new is promised. The size of the supplementary budgets is not due to a failure by professionals in the system, but to political decisions. For three years, Ministers have demanded that the HSE promise certain levels of service but have refused to provide the required funds. That is the reason the funding runs out early and there is growing inefficiency in the planning of services. There has been dishonesty and fraudulent behaviour at the heart of health budgets over the last three years. That is why the discretionary medical card debacle occurred, and the distress it caused thousands of families. It is a shame on the Taoiseach that young children lost their discretionary medical cards because he did not provide money for them in the budget that year. Like the housing emergency, it is a crisis caused directly by Ministers.

Fine Gael has committed itself to running the most negative re-election campaign of any Irish Government. As part of this, it has apparently produced a booklet and memorandum outlining attacks which should be made on me for my time as Minister for Health. One of these attacks is that I supposedly was not able to control spending. The Taoiseach might wish to update that given that this year's Supplementary Estimate is ten times the size of the one in my last full year in that Department, and that came from increased demand not unplanned services.

Deputy Willie O'Dea: Bring it on.

Deputy Micheál Martin: The House should also remember that two years ago, the Taoiseach told us he was taking personal charge of ensuring that health stayed within budget and that there would be no more supplementaries. Some €1.2 billion later, he has some explaining to do. There is little or no chance that the GP card extension will be in place next year and the first phase was delayed by nearly four years from its first announcement. It has been funded by the removal of tens of thousands of medical cards from the elderly and families under pressure, and it represents a direct wealth transfer from the neediest in our society.

After five years of growing failure on health, this is all the Government has to campaign on. For all the posters promising no more trolleys and instant access for everyone, its health policies have been a shambles. I look forward to this being a core issue in the general election.

The Minister, Deputy Howlin, has introduced the tactic of announcing allocations which are automatic due to demographic changes as being "new" or "extra". The great bulk of the additional allocation to education is to cater for growth in pupil numbers, what we once called the "demographic dividend" and which was not even fought for between Ministers. For other improvements, the fact that only a third of a year needs to be shown in the 2016 figures has allowed Ministers to try and take the bare look off what has been a consistent targeting of education for disproportionate cuts. The bulk of the most regressive cuts, such as to guidance counsellors for disadvantaged schools and the abolition of postgraduate grants for poorer students, remains fully in place and part of a legacy on education of neglect and drift.

It was a brave decision of the Government to send its Ministers into the House to speak for over an hour but not once mention the biggest political and budgetary fiasco of many years. Irish Water was not imposed on this Government. It was announced as Fine Gael policy years before the troika was ever heard of. Neither were the form, content and size of the water charg-

es imposed on the Government. The troika confirmed that if Fine Gael and Labour had wanted to do something else, they could have.

We have the absurd situation where we are paying millions of euro to install meters which are not being used and will not be for the next seven years. We have constructed a massive bureaucracy in order to impose a charge and another to give people some of the money back. Some 1,200 people who fix pipes are to be laid off using money raised at a higher cost than State debt.

Deputy Colm Keaveney: A quango.

Deputy Micheál Martin: Instead of ignoring Irish Water, it should be abolished. The other massive and regressive tax introduced by this Government, the local property tax, was mentioned in the budget speeches, but only in order to say that nothing will be done for the next three years.

During this Government's term in office, there were many difficult choices to make, but it chose to be more unfair than was required. The direct impact of this was to further divide our economy and society. In area after area, the Government neglected issues until they were allowed to become crises. It refused to even plan. It abandoned its "democratic revolution" and has refused to change a single significant thing about how Ireland is governed. It has put politics first in everything. This over-hyped budget lacks any vision or direction for our country. It doubles down on an approach which is making us a more divided society.

The Government said it wanted change but all it really wanted was power, and all it now wants is to keep it. I have no doubt the people will not be fooled. Parties which so readily broke their promises before will do so again. A budget designed to last five weeks has nothing to offer a country which needs a commitment to deliver a State and society which works for all of its people.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: Budgets are all about political choices. They are also about the interests that a government seeks to represent. Budget 2016 shows once again that Fine Gael and, to its very great shame, the Labour Party, represent the interests of the privileged few in Irish society. Following the calamity of the economic crash under the last Fianna Fáil-led Government, Fine Gael and Labour assumed office with a huge mandate for political change. However, as citizens have learned to their cost, nothing has changed. Nowhere is this more obvious than in yesterday's budget.

Budget 2016 is an election budget, focused entirely on the short term, without strategic considerations for the longer term or for the public good. In its budget, the Government mimics exactly the boom-bust approach of Fianna Fáil. It is as brazen in playing for electoral advantage as any Fianna Fáil Government. Its budget is a cynical ploy to throw crumbs to specific interest groups in an effort to secure re-election in the months ahead. Sin é. Ach níl muintir na tíre seo chomh dúr sin. Cé go síleann an Rialtas seo gur amadáin iad, le blianta beaga anuas tá ciall cheannaithe ag go leor saoránach.

Since entering Government, Fine Gael and Labour have picked up where Fianna Fáil left off, targeting average families and vulnerable citizens for cruel cuts and unfair taxes like water charges and the family home tax. The Government likes to talk about a recovery but average families have not seen much evidence of this recovery. It is true that things have got better for some but, for the vast majority, little has changed. Tá an téarnamh seo, mar dhea, míchóir agus

míchothrom.

The Government has unnecessarily prolonged the recession for the vast majority of our people. It has also caused huge damage to our public services and local communities, and its budget does not wipe that slate clean. The adverse social consequences of eight years of austerity budgets, first by Fianna Fáil and subsequently by Fine Gael and Labour, will take years to resolve. In successive budgets, Fine Gael and Labour have attacked the most vulnerable. I will give a snapshot of their high achievement. They indiscriminately imposed a blanket water tax and family home tax and they abolished the €300 cost of education allowance. They cut jobseeker's allowance and were only short of packing the bags of young people and driving them to the airport to encourage them to leave. They cut child benefit despite promises to the contrary, cut the back to school allowance, cut the fuel allowance by six weeks, or €120, and cut the respite care grant by €325. They introduced a tax on maternity benefit and abolished the bereavement grant. They cut invalidity pension for 65 year olds by €36.80 per week, cut rent supplement and cut the household benefits package. In total, in its first three budgets the Government slashed the education budget by €500 million and the health budget by €2.5 billion. That is some record.

Budget 2016 is a progression of the Government's socially delinquent approach, this time motivated by electoral considerations rather than done under the cover of the troika. It introduced more tax cuts that favour higher earners, and there has been more starving of public services and badly needed investment. The current crises in health and housing are not accidental but are a direct result of the policies of Fine Gael and Labour in government. Let us not forget that those people who lie on trolleys in accident and emergency wards are our own family members, our neighbours and our friends. They did not drop from outer space - they are us. Those households in mortgage distress and the citizens who find themselves homeless - they too are us. So too the 500,000 citizens scattered across the globe as a result of Fianna Fáil, Fine Gael and Labour emigration policy. The Government has a duty to protect and defend the rights and entitlements of citizens; that is its first call. Instead, the Government has repeatedly attacked those rights and entitlements.

As a result of five years of Fine Gael-Labour Government, our society has become ever more polarised and unequal. This should be a matter of deep shame for the Tánaiste and the Labour Party. Budget 2016 again sees Fine Gael and Labour perpetuating a lie that it is possible to reduce the overall tax take, possible to stand off high earners and wealth, while at the same time maintaining and building front-line services. It is a lie.

Budget 2016 makes high earners the winners while average families and those citizens most dependent on public services lose out yet again. For all of the Government's fine talk, here are the figures. The budget gives to a person earning €25,000, in or around the norm in the economy, €227 per annum, just over €4 a week. However, for individuals earning over €70,000, it puts over €900 back into their pockets, three times more. Yet the Government talks about fairness and equity. By reducing capital gains tax by 13% and reducing tax on wealth, the Government is again dismantling the tax base. Its tax reduction measures will reduce the money available to the State by €882 million. At the same time, it puts €181.9 million of tax back into the pockets of the top 14% of earners and talks about equity and recovery.

How does any of this help the average family, the people who have borne the brunt of the economic and financial crash? Income inequality has deepened on the Government's watch, under the Fine Gael and Labour Party Government. The Labour Party has shamelessly aban-

doned average workers and the vulnerable. It has refused to take action on low hour contracts or on the unacceptably high levels of low paid and insecure jobs. We now live in an increasingly low pay and poverty wage economy. The Labour Party leader and Minister for Social Protection, Deputy Joan Burton, has cruelly targeted lone parents and unemployed young people for vicious cuts. She seems to hold a special kind of disdain for those particular groups of citizens.

This State's taxation system is deeply inequitable. We speak about progressivity in income tax, but taken in the round, the system is inequitable. Budget 2016 benefits the top 14% of earners. The Government cannot say that is equitable. For the low paid, budget 2016 gives a meagre increase of 50 cent in the national minimum wage. This will come not from Government coffers, but from employers. The Government will not lead as it should and has nothing to say about the need for a living wage. In real terms, there has been no increase in the minimum wage since 2007. Sinn Féin proposed to increase the minimum wage by €1 per hour, bringing a full-time minimum wage up to €19,572 a year. We would increase employee and employer PRSI bands in line with this increase. We support the introduction of the living wage and believe that as the largest employer, the State should lead the way on this.

I am sorry the Tánaiste has left the Chamber. It may come as news to her that contrary to her assertion earlier, the emergency is not over. The Government has presided over chaos in the health system. Some 7,775 citizens lay on trolleys in our accident and emergency departments last June, the highest recorded level of overcrowding in the month of June since the trolley watch count began 12 years ago. This is shocking. In July, we witnessed a 94% increase in trolley numbers in emergency departments since 2006. Our Lady of Lourdes Hospital, in Drogheda, with 769 patients on trolleys, had the highest levels of overcrowding in the State. Yesterday, as the Budget Statement was announced here, there were 469 citizens on hospital trolleys. There were 47 patients on trolleys in Beaumont and 16 in the Mater in my neighbourhood. This chaos is not accidental but is a result of Government policy and is an indictment of its term in office and of those policies. Budget 2016 does nothing to address the crisis. Listening to both Ministers yesterday, one would never imagine there was an issue of resources or fadhb ar bith in the health service.

Sinn Féin's budget proposals, which I am sorry to hear the Tánaiste had difficulty reading, set out an additional €383 million in health funding. This would provide for additional nursing staff, consultants, dentists, orthodontists, speech therapists and occupational therapists. It would allow increases in funding to disability and mental health services and would increase essential ambulance cover. What did the Government propose? When we go through the data and cut through the spin, we see it has allocated €18 million, a paltry sum, of an additional spend for health. Within that, it proposes to extend free GP cover to children under 12, those between six and 11. This is the most cynical of election stunts.

Many seriously sick and vulnerable citizens, including children and young adults, continue to go without medical cards. As the Taoiseach may recall, we had the unedifying episodes of discretionary medical cards being taken from seriously ill and disabled children. Under the Government's new scheme, very sick children of all ages and their families will still be forced to beg and plead for a full medical card. How revealing is this? How revealing it is that the Government favours a headline grabbing announcement over an initiative that would give cover and care to seriously sick children and children with severe disabilities. So much for this budget being child friendly.

In regard to cost, the budget allocates €10 million to the GP initiative. This is odd, because

the costing available to Sinn Féin for such an initiative amounted to €39 million. Riddle us that. I believe that is further evidence of the fact that this is a stunt. It has nothing to do with assisting children who need their medical needs addressed. It has nothing to do with assisting families who go through the horror of caring for a very sick child. Perhaps we should not be surprised, because the Government has previous form in this regard.

The Taoiseach had a lot to say earlier, as did the Tánaiste, about older citizens. They seem to regard themselves as knights riding to the assistance of senior citizens, but nothing could be further from the truth. Yesterday, the Government did nothing in the budget regarding prescription charges. If there is one issue consistently raised by older citizens, it is the issue of prescription charges. Elderly citizens are now being forced to decide which medicines to take because the prescription charge is so high, at €2.50 per item. Where now stands the 2012 promise to abolish prescription charges? Far from abolishing them, the Government has presided over a 400% increase in the charge. This has caused serious hardship and is jeopardising people's health and well-being.

The Government made a drama last week of its plans for capital spending of €27 billion over six years. However, let it be recorded here again that next year, the Government will cut capital spending by more than €50 million. What is the logic for that? The mind boggles. I suppose the Taoiseach had his outing in the media so now he will go about his actual intentions.

Faoin Rialtas seo, chuaigh géarchéim na tithíochta in olcas go mór. Fine Gael and Labour have abandoned the provision of social housing to the private sector and we can see the disastrous results. We have 130,000 families in need of housing and on social housing lists. Nearly 1,500 children are in emergency accommodation. No matter how often that is said, it is still so shocking.

Rents have gone up by 35% since 2011, outstripping Celtic tiger levels. We need a level of investment to which this Government is simply unwilling to commit, so the crisis will continue. That is the prognosis. From any reading of its announcements yesterday one could arrive at no other conclusion.

The additional €69 million announced by the Government yesterday is less than a quarter of what it cut from the housing budget in 2012. Was the Taoiseach aware of that? Again in 2013 the Government halved funding to local authority housing, and cut another 10% in 2014. We wonder why we have an emergency now. With homeless citizens dying on the streets very close to the Dáil, I really wonder what it will take before this Government acknowledges the scale of this catastrophe. Sinn Féin has provided for an extra €300 million investment for 2016 in social housing delivering almost 1,700 units in addition to existing Government plans.

The Government will not do that because it chooses not to. It also failed to announce rent certainty as part of the budget. Meanwhile many landlords have seen an opportunity in the current crisis and have hiked up rents. As a direct result of their actions and, more importantly, the Government's inaction, children and their families are now homeless.

The Government did nothing about the bank levy, despite all its previous tough talking and shape throwing. There will be no legislation to let the Central Bank set a cap on rip-off mortgage rates. The 300,000 mortgage holders with standard variable rate mortgages have been abandoned by this Government. We see again that this is a Government of the banks and for the banks.

The Government tells us that NAMA will build houses. Many in Sinn Féin have been calling on NAMA to activate and honour its social obligations for many years. Those pleas fell on deaf ears. Let it be said that, if delivered, only a tiny proportion of those houses will come back in the form of social or affordable housing. Again, the Government is relying on private developers making a buck in respect of housing provision.

I would like to know what the Government proposes to do around the funding of Tusla in general, and specifically in respect of the fact that 80% of women fleeing domestic violence were turned away from Dublin refuges in the first three months of this year. Many of those women have children and they were turned away. I want to know where the money is for that, and where the Taoiseach's commitment is. There was no mention of it yesterday although many of these refuge facilities are in imminent danger of closure. It was not worthy of mention in the budget. We know that without these services many women and children will be forced into homelessness or, heaven forbid, worse.

The Government's announcement on child care falls very short of the Scandinavian model benchmark so beloved by the Tánaiste. It is proposed to provide an additional 50 weeks in respect of any individual child between the ages of three and five and a half. Although any advance in child care is welcome, let us be clear that the system as it exists is sessional and therefore very part-time. The capitation rates afforded for the scheme are absolutely inadequate and are causing huge difficulties in terms of staffing. The experience of children with special needs and disabilities has been in many cases one of exclusion from this scheme. The Government has now committed to remedying that position and I hope that it will be true to that commitment when we see the details.

Sinn Féin's budget proposals also provided for an additional six weeks maternity benefit that can be taken by either parent in addition to paternity leave. I am very disappointed that the Government did not do something in that regard.

The only positive move regarding education in the budget is the decrease to the pupil teacher ratio. There was no increase in school capitation grants, which leaves schools in very great difficulties. I heard no mention of increasing funds for DEIS schools or, importantly, of reducing the student contribution fee. The cut of 15% to resource hours across the system has been devastating. The Government's partial announcement does not come close to reversing that cut.

Rural Ireland has been under sustained attack over the past number of years. Fine Gael and Labour have presided over the closure of Garda stations, schools and post offices, the shutting down of hospitals and of other local services. The budget does nothing to reverse this attack on rural Ireland. Our pre-budget submission proposed that farm assist be restored to pre-2013 levels in terms of assessment of means and income deductions in respect of children. We also proposed additional places in the rural social scheme by 20%. None of these measures was introduced by the Government. While some of the measures announced, such as capital gains tax and stamp duty exemptions for young farmers being extended beyond next year, are to be welcomed there is nothing from this Government for struggling small farmers. The USC reduction of 0.5% will apply to most small farmers who earn less than the lower limit, while the bigger farmers will benefit to the tune of 2.5% on incomes up to €70,044.

The Taoiseach: What about the genomics and GLAS schemes?

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: Not a single new garda was trained between 2010 and

2013. Just 200 new recruits were taken in last year and the numbers for the last two years will not even cover the retirements. While on the face of it, the announcement of 600 gardaí in 2016 sounds like a lot, as the Minister herself has acknowledged, retirements are roughly 400 each year. That leaves a net gain of 200, far short of the announcement.

Since entering Government, Fine Gael and Labour have cut the strength of An Garda Síochána by nearly 10%. That is a truly shocking statistic, especially given the sustained attacks in rural Ireland by organised criminal gangs. Sinn Féin has proposed investment in community policing by training an additional 1,000 gardaí to ensure the strength of the force gets back to where it was before this Government assumed office.

The disastrous economic policies initiated by Fianna Fáil and continued by Fine Gael and Labour have seen over €30 billion taken out of the economy in taxes and cuts. Bréag iomlán atá ann nuair a deir an Rialtas go bhfuil muid ar fad ag obair as lámh a chéile sa ghéarchéim seo. Masla atá ann fosta do na saoránaigh sin atá ag fulaingt go géar.

Many of our citizens have suffered greatly while those who were protected are again first in line to benefit under this Government. Those being forced to pay the price for the Government's policies are families on low and middle incomes. Those paying the price are families put to the pin of their collar by the family home tax and water charges. They are the 500,000 people who have emigrated since 2008. Young people are continuing to leave in their droves because of poor opportunities, low wages and a lack of access to housing and child care.

Those paying for the Government's austerity policies include lone parents. They are the thousands of seriously ill and disabled children and adults who have had their discretionary medical cards withdrawn. Those paying are sick people forced to go without medicine because of the introduction of prescription charges. The price is being paid by those who use our public hospitals where one in eight patients on a waiting list is in the queue for over a year. Some people are waiting up to four years to see a consultant. That is some record. The price is being paid by the 130,000 families on the social housing waiting lists and the 100,000 households in mortgage arrears. Legal proceedings to repossess homes have increased tenfold. Rents are still increasing and the number of homeless children continues to rise.

While all these people have paid the price of Government policies, who did Fine Gael and the Labour Party protect? They certainly protected the property developers. NAMA has been allowed to pay developers salaries of €200,000 a year while medical cards were being stripped from children. The Government protected the bondholders. Billions of euro have been paid to international junior and senior bondholders who gambled on unstable banks while the Government broke its social contract with Irish citizens. The Government also protected the vulture capitalists. Billions of euro worth of Irish assets are being subjected to a fire sale while the citizen picks up the losses.

The Government protected the tiny wealthy elite in this State. Wealth tax and tax relief loopholes have been allowed to continue. It protected the banks. A total of €64 billion of public money was pumped into the banks and then bank CEOs were allowed to pay themselves salaries of €800,000 a year while threatening families with eviction. The Government abjectly refused to get a resolution to the problem of legacy debt. That is its legacy. It protected the golden circle. Just like Fianna Fáil, Fine Gael and the Labour Party continued political appointments to State boards and failed to act on high salaries for politicians and those in banking and State bodies.

Meanwhile, the Government has ignored the demands of hundreds of thousands of citizens who have taken to the streets again and again to demand it scraps domestic water charges. It should have done so yesterday. The water charges issue has not gone away, you know. It has become a catalyst for popular discontent against the Government. The community mobilisations have been extraordinary and a real example of genuine, active citizenship. Those who have been politicised will not now meekly back down in the face of Government bribes, slander or intimidation. The major mobilisations we have seen are not just against water charges. They are against the blind, relentless pursuit of a failed austerity agenda.

The Taoiseach has characterised the forthcoming election as a choice between stability and chaos but there is no stability for low-paid workers or those on zero-hour contracts. There is no stability for those patients and front-line workers facing chaos in our hospital accident and emergency departments. There is no stability for those families facing the prospect of losing their home. This Government's idea of stability is very different to that held by most citizens. The Taoiseach and the Tánaiste's notion of stability is the maintenance of a deeply unequal and dysfunctional status quo. That is not the stability our people need or want. This Government has used its huge Dáil majority to attack the rights and welfare of struggling families and vulnerable citizens in complete contradiction of its 2011 election promises.

The Taoiseach should think of this phrase "fool me once-----"

The Taoiseach: "Shame on you".

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: "Fool me twice, shame on me". The Government has fooled the people once. It will not fool them twice.

Deputy John Halligan: Yesterday's budget as per tradition was delivered in two halves, the first by the Minister for Finance and the second by the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform. Since I have been in the Dáil and since the Government took office, it has been the tradition to introduce a range of measures that will cumulatively advance us even further towards an Irish society of two very distinct halves - the rich and the poor or the haves and the have-nots. There was the usual attempt to portray a fair and balanced fiscal outlook but there has been nothing fair about the austerity foisted upon the Irish people through what I would call a bad political decision and bad political decisions in recent years. Yesterday's poor attempt to buy back votes with scraps was a further insult to the intelligence of very many people. Does the Government honestly believe people's memories are that short and that they can be dazzled by a couple of euro a week when their children are still living in exile in forced emigration, when their friends are losing the roof over their heads and when their neighbours are lying in pain on a hospital trolley, waiting for a bed?

The big fanfare in the budget surrounded the USC "bonanza", as one newspaper called it and as the Government would like to portray it, and how it will give back squeezed middle-income earners around €10 a week. If one thinks of that, it is a princely sum of their own hard-earned money that will be quickly soaked up and taken away by water charges, household charges and, of course, all the other indirect taxes. It is a case of fingers crossed on the part of the Government that these people will be so overwhelmed with paying a percentage less that they will forget this tax was only intended to be a temporary measure in the first place.

Speaking of the squeezed middle, I am very disappointed at the Government's attempt to portray this budget as the antidote that hard-pressed working families have been waiting for.

Granted, the additional 23 weeks of free preschool will benefit a significant number of families but what about those working parents whose children have already turned three years of age, many of whom have been speaking on the radio this morning? It is too late for these people to benefit from this measure. Ireland is now the most expensive country in the world for child care yet, astonishingly, there was no attempt in this budget to introduce measures aimed at universally affordable and accessible child care for middle-income earners who are currently forking out approximately €1,000 per month. There is a wholly inadequate €3 million allocation to support after-school services which I cannot see stretching very far. The school year only runs for 37 or so weeks of the year. What are working parents supposed to do outside term time? Young working parents have borne the brunt of the recession and they have been left hanging by this budget. It is not good enough. We have again turned our backs on even adequate child care services in this country.

It is interesting that the Minister for Finance said yesterday that the cost of renting accommodation was not a budgetary matter. This was an astounding statement to make. His reasoning behind not addressing rent controls or the price of rent was that he did not want to interfere and make matters worse than they already were. This is exactly what he said. One wonders just how much worse things will get before the Government faces up to the homelessness crisis. There are thousands of young adults over the age of 18 who are living with their parents and sleeping in sitting rooms and kitchens who consider themselves homeless, so there are far more homeless people than those we define as being homeless. It is widely documented that the substantial gap between rent supplement and the famous housing assistance payment, HAP, and the actual rents being sought is causing homelessness and will continue to do so. I do not understand why the Government has not taken up the results of a survey carried out earlier this year that showed that only 12% of rental properties were available within rent supplement or HAP limits. It is not working. The HAP is a complete failure and people in housing offices all over the country are saying the same thing. They may not say it publicly because it is not advisable to do so, but they tell me it is an absolute failure.

Threshold's Dublin tenancy protection service states the additional annual cost of providing 744 households in the capital with an increased rent supplement payment, to prevent them from becoming homeless, was, amazingly, €800,000. By comparison, €1.6 million was spent in providing emergency hotel accommodation for 361 homeless families in the Dublin region in July 2015 alone. Who balanced the books? Who came up with this in the budget? It is absolutely outrageous. If this is not a budgetary issue, as the Minister for Finance said yesterday, I do not know where he is going. I could not believe he had said it.

Another supposed "giveaway" yesterday that voters were quick to see through was the €3 per week increase for pensioners. The Government will hand pensioners three coins. That increase is negated immediately by failing to restore the lifeline that was the telephone allowance. Irish telephone costs are the sixth highest in Europe. The prescription charge has not been touched, which means that €1.50 is already gone because the charge rose over two years, while the meagre increase in the fuel allowance does not even restore the allowance to 2009 levels. In 1994, 5.9% of people in the country aged 65 years or older were at risk of poverty. Today the figure stands at 9.7% and this number will continue to increase, unless the Government rethinks its policy towards the elderly. It is not enough to throw an extra few euro at pensioners when a general election is looming. A person living on the State pension - all the statistics show this - is down €700 since 2008 in allowances and benefits and that is without taking into account the rising costs of living and increases in charges and taxes. Neither was any attempt made to

replace the 2.34 million home help hours lost since 2008, on which elderly people are so reliant.

We need to move towards a progressive model that will tackle income inequality among the elderly such as a universal State pension, about which the Labour Party and other groups, including Social Justice Ireland, have spoken. Such a system would be financed not by increasing tax rates but by adjusting the current system, principally by making tax breaks for pension contributions available to everyone at the standard rate of rate and curbing tax benefits on private pensions that favour higher earners. This model has been costed by accountants in recent years and I am taken aback that the Government has not considered doing this.

There is an error in the budget submission on health. The Minister said the €13.5 billion allocated to the health service this year had brought it back to crisis levels. He obviously did not get his facts and figures correct because I checked back and in 2008 the Government allocated €15.5 billion. That was when the crisis was beginning and the health service was in crisis in 2008. Even now it cannot get a consultant to work 24 hours or in a hospital at weekends. Waterford General Hospital cannot get one to work at weekends. How can we deal with a health service which cannot provide rudimentary services? Young workers are forced to work for the minimum wage and if they do not do this and work terrible hours, their social welfare payments are cut off. Consultants on big earnings say they will not work beyond 4 p.m. or 5 p.m. on a Friday. They said it to the previous Government, too. Patients can forget about seeing a cardiac consultant after 5 p.m. in some hospitals. If he or she is on call somewhere, the hospital may or may not be able to get him or her to come back if a patient has a heart attack.

The Budget Statement refers to a spend of €13.5 billion, but it is not all a question of money. Medicines here are the most expensive in Europe and this has been said for 20 or 30 years. The Minister was completely wrong when he said yesterday that €13.5 billion was a huge sum that had never been given before. The previous Government invested €15.5 billion in 2008 when the health service started to go into absolute decline; therefore, it is not a question of money. The Government cannot deal with the essentials in the health service, providing care and making those paid to provide it such as the consultants do so. It cannot force pharmacists to bring down the price of prescription medications. Pharmacists are supposed to tell the customer about the generic brand available, but three quarters of them do not do so. We are at nothing in the health service when the Government is afraid to deal with the consultants and the cost of running the service.

I agree with the Labour Party that we should be aiming towards providing free health care. We should allocate €10 million, but all of this is subject to negotiation with the doctors' representatives, which means that the parents of a 12 year old child had better not hold their breath. When the Government tries to negotiate with doctors on this issue, the first thing they will want to know is how they will make or lose money. The Government should not have proposed this measure. It was economical with the truth to the electorate. It should have sorted out this issue. It would have meant a lot to people if it had been able to say "we have already concluded the negotiations and can do this now." It gives people the impression that if they have a 12 year old child, he or she can have free GP care, but that will not happen within two or three years, as the Minister of State at the Department of Health, Deputy Kathleen Lynch, knows as well as I do. The Government will not do this next year or even the year after that.

I do not like to be personal and critical of the budget. There are some good things in it, but an opportunity has been missed again. It gave back €1.5 billion, but €30 billion has been taken out of people's pay packets and through cuts in welfare services and so on over five years and

it is not an awful lot to give back. A country is judged on how it treats the most vulnerable in its society, not those who have sufficient money to get by, but its most vulnerable. There are between 130,000 and 150,000 people on housing lists and people have been waiting four and five years for a medical procedure. It might be eight or nine months before they get to see a consultant. One in ten children goes to school impoverished. The Government has spent four years firing all hell on austerity. It has an opportunity to give back €1.5 billion, but it has not done that; it has not dealt with the people who need money. People come into my office every day of the week distressed because they cannot pay their mortgages. There were 800 facing eviction in the past two weeks. That is not the way it was supposed to be when the Government took office. It was supposed to deal with that issue and to protect people who, through no fault of their own, were losing their houses, but that has all gone by the wayside. They cannot now be protected. They are at the behest of a judge who will decide whether they should be evicted or be given a stay of execution.

The Government has underestimated the people if it thinks they will be bought by the budget. A conservative elderly lady said to me last week that the budget would not be like the last five or six when things were good and we were bought and sold. She said people were going to be analytical and examine this budget, what they would lose and what they should have got back. I understand the Government could not have given back €30 billion, but the redistribution of the money is unfair. This will come to pass in the next couple of months or shortly when people in the next few days analyse exactly what they have been given and what they should have received. It will not be seen as a favourable budget.

2 o'clock

Deputy Tom Fleming: The main function of a budget is to create an environment for job creation and the retention of jobs. It is also to have a balanced and equitable regional spread of jobs and job incentivisation measures. We have failed in this budget as these issues have not been addressed. Giving people their dignity is pivotal in life, to which a job is essential. I do not mean Mickey Mouse stuff such as zero hour contracts. We should strive at all times to give sustainable work and put a roof over people's heads. People need sustenance for themselves and their families.

There is a gradual recovery, but it is still fragile. Full-time sustainable jobs are paramount to the needs of our abundant workforce, but many people are in long-term unemployment and in a situation which seems to be endless and with very few, if any, possibilities of finding something satisfactory. They are demoralised and this has a general effect on their well-being, health and status within their communities. Graduates are faced with a lack of suitable opportunities to participate in the recovery of the country.

Some of our emigrants may wish to return, but they are still sceptical about it and the prospects of eking out a viable livelihood in this country. Vital infrastructure is important, but there is a lack of quality broadband. Whether one is in Toronto, Sydney or Birmingham, a person can at least access Internet services at the press of a button, but people here are bewildered at the state of this vital necessity. It is a major disincentive to return when we should be incentivising them. People see broadband as an entitlement which they have other countries; therefore, the standard of the service here does not entice them to come back in great numbers. We need them to build on the recovery in the short term. Otherwise, we will restrict their options to come back and eke out a living here. Their exodus was followed by a decline in rural Ireland and the entire rural fabric was affected.

There is an urgent need to send the right message to the youth of the country by reinstating the social welfare rate that was payable previously. It was reduced to €100 and needed to be corrected. It is a huge blow to unemployed youth who are a very disaffected cohort. Many of them are well educated and qualified, yet they are forced to live at home for prolonged periods, which is not very desirable. It is not acceptable and leads to internal problems within households when a young person is not independent and cannot make a living on his or her own. It is wrong of the Government not to recognise this and correct it. I plead with the Minister for Finance and the Tánaiste and Minister for Social Protection to reconsider bringing the rate back to the normal figure to give the young people concerned an adequate opportunity. Those on €100 a week cannot afford to send all of the documentation they are required to send because of the cost of stamping envelopes or getting a taxi to seek work in the next town 15 miles away. Public transport is not available in some places and young people cannot afford to pay for their own transport, unless they use a bicycle to travel the 20 miles they may need to travel to attend a job interview.

Action needs to be taken on the regional property programme and regional action plans. My own peripheral county in the south west has been deprived and neglected for too long. We listen to announcements every day for the large centres of Dublin and Cork city. It is very fortunate for us that Cork city is benefiting from measures and we also gain when Limerick benefits, but we still feel we are the forgotten people and I cannot see anything tangible in the budget to make our situation any better. Lip-service is paid to regional property programmes and action plans and there is a lack of specifics. It would be great if some specific measures were outlined in the budget to target the south west, including County Kerry, or County Donegal or County Waterford with action plans, but it is just smoke and mirrors and will eventually all be forgotten about. I, therefore, urge the Minister to set out a decisive action programme. I can count on the fingers of one hand the number of trips the Minister has organised to County Kerry for investors in the past five years. There may have been one or two, but it would be interesting to know what the purpose of the visits was, or if the people involved stayed for a whole day or just two or three hours, following which they left the county again, making it no more than an excuse of a trip.

We need a regional spread of jobs. We are fortunate in having good SMEs in the county, some of which started with five, six or ten jobs, but they now have 100 or more. We have some wonderful examples of firms which have been highly successful because they have a diligent, well qualified workforce. There is an institute of technology in Tralee, with a huge number of graduates coming out every year into the catchment area. We also have students who attend Cork Institute of Technology and Limerick Institute of Technology and they want to come back to their own county and communities. Companies such as Killarney Plastics, Fexco, Munster Joinery and Harty's in Causeway are all flagship projects and successful employers. I am glad to see the self-employed, the smaller outlets, are being given a bit of a break in badly needed tax breaks. Farmers, who form the backbone of rural Ireland, will also avail of some positivity in the budget in that respect, which is a start anyway.

However, those self-employed people are still being discriminated against in social welfare benefits and they have been badly let down again. I thought this issue would have been addressed. Many people who have to close up their shops have no income. People have suffered in the crash over the past six or seven years, in particular. They have been the lifeblood of their communities, keeping great life in small towns and villages. They were family businesses as well and it is sad to see these people out on the street. The fate of some of them was worse in

that they lost their homes as well as losing their businesses.

The Minister for Health called for €1 billion to give an immediate injection - pardon the pun - into the health service. I believe he was quite right. The Minister of State, Deputy Kathleen Lynch, is doing her utmost for disability services, for instance, but she is battling against the tide. The Minister, Deputy Varadkar, is faced with shortages in acute beds with the domino effect of shortages down the line in community hospitals. The lack of step-down beds is resulting in trolleys in the corridors, which is unacceptable. There are long waiting lists for various procedures, diagnostics, etc.

Earlier I mentioned how essential jobs are, but health is a priority for everybody, including a six-day old baby or a 99-year old person. The least we can do is to look after people properly in a timely fashion, but that is not happening. The Minister for Health called for €1 billion to wipe the slate clean. I believe it could be done over six months if it happened. When we had surplus funding, we certainly could have gone 80% of the way anyway. There is a lot of wastage and that will need to be addressed in tandem with the provision of more money. This was a call from the Minister and I think it could have been achieved but unfortunately, it has not been addressed in this budget.

On community care services, we need to get back to basics regarding our elderly population. The gain in the budget is welcome and they appreciate it very much. The Christmas bonus is something for people. After seven or eight hard budgets, it gives them a bit of hope and will give them a bit of comfort coming up to Christmas.

Respite is very welcome, of course. People providing respite care selflessly are really the heroes. What I will say about the €3 is that the carbon tax has affected many people in terms of their fuel needs in recent years and this is a bit of a return. We cannot forget family resource centres. They are certainly in need of a bit of extra funding in the budget and the same applies to all the disability services. The upkeep of the home help service is crucial.

Sitting suspended at 2.15 p.m. and resumed at 3.15 p.m.

Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Paschal Donohoe): As the Minister for Finance said yesterday, the previous few budgets have been hard, but they have made it possible for Ireland to exit the bailout programme, move the economy and society into a real recovery and to get our country to a point where we are reducing the amount of debt and the need for us to borrow year after year.

The overwhelming priority of this year's budget, which is ambitious but is also sensible, is to sustain the recovery and keep things going in such a way that more communities and people across the country can participate in it and benefit from it. That is the reason for the introduction of measures such as the reduction in the universal social charge, investment in important public services such as the employment of more nurses and doctors and more staff in classrooms. One important measure in particular that was taken yesterday was to provide further support for one of the backbones of the economy, namely, the self employed. All of the measures are sensible, affordable and will sustain the recovery that is under way and give more people the ability and opportunity to benefit from it.

Just as was the case with the recent capital plan published by my Department, the budget contained many measures people supported but there were many more things absent from it that people wanted. The Government was not in a position to meet all expectations. The reason for

that is we can only spend the money we have at the moment or the money we sensibly expect to have in the future. We cannot spend money that we do not or will not have. If we do so, we will end up in the kind of difficulty we are all working to get away from. It is clear that we can only spend in line with our capacity to pay for the spending. I am still conscious that while our borrowing requirements are reducing, we are still borrowing. That is the reason the Government's target to balance our books by 2018 is such an important objective.

My Department seeks to make a further contribution to the positive change under way in the country. The budget for 2016 will allow for a total expenditure by the Department of Transport, Tourism and Sport of €1.74 billion. That is an increase of 8%, or €125 million on 2015. It marks the first year the allocation for capital spending for my Department has exceeded €1 billion. That is important progress as it allows us to make more of a contribution to the maintenance of existing roads and railways while beginning work on the kind of projects we know are vital to sustain future recovery. There will be an increase of €47 million in current funding to bring the total current spend to just under €722 million. This increase in funding includes an additional €28 million or a 14% increase in public service obligation, PSO, subvention. This is being provided to support increased and improved public transport services, including those operated under the rural transport programme. The priorities for this funding will be to reduce congestion by responding to passenger demand on key Dublin Bus and Bus Éireann services, the opening of the Phoenix Park tunnel next summer and improving the services currently available on the DART. As a result of this extra funding the National Transport Authority, NTA, will now finalise its plans for 2016. An additional €2 million will be provided to support co-operative overseas marketing to support important initiatives such as the Wild Atlantic Way, Ireland's Ancient East and the work pertaining to the Rugby World Cup 2023 bid. An additional €3 million also will be made available to support important sporting and physical activity initiatives, such as the new national physical activity action plan, and to help the sporting bodies and national governing bodies, NGBs, of sport to continue in their important work in preparing for the Olympic and Paralympic Games at the end of next year.

As for capital expenditure, there will be an increase of €78 million to provide funding for the maintenance of the existing road and rail network and to allow for an increase in capital funding to deliver the construction of the national indoor arena, which is to open by the end of 2016. This will be an incredibly important and positive development for Irish sport in that it will provide an indoor facility in which up to 20 different disciplines will be able to participate, as well as an arena that will further allow Ireland to compete for major international sporting events that currently are being held elsewhere.

On taxation, yesterday the Minister for Finance announced a €43 million plan with regard to the commercial motor tax system for heavy goods vehicles. This will reduce, and have a positive effect on, motor tax levels for 29,000 goods vehicles. I wish to acknowledge in the Chamber that the work this sector performs for the economy is vital to its effective performance. Earlier today, while preparing for work in respect of this sector, I was struck by how, due to the fact we have an island economy, transport costs absorb an extremely high portion of the total cost base a company must face when it is selling its goods and services abroad or when it seeks to sell its goods and services into Ireland. Consequently, while this measure is important for the sector and is a recognition of the vital work it does to allow the economy to perform and to allow goods and services to circulate, even more importantly this measure seeks to contribute to the cost-effectiveness of the economy and to the competitiveness of manufacturing, in particular. I look forward to continuing to work with the sector to support it in its measures to employ

more people and to allow others to employ more people as a result of this measure. Of itself, this measure is an interim one put in place pending the replacement of the current commercial motor tax regime with a fairer basis for calculating motor tax, which will be based on the design gross vehicle weight of goods vehicles and will promote more efficient and less polluting vehicles. In addition to the importance of that measure, other plans confirmed in the capital plan also will allow the haulage sector to do its work in a more efficient way by upgrading important roads it requires, as well as investing in connectivity and access into important ports.

Yesterday's budget also included a freeze in the special tourism-related VAT rate of 9%. As with previous years, this will be subject to review to ensure that visitors to Ireland continue to benefit in terms of value for money from this lower rate. I recognise this is an important measure that has played an important role in the creation or retention of 30,000 jobs nationwide. However, I also emphasise this measure is conditional on not witnessing a return to the kind of pricing that caused such damage to Irish tourism in the past. In particular, I recognise that outside Dublin and some of the larger cities, the hotel sector continues to grapple with legacy debt issues and is working hard to get back on its own feet. It is in particular recognition of the speed of that recovery across many parts of Ireland that the Government has decided to maintain the rate at this level for next year.

Turning to spending, I will outline a few important priorities. I already have outlined the increase of €28 million to support increased public transport services. This is a significant development in the funding of public transport within Ireland. It represents the restoration of approximately 25% of the total cuts since 2008 and comes after many years of decline. When I took office more than a year ago, I indicated that an important priority for me was to stabilise the level of PSO funding and to ensure it was not cut further. I did so in recognition of the fact that for the first time in a number of years, the number of journeys on the public transport network increased after many years of decline. If one considers the case of Bus Éireann alone, last year that company carried almost 1 million additional passengers. It now is important to begin the work to invest further to allow more services to be provided. However, I emphasise this cannot be at the expense of losing the efficiency gains generated by the public transport companies because such further investment should have a tangible and noticeable effect for commuters who need better trains and a more reliable service and who, in many cases, experience bus services that do not meet their needs. This is why I am making this investment.

An Ceann Comhairle: Is the Minister sharing time?

Deputy Paschal Donohoe: I was not aware of that.

An Ceann Comhairle: The Minister for Children and Youth Affairs is not on the list I have to hand.

Deputy Paschal Donohoe: I certainly can wrap up quickly.

I wish to emphasise one other important priority in respect of sport, which is to recognise that for 2016, there now is an overall sports allocation, in current terms alone, of €47 million for Sport Ireland and that the overall sports programme allocation has been increased by 40% from last year's allocation. This is to deliver the progress I mentioned with regard to the national indoor arena and to continue preparations in the run-up to Rio.

As for the final portfolio within my Department pertaining to tourism, I wish to continue all the great work that is under way and I am allocating a further €2 million to Tourism Ireland and

Fáilte Ireland. The allocation of €1 million to each agency is to go into developing overseas marketing campaigns to continue to get more people into Ireland, particularly at a time when our hotels and bed and breakfasts have the capacity to cope with that demand.

Minister for Children and Youth Affairs (Deputy James Reilly): I thank the Ceann Comhairle.

An Ceann Comhairle: There was a mix-up in the jerseys. The Minister was not listed in the programme.

Deputy James Reilly: Really?

Deputy John McGuinness: Members are anxious to hear what the Minister has to say.

An Ceann Comhairle: I have no problem with that.

Deputy James Reilly: The Government remains committed to a sustainable and secure recovery based on strong economic growth and a determination not to repeat the mistakes of the past. It also is right that the people start to see the tangible benefits of the recovery. It is with these twin priorities in mind that the Government has framed its budgetary choices this year. In so doing, it remains acutely aware of the need to walk a narrow path between the benefits arising from a fledgling recovery and the danger of overplaying our hand and finding ourselves back in troubled waters.

The 2016 Estimate for my Department once again demonstrates that this Government is strongly committed to delivering important reform and service developments to support Ireland's children and families. I remain fully committed to ensuring real reform of child welfare and protection services and making this country a better and safer place to be a child or young person.

I am pleased to announce the allocation of significant additional funding for children and young people's services under budget 2016. The gross amount of funding for my Department in 2016 will be €1.137 billion, which is an increase of €117.4 million, or 11.4%, over the allocation for 2015. There are two major elements to the additional resources in my Department's Vote for 2016, including an €85 million package of investment in child care and substantially increased resources for Tusla to place it on a firm financial footing and enable it to meet its obligations to children.

The first step child care package announced in the budget is a significant step towards more affordable, accessible and higher quality child care. It is based closely on the approach proposed in the interdepartmental group report which I published in July. Affordability, accessibility and quality are the holy trinity of good child care provision, and each are at the heart of this €85 million child care package. The suite of measures included in this package are in line with the recommendations of the interdepartmental group on future investment in child care, informed by research and evidence of best practice and reflect the general view of key stakeholders, including parents and child care providers. The measures provided include an expansion of free preschool provision by extension of the age range for children accessing the scheme. The maximum number of weeks of free preschool education to which a child will be entitled will increase. The precise period of this extension will vary for each child depending on his or her month of birth and the age at which he or she makes the transition to primary school. For example, a January born child who starts primary school at four years of age will be entitled to up

to 50 weeks of free preschool provision. If this child starts primary school at five years of age, he or she will be entitled to up to 88 weeks provision. It is estimated that on average children will avail of up to 23 additional weeks of free preschool provision under this budget measure.

This measure will not only support better outcomes for children by extending the duration of preschool education and encouraging later school starts but it also makes an important contribution to reducing child care costs for parents. This extended free preschool provision will increase current investment of €172.4 million in the ECCE programme by €47 million in 2016. These costs include full restoration to capitation payments to providers to pre-2012 levels from September 2016. The child care package also provides greater guarantees that free preschool provision can be accessed by all.

Prior to budget 2016 various practical efforts were made to support children with a disability in accessing the ECCE programme. These include more flexible rules regarding access to the free preschool year; the provision on a limited *ad hoc* basis by the HSE of funding towards the cost of preschool support assistants in some areas; elective modules on special needs in mandatory courses for early years practitioners; and various initiatives by city and county child care committees. Despite these efforts, it is accepted that ECCE supports for children with a disability could be further improved. Under budget 2016, a suite of supports to help children with a disability to participate fully in, and reap the benefits of, preschool education under the ECCE programme are being introduced. These include a number of universal supports for all children with a disability, including funding towards the ongoing professional development of early years practitioners and a number of more targeted supports such as grants for equipment, appliances and minor alterations and access to therapeutic intervention for children with complex needs arising from a disability. These supports, which will be phased in from next year, will cost €15 million in 2016. Full year cost from 2017 is estimated to be in the region of €33 million.

The package also provides for additional community child care subvention, CCS, programme places and a move towards consolidating all targeted child care support programmes. The CCS programme traditionally provided funding to community child care services to enable them to provide quality child care at reduced rates to disadvantaged and low income working parents. Parents qualify as disadvantaged or low income on the basis of means-tested entitlements. In the case of full day care, parents qualifying for the higher rate of subvention under the CCS programme can have up to €95 per week deducted from the overall charge for child care in the participating child care facility. Prior to budget 2016, approximately 25,000 children were catered for under the CCS programme each year in almost 900 community child care services. The programme had an annual budget of €45 million.

Under budget 2016, an additional 3,200 full-time equivalent places, or up to 8,000 children based on average uptake, will be made available from early 2016. Critically, for the first time, these places will be made available through community and, where demand exists, private child care services. These additional CCS places will cost approximately €16 million in 2016. In addition to this, I have secured a small resource of €800,000 to allow important work to commence on consolidating existing targeted child care support programmes, including the CCS programme. It is envisaged that, in line with recommendations set out in the interdepartmental report on future investment in child care, a new simplified targeted child care support programme will be available through community and private child care providers from 2017.

After-school services have developed in a very *ad hoc* fashion and it is acknowledged that

a more standardised approach suitable for school-going children is necessary. Parents working full-time need the confidence that there is a reliable, quality and affordable place for their children after school. This child care package includes funding to administer a programme of capital grants, undertake research with children on after-school child care, which is critically important, and develop quality standards for after-school child care. It is vitally important that we continue to work in partnership with the child care sector to constantly enhance the quality of child care provision. Deliverance of the child care reforms proposed will require a programme of concerted action and investment over a number of years. The investment required is considerable. The OECD reports that Ireland's investment in this area currently represents 0.5% of GDP. This compares to an average across the OECD of 0.8% and UNICEF's international benchmark of 1% of GDP. Based on current GDP, every 0.1% increase in public expenditure on child care requires additional investment of over €180 million. The measures announced in this budget alone will increase public expenditure on child care by almost 0.1% of GDP. This is a solid start and a direction of travel I think most Deputies would agree is appropriate.

I have been able to increase the allocation to Tusla by €38 million to allow it address unallocated cases in respect of children in need of a social worker. A further €27 million is being provided by way of Supplementary Estimate to allow Tusla clear the decks in terms of legacy issues and over-runs from this year. Funding is also being provided for a national out-of-hours social service to support An Garda Síochána and a dedicated intervention team for urgent situations and improvements to Tusla's organisational structure.

I am also pleased that we are providing an additional €1.1 million in current funding and an additional €2.250 million in capital funding for youth organisations. This additional funding will support the delivery of a range of youth work programmes and services for all young people. Youth work programmes and services are delivered to some 380,000 young people by 30 national youth organisations and other local youth services supported by 40,000 volunteers in communities throughout the country. On my behalf and on behalf of the Government, I thank those organisations and, in particular, the volunteers without whom we could not achieve and progress our goals.

Additional funding of €1.6 million is also being provided to the Irish Youth Justice Services in respect of the running costs of the new national children's detention facility in Oberstown. This funding will also support a bail support scheme designed to provide therapy services in the community to assist children in adhering to bail conditions. The overall objective of this scheme is to reduce demand for detention school places where possible and minimise as far as possible the remand of children in custody. Additional resources are also being provided for the Adoption Authority of Ireland and the Office of the Ombudsman for Children.

There is no doubt but that 2016 will be another busy year for my Department and its agencies. I believe that the significant additional resources I have secured for 2016 will allow us to build on the hard work and effort by all involved in working with children and families, both State and voluntary organisations, to deliver on this Government's commitment to reform fundamentally the delivery of child and family services and secure better outcomes and brighter futures for our children.

Deputy John McGuinness: I will not take from the fact that this budget has spread funding across various Departments and agencies and there will be a benefit from that throughout the country in the context of the manner in which the Government has approached the budget.

I take the opportunity while the Minister, Deputy Reilly, is in the Chamber, to raise with him the issue of the child care package. I draw his attention to a submission that was made to him from a group in Carlow on the issue of commercial rates to be paid by the private operators. They are extremely concerned about it and find the rate burden very difficult to meet and they believe an effort should be made by the Department of the Environment, Community and Local Government to reduce that burden. Those operators are providing a direct service to the Minister's Department. They are fully reliant on any funding they get from the Department and they could be classified as an educational establishment rather than what they are, and that would assist them.

I respect the job the Minister, Deputy Donohoe, who has just contributed, is doing and I acknowledge what has been done for the transport sector with which I am familiar. The initiative the Minister has taken in regard to road tax is significant for that sector directly and it will also have an impact on those who use the sector extensively. It will improve the cost base for hauliers who travel from here to the UK and to Europe to service our export market, which is essential to ensure an upturn in the economy.

I wish to return to what was said at the time of the 2011 election. At that time we had come forward from a period where old tribalisms were well established in politics and there was a need for a shift in how we did our political business, accounted for ourselves in this House and the way the system accounted for itself in terms of the Comptroller and Auditor General and so on. Reforms were absolutely necessary. The Government parties have fallen way short of the mark with respect to the promises made by the then Government parties to the electorate, the reform package they put to it and their discussion about a democratic revolution. The Government parties have disappointed a great number of people throughout Ireland in that they have not used the large numbers they have in terms of Government support to bring about the reforms that are absolutely necessary. I saw the need for those reforms in politics. I have been a Member since 1997 and those reforms are still needed in the context of how we do our business in this House and how politics is managed generally. The way we are perceived outside this House requires a great deal of attention because that results in the reform-driven agenda that is so necessary in the context of managing budget figures and auditing those figures over the years.

This budget is a nickel and dime approach to a whole sector of Departments and agencies. The only real big message that came out of it was the road tax agenda of the Minister, Deputy O'Donohoe, and the effect it will have on the haulage industry. The rest of what is in it is spread too thinly across society and the sectors within it to have any real impact. The changes that were necessary in terms of the reform I mentioned did not come about. As a result of that, we have the same type of budget process, we have the same tribalism within the political parties that existed in this House and we have the same approach to protecting the *status quo*. That nickel and dime approach will not buy the next election for the Government parties. Members of the public are of the same mind as they were in 2011 in regard to change and reform. They want their lives to be considered in this House. They want to know that the problems they face are concerns of ours and they want to know that we understand those concerns.

There is very little in terms of social welfare provision for people who are on that level of income. I will cite an example given to me by Michael, a man from Kilkenny. He left me a note at my constituency clinic last Saturday. He states that his household benefit was thrashed, six weeks of fuel allowance is gone, 100 units of ESB have been cut and there has been a cut in his fuel allowance, from €23 down to €20. He has his household charge, his septic tank charge

and his property tax. He has to pay his car tax and his petrol costs have risen. He has to pay €280 to a school for his child starting there without any regard to the cost of a uniform, shoes or anything else. He has suffered a cut in the back to the school allowance and a cut in his child benefit, although I know that will be increased marginally in this budget. He is getting €29 a week to look after a 13 year old girl and he is on a contributory pension. He also has all of the usual household bills, be it refuse, heating in term of gas or coal, or lighting. He has to pay €350 for the bus to take his child to school and he has home insurance of €310. The increase he will experience after this budget is nothing in the context of the real figures that he has to deliver on in terms of his household income and the draw on that income which is substantial. His quality of life and that of his family will not be improved by this budget. That is a tangible example of spreading provision too thinly across all various sectors. This man's boat has not risen.

Another issue I have with the budget is with respect to the provision for entrepreneurs, of which great play was made. I will define that group. The entrepreneurs to whom I refer are the men, women and families in this country who have created 750,000 to 800,000 jobs and have sustained themselves through thick and thin in this economic downturn. The entrepreneurs who are still in business are anxious to participate in the creation of jobs. They want to be successful in their businesses. The biggest single drawback for them is the Government's attitude towards the small and medium enterprise sector. What the Minister has done in terms of examining the tax with respect to an employer versus an employee is marginal. It is nothing. It acknowledges their position, after years of turning a blind eye to it, but it does not help them in the course of this recession.

I will relay what a man texted to me about the budget yesterday. I agree with the minimum wage, with improving people's lives and with helping people but Government intervention can often negatively distort what is happening in a small business and most small businesses today, the ones that are successful, the ones that have come through the difficulties and that are still with us, have bank debt, legacy debt and, presumably, a small debt to tide them over and keep them competitive and active in the marketplace. That man texted that the Minister's 50 cent per hour increase in the minimum wage adds €15,600 to his wage bill at a time when he cannot afford it. He stated that he sometimes takes home less than what his employees take home. He added that costs in the insurance industry are so out of control that this year alone added to his expense is €6,000 for insurances for his business. That is what is happening on the ground. The Government has failed in any significant way to address that. Small businesses on high streets throughout the country are under pressure and closing and nothing was offered to them by the Government. I noticed in the comment that was made about consultation that not one word was said about commercial rates. The commercial rate is the most unfair tax that could be levied on a small business. It is talked about most times in budgets. It is talked about inside and outside this House, but we have not given the political leadership that is necessary to reduce those rates and to bring in an ability-to-pay clause or an ability-to-pay-on-profit clause.

Deputy Simon Coveney: The Deputy should get his party's councillors to do that.

Deputy John McGuinness: That is not good enough. With respect to that attitude from the Minister, Deputy Coveney, in making that comment about councillors, his party's councillors are in the majority.

Deputy Simon Coveney: They are not.

Deputy John McGuinness: They want to increase the commercial rate.

Deputy Simon Coveney: The Deputy is wrong about his earlier comment.

Deputy John McGuinness: What is needed is a policy that will correct from the centre what is being collected unfairly from the people who are creating employment for 800,000 people in this country.

The National Asset Management Agency, NAMA, was mentioned in the context of the provision of houses. NAMA will provide up to 20,000 units up to 2020, which comes to 4,000 units per year. Of these, 90% will be in Dublin with 400 units for the rest of the country. Kilkenny alone has 3,500 people on its housing waiting list. These figures are massaged because those on the housing assistance payment and other schemes are considered to be adequately housed and, therefore, not on the housing list. No account is taken of those in hotels or sleeping on our streets. Every county has that problem. The Minister, however, decides that 90% of the houses NAMA will provide will be located in Dublin.

NAMA offered 6,569 housing units but only 2,500 units were taken up from that offer. What is the Minister for the Environment, Community and Local Government, Deputy Alan Kelly, doing about this? A significant number of small builders who, if given the proper opportunity with the support of each and every local authority, would help to deliver houses on the ground. That is the direction we should be taking. Large housing estates built back in the 1950s by the local authorities to this day remain the successful centrepiece of housing people across this country.

Mortgage arrears were not dealt with in this budget. Up to 17,000 repossession orders exist which means people will be dumped on the streets and on to the housing list with no solution for them. Neither has the issue of the 38,000 mortgages in arrears for over two years been addressed.

Deputy Simon Coveney: That is down 45%, however.

Deputy John McGuinness: Can the Minister imagine the hardship these people are going through while the banks refuse to deal with them or understand their difficulty and plight? It will take a strong intervention from the Government to make those banks come to heel. They are not assisting those families in question and have no respect for them or the Government. As soon as the bottom-lines of those banks become better off they will ignore the Government and the citizen and get back on to the same game they were on before. Where then will stand the Government's 2011 democratic revolution where the people were front and centre to everything?

Another issue this budget never touched was the health service. I asked the Taoiseach a question about hospital waiting lists but the Ceann Comhairle suggested I put down a parliamentary question on it. I will ask it now. I have the case of a person on a waiting list for a procedure at Waterford Regional Hospital who was then sent to Cappagh hospital. That hospital could not deal with the procedure, so the patient was then to be sent to Altnagelvin Area Hospital. To this day, it is hard to find out the patient's position on this waiting list. That is unforgivable of any government. These people are waiting in pain to get their procedures or operations carried out.

The Government has allocated €13.5 billion to the health services. I suggested to the HSE chief executive officer, Mr. Tony O'Brien, that he was not up to the job and maybe the Minister should get somebody else. He accused me of making a political statement. It was not. It was

an honest-to-God statement regarding the fear and frustration I have for the management of the health services which I believe is out of control. Middle to senior management in the health services has no real direction. The system is held together by the nurses and doctors, the Band-Aid of the system, who work tirelessly day and night to keep it together. They will not see much from this budget but the senior management and upwards will.

Recently, the Comptroller and Auditor General had to tell the health services that they owed small businesses €9 million in compensation because they did not pay them in time. The health services tried to wriggle their way out of that. In 2013, 2014 and again this year, the Comptroller and Auditor General has had to draw attention to the fact that the procurement rules are, by and large, ignored by the HSE and that there are issues for it to address. There was a further issue with the settlement of tax, which involves some €4 million. Compliance performance with procurement rules is in significant difficulty. Hospital managers have failed to get consultants to sign off on operations, so they can claim for them from private health insurance. Those outstanding claims come to €290 million.

The Comptroller and Auditor General's report on the Garda Síochána noted its failure to comply with computer procurement rules. The report highlighted taxpayers' money was not applied to the projects for which it was intended, some €691,000, in Vote 25, community and local government. The postal code system was originally meant to cost €18 million but will now cost €38 million. The Revenue Commissioners have said they will not use it.

The Committee of Public Accounts and the Comptroller and Auditor General do not audit the significant moneys that go to the local government system. Will the Government bring forward the necessary appropriate reforms to allow the Comptroller and Auditor General to carry out his duties to audit local government? Will the Government give him the powers, and indeed the funding, to ensure that forensic examinations can be undertaken of the expenditure of this Government or any government? This is not a political point but about the administration of the State, which is failing this Government and the taxpayers, who contribute €50 billion a year in taxes. We are not getting value for money. It is simple. Will the Government amalgamate the local government audit system and the Office of the Comptroller and Auditor General, give them all the appropriate powers they need to conduct their inquiries across Government agencies and Departments, fund them properly and ensure they follow the taxpayers' money to the point at which it is spent? That is all I am asking for. It is not for me. It is for the Government and for the proper management of the State to ensure we can get some closure on the inefficiencies and failures of the State. If those failures were corrected, it would force the Government to collect more taxes than what it might need.

What is wrong with that? The former Minister, Deputy Pat Rabbitte, suggested many of these actions when he was a member of the Committee of Public Accounts. The first action I took when I entered the House was to introduce a Bill that might enable that to happen. The Government, however, refused to support it. The Minister for Finance, Deputy Michael Noonan, is a former Chairman of the Committee of Public Accounts. When he was Chairman, every week he would lead the committee to the audio-visual room to give a press conference on the extreme waste and inefficiencies in the system. These are, however, still going on. I am a taxpayer and used to be a small business person. They look aghast at the fact that we do not address these issues. It might make the Government's budget figures a lot easier but that does not happen. Will the Government consider bringing forward legislative proposals to ensure these changes take place?

There are many examples and these are but a few. It is simple to capture them in an independent way. The Minister should look into the marine section in his Department at leases which were never signed, moneys never collected and the way people were treated. It tells its own story.

4 o'clock

Finally, there are times when the State wrongs an individual and instead of owning up to it, it will head for the *status quo* and the safety and comfort of hiding behind the system. The devastation that attitude has brought to individual people and families in the country is nothing short of shocking and a disgrace.

An Ceann Comhairle: Is the Minister, Deputy Coveney, sharing time or will he be taking the 20 minutes for himself?

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Simon Coveney): I will be sharing the time with myself because I have two portfolios I wish to address.

An Ceann Comhairle: I wanted to check because a previous Minister was unaware he could share.

Deputy Simon Coveney: I am okay, unless the Minister of State, Deputy McHugh, is due to speak. I will take on board some of the issues raised by Deputy McGuinness although I do take issue with some of the generalised comments on the marine element of my portfolios. The complexity of leasing arrangements in some of our fisheries harbours are not as straightforward as Deputy McGuinness makes out and some of the people who are asking for leases to be signed have issues they need to deal with in respect of those harbours. However, I take the point in general and some of the points are fair.

As a Government and as a country, we have dealt with a number of difficult budgets. The difficult decisions taken during that time have made it possible for Ireland to exit a bailout, reduce debt levels and move towards real recovery. During that time, the agrifood sector has continued to prove its fundamental importance as a cornerstone of the economy and rural life in general. I am pleased to say that the 2016 budget reflects a significant Exchequer recognition of that position and demonstrates a further commitment of support for the agrifood sector as a whole. The Exchequer contribution to the Vote of my Department will amount to €1.351 billion in 2016, which is €1.134 billion in current expenditure and €217 million in capital expenditure. This represents an overall increase of €109 million over this year's Estimate and takes account of new priorities including, in particular, the rural development programme and the seafood development programme. The agrifood sector continues to play a significant role in our economic recovery, accounting for in excess of 169,000 jobs, and total agrifood exports amount to just under €11.3 billion as of last year, which is an increase of 29% since 2010.

In addition to the Department's Vote, in 2016 Ireland will receive some €1.2 billion in direct funding from the EU for our basic payment scheme. I am pleased to announce that advance payments of 70% will be issued to farmers next week, which is the equivalent of about €750 million. I welcome the taxation measures introduced by the Minister for Finance, Deputy Michael Noonan, which demonstrate the Government's strong commitment to the agrifood sector. Last year we successfully collaborated on an agritaxation review, the most substantial package of its kind ever introduced in a single budget and worth about €300 million to farmers.

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Additional measures have been announced in budget 2016, including a major new initiative on family transfer partnerships to assist succession, which I will deal with later, the removal of forestry income from the high earners restriction for active foresters and farmers and, of course, the inclusion of farmers under the self-employed tax credit of €550 announced yesterday.

In order to build on the progress achieved in recent years, the following measures have been prioritised for funding over the coming year. The rural development programme will see an investment of €4 billion in agriculture between the years 2014 to 2020 and is a key support in rural areas. The rural development programme schemes provide vital investment capital in the rural economy, prioritise agri-environmental protection and support the incomes of family farms. Overall, for 2016 I have secured almost €500 million for investment in the rural development programme, which is up from €439 million in 2015 and an increase of over 12.5%.

In terms of the agri-environment scheme, which is the biggest of these schemes, €203 million will be made available for the agri-environmental schemes AEOS, GLAS and Organics. At least 35,000, and up to 40,000, farmers will benefit under the new green low-carbon agri-environment scheme, known to farmers as GLAS, which encourages farmers to farm in an environmentally sustainable manner and pays them for specific actions they will take. Of course, this scheme will ultimately support up to 50,000 farmers and require funding of €250 million per annum in future years. However, we are getting there faster than had been promised and predicted.

I am allocating €195 million to areas of natural constraint, continuing strong support for farmers farming in disadvantaged areas, and this will continue to generate an important multiplier effect in these local economies. I have also allocated funding amounting to almost €36 million to the targeted agricultural modernisation scheme, TAMS, for 2016. This will provide funding for the young farmer capital investment scheme as well as dairy equipment, organic capital investments, sheep fencing, pig and poultry investments, the animal welfare, safety and nutrient storage scheme and the low emission slurry spreading scheme. All of these are strategic schemes which seek to change and modernise farming through innovation and better ways of doing things.

I am also seeking approval from Cabinet for a scheme to specifically target the tillage sector with support for appropriate investments and I will also reintroduce support for sheep fencing. The beef data and genomics scheme is a big area under the rural development programme. This innovative scheme is now almost fully subscribed with 29,000 applicants and will be further resourced to the tune of €52 million in 2016.

In terms of the marine and seafood area, in anticipation of the approval of the seafood development programme I am providing some €36 million to my Department, the Marine Institute and BIM to fund the roll-out of capital investment schemes. In 2016, this is expected to include the launch of a new capital investment scheme, including supports for the discards ban, aquaculture development, seafood processing, fisheries local action groups, decommissioning of vessels innovation, new product development in the processing sector, stock conservation and sustainability in the inshore fisheries sector and training and advisory services for fishermen and aquaculture enterprises. In addition, significant investments will be made in enhancing control and enforcement of the common fisheries policy.

It is worth noting that the seafood development programme that is going to be rolled out in the next five years is more than twice the size of the value of the fund of any previous seafood

development programme introduced in Ireland. I also welcome the publication of the marine taxation review, which recommends potential areas for support through the taxation system and I look forward to further engagement on the specific recommendations. It is hoped that those recommendations will be factored into the finance Bill in the days to come.

Food Wise 2025 emphasises the need to attract new talent to the sector and increase land mobility to ensure the productive use of land. In negotiating the last CAP reform, I was concerned to provide additional support for young trained farmers. These priorities were reflected in the new tax measures last year. We can already see these changes are driving real structural change in Irish agriculture right now. We have more young farmers in agricultural colleges than we have ever had before and we need to ensure they are not disappointed when they go back home to farm with a view to taking ownership and control of the management of their enterprises.

Four existing tax measures on stock relief and stamp duty relief which are vitally important to young farmers and partnerships, in particular, have been renewed for a further three years. These measures are the 25% general stock relief on income tax, the 100% stock relief on income tax for certain young trained farmers, the 50% stock relief on income tax for registered farm partnerships and the stamp duty exemption on transfers of land to young trained farmers. The retention of the valuable 90% agricultural relief on capital acquisitions tax is also essential to facilitate inter-generational farm transfers.

The area that is getting the most headlines today from an agricultural point of view is the new family transfer partnership introduced by the Minister for Finance, Deputy Michael Noonan, yesterday. I am particularly pleased with the development. This incentive will encourage important conversations within farm families about succession planning at an earlier stage and will facilitate earlier inter-generational transfer of family farms. There is a significant tax credit of up to €5,000 a year for five years to encourage them in this regard. That is €25,000 to incentivise the orderly and managed transfer of the family farm from one generation to the next, which is what we are trying to achieve.

On environmental sustainability, almost €114 million will be made available under the forestry programme in 2016. The removal of forestry income from the high earners restriction for active foresters and farmers is a significant measure in support of national forestry policy. This is something for which the forestry sector has been campaigning for the last three years and we are delivering more than it was seeking. What was being sought was income averaging over a certain number of years. Instead, we have decided to exempt income in its entirety. That will allow much more efficient and commercial afforestation and clear felling in Ireland, which makes a great deal of sense for a sector that has tight margins and is very competitive.

In terms of research and development, I am fully committed to research and innovation which drive competitiveness, profitability and sustainable economic growth. I am continuing to prioritise innovation by allocating over €31 million for research, development and training to be delivered mainly through the Department's competitive food institutional research measure, FIRM, stimulus and forestry research funding programmes and Teagasc training.

I am pleased to announce an increase of €6 million in the 2016 allocation for the horse and greyhound racing fund. This is an increase of almost 9% and brings the total fund to €74 million. It is almost back to the level it was at during the boom. This is a sector with a turnover of approximately €1.2 billion and which employs approximately 17,000 people; therefore, it

will give a great deal more back than we are putting into it. The Government's commitment to the racing and greyhound industries has been extraordinary in recent years, given the financial pressures we have endured. I hope the increase will be welcomed and put to good use.

I continue to be very concerned about farm safety. The number of fatalities in the farming sector is unacceptable. Last year the figures were horrific and many families are still in mourning as a result. This year the numbers are not quite as high, but they are still far too high. We have again prioritised farm safety as a critical component of the TAMS and I have also made it a mandatory requirement for all applicants to have completed a minimum of a half day farm safety course before they can claim grant-in-aid in any of the new schemes we are opening.

Animal welfare is an issue on which I am anxious to have made a definite change by the time I leave office. I feel very strongly about animal welfare. I am, therefore, pleased to be in a position to provide some additional funding in this area. I will increase funding by €600,000 in 2016 to €2.7 million to support animal welfare organisations. Five years ago the figure was a fraction of this. My Department has a responsibility for welfare issues and we are delivering from a funding perspective. I am maintaining the funding of €2.8 million to assist local authorities in reducing instances of horse abandonment and advancing horse projects for urban and Traveller horse owners. We are anxious to build specific horse welfare projects in and around some of our towns and cities and are providing capital funding to do this.

This has been a good budget for farmers, as it should be. Agriculture, farmers and the food industry are the most important parts of Ireland's indigenous economy. They must be supported by the Government and are being supported by it. That will continue.

My other responsibility is the Department of Defence. I am pleased to be able to signal an increase in the defence 2016 allocation to allow the first step towards the implementation of the recently published White Paper on defence and continue the Defence Forces' delivery of operational outputs, both at home and overseas. This is the first increase in the defence budget since 2008. Although some opposition parties would like us to reduce defence expenditure, I do not agree with that position. Our troops, sailors and members of the Air Corps need modern equipment to be safe and do an efficient and safe job, both at home and abroad in their peace-keeping role.

The combined defence 2016 allocation of some €904 million, comprising €224 million for Vote 35 for Army pensions and €680 million for Vote 36, is a significant level of funding and shows an increase of €6 million on the corresponding 2015 allocation. The White Paper on defence sets out the roles the Government has assigned to the Defence Forces and looks at associated capability requirements. It sets out proposals on the replacement of major equipment platforms for the next decade and other priorities for the Army, the Air Corps and the Naval Service. The White Paper has a crucial role to play in determining our financial strategies and spending plans in the next decade. The improving public finances will allow further scope for investment in the replacement of major equipment and ongoing recruitment.

It is in this context that I have made a commitment to maintaining Permanent Defence Force, PDF, numbers at 9,500. The Permanent Defence Force is conducting a very active recruitment campaign to ensure we stay at that number. In parallel with the ongoing recruitment campaign, I am pleased to announce that there have been over 500 promotions across all ranks of the Permanent Defence Force to date in 2015. The White Paper on defence also outlined a range of measures that would be progressed during the next few years to develop further the Re-

serve Defence Force, RDF, which plays an important strategic role and will do so in the future.

Capital expenditure accounts for a sizeable element of the defence Vote and the increased allocation for defence under the recently announced 2016-21 capital investment programme is highly significant. In total, €437 million is provided for defence capital investment over that period and this allocation will be expended on replacement programmes for defensive equipment across the Army, the Air Corps and the Naval Service, as well as on an infrastructure works programme within barracks. The naval vessel replacement programme has seen the *LE James Joyce* added to the Naval Service fleet in 2015, joining the *LE Samuel Beckett* which was delivered in April 2014. A third ship purchased under this programme, the future *LE William Butler Yeats*, is scheduled for delivery in July 2016. The progressive and prudent approach taken to these purchases is testament to the value for money ethos prevailing within the Department of Defence and the Defence Forces.

The capital funding envelope provides for the development of a key proposal under the White Paper, the new institute for peace support and leadership training, building on the UN Training School in the Curragh. The institute is intended to provide a new international resource in the area of conflict resolution, conflict prevention and peace building. The capital allocation will also provide for the ongoing refurbishment of a diverse defence property portfolio and the provision of replacement or additional facilities, where required. I will provide more details on the peace and leadership institute in the weeks ahead.

I take the opportunity to pay tribute to Defence Forces personnel serving overseas in very important and often challenging situations. Ireland is contributing 494 Defence Forces personnel to 12 overseas missions. This level of overseas deployment reflects Ireland's ongoing contribution to international peace and security. The numbers will increase. We are committed to providing at least another 170 personnel for UNIFIL next year. In addition, there will possibly be another 175 committed in connection with the German battle group, should it be called upon for a peacekeeping mission somewhere in the world. Our role overseas is one that makes Irish people very proud. It is also really testing for the Defence Forces. It is what they train for and what they do, but it is a significant and sometimes very dangerous job, be it in southern Lebanon, on the Golan Heights, in north Africa, eastern Europe, Afghanistan or in the Mediterranean where our sailors, with the support of some of our soldiers and medical staff, have saved almost 8,000 people during the summer months.

Domestic security remains primarily the role of the Department of Justice and Equality and An Garda Síochána. However, the Defence Forces will continue to provide essential support for the civil power throughout 2016, whenever requested to do so. I take the opportunity to express my deep condolences to An Garda Síochána and the families who are mourning as a result of the tragedies that have occurred in recent days. Following a Government decision to establish the emergency aeromedical support service on a permanent basis, I am pleased to announce that an additional allocation of €2.2 million was provided in the defence Vote for reimbursement of Air Corps costs incurred in the provision of this service. This is now a permanent service, in partnership with the HSE and the Department of Health.

With the onset of winter, it is important to also highlight the assistance provided by the Defence Forces for the civil authorities. Apart from weather emergency responses, the Defence Forces have the training, equipment, skills and expertise to assist the civil authorities to deal with a range of diverse events, ranging from fire fighting, maritime patrols, air ambulance duties to missing person searches.

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I acknowledge the vital contribution Civil Defence volunteers make to the State. The Department of Defence provides support for local Civil Defence units, including central training, as well as supplying vehicles, boats, uniforms and personal protective equipment for volunteers.

The Defence Forces as a whole are opening a new chapter in their development and modernisation and the asks being made of them by the Government, to which they will have to respond. We now have a White Paper that charts a very exciting future in which the Government will give strong support through a clear policy and appropriate levels of funding. The Defence Forces will respond in the way they respond to every challenge - by delivering on the asks made of them by the State. We should be very proud of the work they continue to do.

An Ceann Comhairle: Deputy Sandra McLellan is sharing time with Deputies Martin Ferris, Jonathan O'Brien and Seán Crowe.

Deputy Sandra McLellan: I take the opportunity to express my deepest sympathy to the family of Garda Golden, the families of those who died in the Carrickmines tragedy and the family of the homeless man who died on Westmoreland Street on Saturday night.

Yesterday evening I received an e-mail from the One Family group about the budget announcements. If I am to be honest, it did not make for great reading. The group referred to the budget as a "let down for poor one-parent families". Contained within the letter was the following:

...this government has heaped cuts on those one-parent families who rely on social welfare in the past four budgets. Child poverty rates have rocketed. [I]f Government really wants to be family-friendly to all families then more needs to be done to be aware of the reality of the diversity of families in Ireland and what they need.

The budget, when looked at proportionately, will do very little to protect and fails the most vulnerable. For the Government, there seems to be a disconnect when it comes to a realisation of the realities. It had the opportunity yesterday to make the lives of vulnerable people more secure, yet it introduced another budget that, once again, favoured those most well-off in our society.

I welcome the additional allocation being made available to Tusla, the Child and Family Agency, as it was an issue I brought up just last week. However, I repeat what I said then. Serious investment is required in the social work sector to allow ratios to be brought down to more workable levels in the hope of producing a more efficient service and allowing those children most at risk to be protected in so far as is humanly possible. Family resource centres also require adequate investment, at both national and local level, to facilitate their work, given the ever-rising number of vulnerable children and families presenting to their services. Prevention is better than emergency firefighting.

Some 1,496 children are still living in emergency accommodation and judging by trends in the housing sector and ever-increasing rents in the private sector, this number will continue to rise. Yesterday the Government could have attempted to tackle this crisis but instead decided against it. The introduction of rent caps in the private sector would give struggling families some sense of security, but this opportunity was ignored. It could also have looked at the possibility of increasing rent supplement limits. In an article in *The Irish Times* just last week it was highlighted that over 90% of available properties were out of reach of someone who received rent allowance. Does the Government fail to hear the voices of those who need help most or

does it deliberately turn a deaf ear? When looked at objectively, one can only derive that, with thousands of people in need of rent support and less accommodation available, this will result in more people being subjected to homelessness and becoming part of a crisis that has already reached astronomical levels. All it requires is a basic analysis and the application of a minimal amount of logic, but, not surprisingly, this has evaded the Government yet again.

The Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform, Deputy Brendan Howlin, said yesterday that child care was a key priority for the Government. He said the increased allocation would allow him to bring forward a package of measures to ease the burden on working families. I welcome the extension of the free preschool year, but what about those children ranging from zero to three years of age? There is very little in the budget that will be of benefit to them. It is virtually impossible to expect someone to go back to work on a full-time basis when so much of their wages would be spent on child care. Take, for example, a family on the minimum wage and lucky enough to be given full-time hours. They must seek child care, which would account for a huge proportion of their income. The Government speaks about getting people to return to employment, but the policies it implements make this very difficult. The additional funding allocated to the ECCE programme is welcome, but it is still a far cry from the 0.8% of GDP which is the average figure across OECD countries.

It is welcome that Sinn Féin's lead on the introduction of two weeks paternity leave was followed by the Government, although it is very unfortunate that it does not plan to implement this legislation until September 2016. It seems to be based on the premise that the coalition will still be in power this time next year, about which I would not be so sure. We had suggested there was space to go further and extend maternity leave, allowing for another six weeks to be afforded to either parent, but, unfortunately, this was not taken on board. If the Government is really committed to child care and the aspiration to follow a Scandinavian model, it needs to address the gaping holes and the many questions that arise from the double-speak.

Deputy Martin Ferris: There is precious little for struggling farmers in the budget. My party, Sinn Féin, has repeatedly called for the restoration of the farm assist payments to their 2013 level. The Government's refusal to respond to that call which is echoed by farming organisations shows a disconnect from the realities of life for those who are struggling in rural Ireland. The Minister for Social Protection, Deputy Joan Burton's claim that farm assist could be replaced by jobseeker's allowance shows how little she and the Government care if they end up destroying rural life as we know and cherish it.

There is a definite trend in all of the new measures which shows that the future of the family farm and the rural way of life, from which most of us come, are not a concern for this or the previous Government. This is despite all of the promises and spin in which the Government has been engaged for the past few months. In the case of farmers, it started with the abolition last March of milk quotas. One would think they were after winning the lotto the way this was heralded, but many small dairy farmers are now in trouble, yet the Government sits back, as the Taoiseach did this morning on the issue of homelessness, and tells us the market will resolve everything. The banks are chasing small dairy farmers and the market price of milk is too low, but the worship of market forces and the disregard for the vulnerable, not just in farming or rural areas but all over the State, mean that in everything the Government does, including the budget, the vulnerable are on their own.

Has nothing been learned from what happened in the last few years? Is the Government so insulated from the real world that a return to boom and bust politics is acceptable? It is trum-

peting the fact that it has made taxation changes to help the less well-off when it is clear from the figures that the cuts to the universal social charge and the changes to PRSI will put triple the amount in the pocket of someone on €70,000 per year compared to the average worker. The person earning €70,000 will benefit to the tune of €886 per year, while a person on €25,000 will receive less than €230 per year.

The way the Government is handing out lollipops might win it a few votes in the general election, but it is damaging the tax base in the long term. Reducing taxation income in such a way can only mean more damage to public services in the future and the Government is doing this in a totally dishonest way. Saving up trouble for the future is the way boom and bust politics work, but the Government does not give a damn about the suffering this will mean down the line for the most vulnerable, as long as it can cynically pull the wool over people's eyes until the general election. It does not even pretend that it is working towards a meaningful long-term investment in infrastructure and front-line services. The media talk about the emergency in the health service and the homelessness crisis, but when the Government laid out its plans for these services yesterday, its policy was to make them do with what they had. It has turned what those dependent on the services call a crisis into a policy of "making do". We can now truly say it is the Government's policy to leave health, education and housing services in the state they are in, with the suffering that implies.

The Government was crowing about NAMA building 20,000 homes in the next five years. Even if that was enough, what has the Government been doing in the past five years since building stopped and suffering and stress for thousands of people followed? I hope it will get its comeuppance before the anniversary of the Easter Rising as it has made a mockery of the 1916 Proclamation. This is not the future the men and women of 1916 envisaged for the country, for which they fought and were prepared to die. The Government has made a mockery of the aspirations for equality of rights and opportunities for the people. It has looked after the top 14%, giving them €180 million in a reduction of the universal social charge alone, while giving less relief for the lower paid.

The Government has shown itself to be cynical in the extreme. Ministers stand and talk about recovery, but it is not a fair recovery. They look after the well heeled, but the rest can continue to suffer the consequences. The Government has made no meaningful attempt to tackle child poverty or homelessness. It has engineered the closure of a refuge for victims of domestic violence. Thousands are homeless; people are dying on the streets; the health service is collapsing, and inequality is increasing on all sides. Sinn Féin has set out a political alternative that puts investment centre stage - investment in services, infrastructure and small businesses. All of this can be delivered through fair and sustainable taxation. The Government calls this fantasy, while visiting a nightmare on the people we represent. Shame on Ministers and the Government.

I wish to be associated with the expressions of sympathy and offer my sympathy on the murder of Garda Golden and the deaths of the Traveller families who died the other day. I also offer my sympathy on the death of the homeless person who died on the streets and the death of Fr. Gearóid O'Donoghue, a priest in my parish who burned to death in a house fire on Monday morning.

Deputy Jonathan O'Brien: I wish to be associated with the expressions of sympathy to members of An Garda Síochána and the Traveller community.

In my brief contribution I wish to focus on education. Fine Gael and the Labour Party came to office in 2011 and between then and yesterday's budget announcement some €500 million had been taken out of the education budget. We saw capitation grants slashed, increased class sizes, cuts to summer works schemes and minor works grants and Traveller resources. Overall, €500 million has been taken from the budget. Now, with the first budget that, according to the Government, gives us the opportunity to improve public services, one would think education would be a priority.

Does the Minister know how much was included in the education budget yesterday? The answer is €24 million. The Department will spin and state an extra €170 million was included in the education budget. While that is correct on paper, some €154 million of it is earmarked to meet the rise in demographics and the terms of the pay agreement. We were running to stand still in that regard. Therefore, we have just €24 million available, of which we are using €18 million to reduce the pupil-teacher ratio - a welcome initiative - and €6 million to implement junior cycle reform which has not yet been agreed to by one of the main trade unions. There is no doubt, therefore, that the education sector was not a priority yesterday for the Government.

The same goes for the health service. Members on the Government side may shake their heads, but apart from the investment to provide for the rise in demographics, the additional spend in this area is just €18 million for new initiatives. I do not know how the Government can try to explain this. There is no increase for young jobseekers under 25 years, although their income was cut to €100. The opportunity was not taken yesterday to increase this figure. If we look at what the Government has done in regard to the tax base, there is no doubt that it has been completely hollowed out. This will have a detrimental impact on future budgets. Rather than expand the tax base in a fair and equitable manner, the Government has put €180 million back into the pockets of the top 14% of wealthiest earners. Meanwhile, a young jobseeker under 25 years who has received no increase is expected to survive on €100 a week.

The Government massaged the figures for housing. It talks about NAMA delivering 20,000 houses, but the bulk of them are to be built in Dublin, with only 2,000 to be built in the other 25 counties. This will not go far to address the housing crisis. The majority of the houses that will come on line will be affordable and commercial units, not social units. The Government talks about the local authorities and states it has provided them with money and that they should get on with addressing the issues, but it is not as simple as that. It sat on its hands for four and a half years and cut funding to local authorities. Therefore, they did not have the ability to plan the building of houses. Some did not even have architects and some do not even have a plumber. The Government cannot just wave a magic wand and state it has now provided the money and let the local authorities get on with the job. A long-term strategy is required.

Homelessness is on the rise. Despite all the announcements made on housing in 2015 alone - five - we have more people homeless now than when these initiatives were announced. Clearly, the strategies are not working.

Deputy Seán Crowe: The Taoiseach stated this morning that the main thrust of the budget was to keep the recovery moving, yet much of the analysis of the budget shows that it will reward the small minority at the top the most. This is the fifth budget the Government has introduced and it has followed the same trend. The analysis of the trade union think tank, TASC, of last year's triple effect of changes to tax bands, tax rates and USC rates found that budget 2015 had given the biggest cash return, in absolute and relative terms, to those earning €70,000 or over. This budget will do the same. It is clear that higher earners are experiencing recovery

and that the Government wants to continue to reward them with more and more money, while public services that hold our society together crumble. The budget will put €181.9 million into the pockets of the top 14% of earners by way of tax cuts but spend a miserly €18 million extra on health services and €24 million on the resource-starved education system.

When will the homeless have a voice in this Chamber? When will those faced with losing their home have a sympathetic ear? More importantly, when will they have a champion for their cause in Government Buildings? When, if ever, will the Government wake up to the crisis facing more and more families? How many more homeless people will have to die and how many more families will have to endure raising their children in a hotel or bed and breakfast accommodation with just a kettle? The number of children living in homeless facilities has grown during the Government's enlightened term. Rents and social housing lists have grown during its term. When will it declare an emergency and address the issue of rent regulation? The answer is perhaps never.

The hopes and aspirations of citizens have not grown during the Government's term, but the number of citizens at risk of poverty has. Income inequality has grown during the Government's term. Mickey Mouse job activation schemes have grown during its term, while the idea of a fair society has been hammered under its watch. The number of people working on low wages has grown during the Government's term, while the number of patients on trolleys has increased. Is it any wonder that Irish citizens, especially young people, have continued to leave the State in increasing numbers since the Government began its term of office? Over 500,000 have left since 2008. Will this be the Government's legacy?

Government speakers are also hyping up the decision to extend free GP care to all children under 12. When will the Government extend the medical card to the seriously ill or those with terminal illnesses, a topic which has been discussed many times in this House? Ministers have focused on the announcement of 1,000 extra nurses to be hired this year, which seems welcome. None of them seems to remember that in February, the Minister of State, Deputy Lynch said 1,500 would retire from mental health services this year alone. We are losing front-line staff in our health service and are not gaining any.

Another much-heralded element of the budget was the minimum wage rise of 50 cent to €9.15, but speakers failed to mention that the HSE will not pay minimum wage to fourth year student nurses, who are currently working 39-hour weeks for nine months on €6.95 a hour. Surely this anomaly needs to be addressed.

I welcome the fact that overseas development assistance, ODA, has increased by €40 million. ODA must play a fundamental role in our foreign affairs and Ireland must prioritise international assistance on efforts to end poverty and inequality around the world, especially as the world is currently suffering an unprecedented number of simultaneous conflicts and humanitarian crises. I again challenge the Government to fully document how it plans to reach the UN target of 0.7% of gross national income for aid spending as the current allocation represents just 0.36% of Ireland's current GNI. In the interest of accountability and transparency I, along with others, have consistently asked the Government to do this and I reiterate those calls today. I also welcome the allocation of €25 million for the refugee resettlement and relocation programme. However, we lack accurate and up-to-date information on this initiative.

Overall, this budget has failed to deliver. Sadly, the recovery is for the few, not for the many. It is another missed opportunity.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Derek Keating): The Minister for Communications, Energy and Natural Resources, Deputy Alex White, and the Minister for Education and Skills, Deputy Jan O’Sullivan, are sharing time and have ten minutes each.

Minister for Communications, Energy and Natural Resources (Deputy Alex White): Tired old cliches like “helping the well heeled” and “small minority at the top” are no substitute for analysis. The Deputies opposite are capable of much more than the cliches they have served up in the last 20 minutes or so. Listening to the Opposition speakers and particularly to Sinn Féin on this occasion, although the same applied to some of the Fianna Fáil speakers earlier on, it is clear that they are in denial. They are refusing to face up to the fact that we have a real recovery in our economy and that now, for the first time and not before time, the recovery is finding its way through to the homes, business, communities and citizens of this country.

The improvements are modest. That is accepted by the Government. It has been a long time coming, which is also accepted by the Government. As somebody said on a television programme last night, there is a long way back after the economic collapse and crisis we suffered.

It is no use for Opposition Deputies to give the same speeches today as they gave last year and the years before that. In order to be taken seriously, they need to address the changes that are occurring in the economy and those brought about by the measures in this budget. They need to address the increased investment in areas like education, health and social protection. These are the changes that are actually happening. The Members opposite can say they are not enough and can come up with alternatives for better measures. Then we can have the debate.

Deputy Sandra McLellan: We did.

Deputy Alex White: The notion that nothing is happening - Deputy Crowe’s suggestion that it is an entire failure - demonstrates how devoid of credibility the Sinn Féin Party is. The only way to be credible is to base what one says on the facts, not to recycle speeches from last year and the year before. Some of the speakers from Fianna Fáil were doing the same. Deputy Michael McGrath, who led for Fianna Fáil yesterday, spent a great deal of his speech criticising cuts and measures that occurred in previous budgets. Legitimate criticism, perhaps, but not relevant to this budget. I ask colleagues opposite to read these speeches and read the materials that are put before them in the House.

This is a prudent budget which balances the twin objectives of safeguarding the recovery and raising living standards. By any reasonable view, that is what it sets out to do. It will see the continued reduction of the debt and deficit, which is the borrowing the State has to undertake. Those realities were inherited from the catastrophic policies of the previous Government. The budget also sees us investing in the essential public services which were devastated by those policies, including education as the Minister, Deputy O’Sullivan will no doubt address. It sees us increasing the incomes of families left to pay the price of the disastrous policies of the previous Government. The incomes and living standards of individual citizens and families will increase as a result of this budget. That has become manifest. There is no point in my colleagues opposite denying it if they want to be taken seriously.

I say it is a fair budget and I do not accept the suggestion that it is not fair. I will come back to that in a moment. It is a budget that unashamedly distributes the early returns of our recovery to our citizens, families and communities across all sectors. It is a progressive budget that increases the take-home pay of middle income earners as well as those on lower incomes. The

greatest impact of the tax measures will be on people who are on average and low incomes. That is a fact.

The distortion in which Sinn Féin Deputies and others have sought to engage in the last 24 hours is not being bought by the public. Low or middle income earners up to €70,000 know they will see a gain, albeit a modest one, in this budget. All the talk by Deputy Crowe and his colleagues about the well heeled, the higher paid and so on is given the lie when we look at the measures. No income above €70,000 will benefit disproportionately from the tax measures. Someone earning €40,000 will benefit to a certain degree, someone earning €50,000 will benefit a little more and someone earning €60,000 or €70,000 will benefit a little more again. However, once we hit €80,000 or €87,000 - the salary my colleagues opposite enjoy along with all of us in this House - the benefit goes. The cut-off is €70,000.

The Sinn Féin Deputies should face the facts. They should find other things to criticise, by all means, and propose alternatives if they can. They should stop trying to deny the facts of the matter. The tax measures are progressive because there is no added benefit to somebody earning over €70,000. My colleagues should try to tell me if I am wrong. Clearly, that is what the budget provides.

With respect to Deputy McLellan, the budget places the family at the centre of our recovery by increasing child benefit and family income supplement, and by introducing paid paternity leave for the first time. She can say it does not go far enough and there are comparators in Europe that do more. She is right, I agree with her. Here, we can get into having a realistic debate where people are saying we could and should do more. However, Deputy McLellan should at least face the fact that for the first time ever we have introduced paid paternity leave in this country, a very short time after coming out of the worst recession and economic crisis we have ever had. She should give some credit where it is due.

I am particularly pleased to see further progress towards universal health care through the extension of free GP visits to all children under 12. This is a programme I had the privilege to instigate when I was Minister of State at the Department of Health and Children. Deputy Crowe made reference to it and I am not sure whether he was criticising it. He was making a point about medical cards generally, I think. Regarding free GP care, it is a progressive measure to introduce universal access to primary care, GP services. It will be transformative for our health system. I hope it has the support of Sinn Féin. In fairness to Deputy Ó Caoláin, when I was in the Department of Health, he always expressed to me his support for this measure. He used to ask me one question, which was not an unfair one.

(Interruptions).

Deputy Alex White: He used to ask me whether we were only going to do this up to the age of age six because if that was the case, he was not with us. He told me that he needed me to tell him that it was not just a measure up to age six and that we should go up to 12 and onwards. I used to tell him that was our intention. Here we are being true to the commitment we gave, and the commitment I gave to Deputy Ó Caoláin from Sinn Féin, that we were serious about extending free GP care from the under-sixes to the under-12s. I expect it to be extended further to the entire community so that we can transform our health services by moving resources into primary care and where people have universal access to GP services irrespective of their income. That is what we have done and we are sticking to our word and delivering that in this budget as well.

It is also a budget that recognises and values our older citizens with increases in the weekly pension, the fuel allowance and the Christmas bonus. Above all, this is a budget for continued employment growth, building on the efforts and policies that have seen over 130,000 jobs created since 2012. I have just come back from an announcement by Sage that it is creating 300 new jobs at its headquarters in Sandymount. These are quality jobs in Dublin, and there are examples elsewhere in the country. This is further evidence that Ireland's sustainable, jobs-led recovery is bringing real benefits to our communities across Dublin and the whole country.

The budget will deliver progress on my priorities as Minister for Communications, Energy and Natural Resources. It will enhance and expand existing programmes to help our citizens, communities and small businesses to benefit from the many opportunities presented by our transition to a digital society and economy. One of the things I most regret about the recession and the economic crisis, and there are many things to regret, is the gap in investment that grew up. We redressed that in the capital plan and are now looking to invest seriously in transport and education, including building new schools. Most important for me is investing in the digital economy and having the national broadband plan to ensure that every home and business in Ireland is served by high-speed broadband. There is precious little about broadband in the Sinn Féin so-called pre-budget statement. I can see no apparent allocation. There is nothing there about infrastructure except the word "infrastructure". There is nothing about broadband.

(Interruptions).

Deputy Alex White: Where is the money for energy efficiency schemes? There is nothing. It is all talk and cliché. Sinn Féin has run out of road.

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Jan O'Sullivan): This budget really is the culmination of four years of hard work. When we came into office, we inherited a broken economy that had to be fixed. We had to bring stability to our public finances.

(Interruptions).

Deputy Jan O'Sullivan: Deputy Mattie McGrath will remember what it was like because he participated in the Government that led to it. The creation of jobs was a priority. The Minister for Communications, Energy and Natural Resources has just referred to the 130,000 real jobs created since 2012. That had to be done and people across the country had to make enormous sacrifices for us to achieve that. Those people deserve to get the benefits of a recovering economy, which is what this budget is essentially about.

The economy is not an end in itself. We also need to repair the social fabric of our country. The budget does a lot to realise that. Essentially, the era of cuts is over and we can look forward to investment in social services in areas like education. It is not just investing in what was done before. We also need to accompany that with reform of the way we do things. This is very much part of what my predecessor and I have been doing in the area of education. I have always believed, and have often argued, that investment in education is an economic, social and moral imperative. When I was appointed Minister for Education and Skills, we faced a potential reduction in our budget in 2015 of €39 million but working with the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform, we managed to get an increase of €60 million last year. That allowed us to invest in some of the reforms that are necessary to deliver a modern, fit-for-purpose education for every child. Over the past 12 months, I have been determined to build on that first increase in education spending in recent years. The budget yesterday succeeded in that ambi-

tion. In 2016, an additional €144 million will be invested in education. The figure quoted by Deputy O'Brien related to the new proposals regarding the pupil-teacher ratio and one other, but he did not include the ongoing reforms. For example, he did not include the extra funding for junior cycle reform, the school book rental scheme, literacy and numeracy reform, the new apprenticeships we announced and the technological universities. These are just some of them. I will go into the detail of some of those later on. That is why Deputy O'Brien's figure differs from our figure. The additional investment in education is actually €144 million this year.

My priority for additional investment has been to see smaller classes introduced at primary level. Budget 2016 will deliver this important measure. We have reduced class size back to the smallest class size we have ever had. This is the start of our ambition and a new push to bring class sizes down over a number of years. It is worth noting that even in the most difficult budgets of recent years, this Government protected class size. The only recent cut was done by those on the Opposition benches. I think Deputy Mattie McGrath might have been supporting Fianna Fáil at the time. The measures introduced in this budget will bring down average class sizes from 28 to 27. It will begin the process of putting an end to classes of over 30 children.

I have said previously that no class should contain more than 30 children and that average class sizes should fall below 25 over the coming years. The move in this direction this year will require approximately 300 additional teaching posts. Additional teachers will also be provided at post-primary level. A total of 550 new teaching posts will be provided and I expect more than half of these will be used to improve guidance counselling support in schools. This will be done by reducing the pupil-teacher ratio from 19:1 to 18.7:1 for most schools and from 18.25:1 to 17.95:1 for disadvantaged schools. While schools will have the autonomy to use this additional staffing in accordance with their needs, we are very conscious of the need for appropriate guidance counselling to be available to every student. In fairness, I know that the Opposition is in agreement with that. A new circular on guidance will issue in the spring and this will underpin the responsibility of every school to make sure it uses this additional staffing to meet its obligations to provide guidance counselling support to all students. As Members will know, the Institute of Guidance Counsellors has been a very effective advocate for increased guidance resources and I welcome its support for this measure.

A total of 250 of these additional post-primary posts will also be used to enhance the role of deputy principals in schools with less than 500 students. Strengthening leadership in schools is an important agenda. It might not grab the headlines. Indeed, additional resources in this regard often go unnoticed outside the school community but supporting leadership in schools has many positive benefits for students, teachers and other school staff. Part of the allocation will allow deputy principals to reduce their teaching time and focus on leadership and management. It will also provide additional release days to teaching principals in primary schools. This is positive news for school leaders and school leadership and it builds on the work already done this year in establishing the Centre for School Leadership, which I announced earlier in the year. These changes build upon the significant investment required to meet demographic growth in schools. Next year alone, almost 14,000 additional students will be enrolled in our schools. A total of 810 additional teachers are being provided to meet this additional number of children and young people. Similarly, a further 600 additional resource teachers have been provided to support additional children with special education needs.

As I said earlier, investment must go hand-in-hand with reform. One area where the Government has driven reform is the area of apprenticeships. Ireland has a world-class reputation in terms of our skilled craftspeople. We regularly win top international competitions and did so

very recently. I congratulate those students. Unfortunately, this national talent is often overlooked and does not receive the attention and celebration it deserves. I want to see that change. I will ensure that the apprenticeship model is extended to growing sectors of the economy. We expect at least 4,000 additional apprentices to begin training next year. Apprenticeships offer a high-quality career path for young people leaving school. The apprenticeship model, which up until now was largely focused on the construction trades, is now being expanded into new career sectors such as financial services, travel, tourism and hospitality and other areas, such as HGV drivers.

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These apprenticeships will come on stream in 2016 and will be supported by more than €10 million in funding.

This is an important reform that the Minister of State, Deputy Damien English, and I worked hard to deliver. I received support for this initiative from Members across the floor of this House, including Deputy Jonathan O'Brien, who is here today. Technological universities will bring industry-connected university level education to regions around Ireland. Three consortia have reached the final phase of moving to become technological universities in the south, south east and the Dublin area. These consortia will next year benefit from additional funding. A total of €2 million is being made available to develop technological universities in Dublin, Munster and the south east. A further €3 million is being made available to invest in the student assistance fund and more generally for supporting disadvantaged students. More funding will be needed for the higher and further education and training sectors over the coming years. The expert group, chaired by Mr. Peter Cassells, will report at the end of the year. That report will outline options for funding higher education in the future and I will publish it as soon as it becomes available.

SOLAS, the Further Education and Training Authority, has begun reviewing the opportunities available in the further education and training sector. This sector has been neglected but I want to ensure that we shine more light on it in the future because it really does provide opportunities for people to get meaningful, strong careers. I have met many people in the further education colleges around the country who are benefitting from those opportunities. SOLAS will complete a review of post-leaving certificate courses next spring and then move on to examine other opportunities in further education and training. As it carries out that work I will support it, just as I have by prioritising investment in apprenticeships today.

We have achieved a great deal in reforming education in recent years. Budget 2016 will ensure that we can continue this important work. This year we saw the first improvement in reading and mathematics in a generation, results due in part at least to our successful literacy and numeracy strategy. I am delighted to continue funding the implementation of that strategy with an allocation of €17 million, an increase of €3 million compared with this year. Reform of junior cycle will also continue with an €8 million increase in funding of this reform bringing the total allocation up to €17 million. This funding will be used for teacher training, giving teachers professional time to engage with the reforms and for curriculum development. I am pleased to inform the House that continuing professional development for junior cycle will begin in the coming weeks. The first phase will focus on the education and training board, ETB, sector where the Teachers Union of Ireland, TUI represents most teachers.

I have provided €2.5 million in funding in 2016 to replace the philanthropic funding which

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has been raised to promote music to children through Music Generation. We are investing €9 million to ensure the high-speed broadband, which has been installed in all post-primary schools, thanks to the Minister for Communications, Energy and Natural Resources, Deputy White, is available to them free of charge.

On top of these important areas this year I have secured €2 million in funding to support new curriculums, which include the revised primary languages curriculum and the roll-out of politics and society as a new leaving certificate subject. It will also support the revised curriculums for art, design and communications for leaving certificate. I am also providing the final tranche of €5 million in a three-year additional investment in the school books fund which does relieve some of the pressure on parents with regard to the cost of education.

A minor works grant will issue to all primary and special schools in November, totalling €28.5 million. There will also be a summer works scheme over 2016 and 2017, for which funding of €80 million has been allowed.

I commend the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs, Deputy James Reilly, on what has been achieved in early years education. We have been working closely with him on this issue and I commend him particularly on his support for children with special needs. We see education as a continuum and early years are extremely important. I am delighted we have been able to achieve significant progress in the education budget.

Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice: I am involved in a national school and welcome the reduction of numbers for a three-teacher school from 56 to 55. We hoped it might have been possible to come down one or two more, to make sure that rural schools would be saved. The bottom threshold is reaching 52.

I welcome the minor works grant and summer works scheme because they are vital to national schools around the country. Some Ministers have stepped up to the mark and delivered certain things. We would have liked more, as everyone would. I thank the Minister for Education and Skills for those grants because I haunt her now and again about them.

Road tax for hauliers is a vital issue. I have been dealing with it for the past year. It costs €4,500 to tax a lorry in Southern Ireland. It costs £900 to tax the same vehicle in the North. Irish hauliers were at a distinct disadvantage when they went to the North. They were being crucified by having to pay £10 a day while there, as a penalty for driving on the roads there. I made submissions on it to see if there was any way we could hit drivers coming down here to alleviate the €4,500 tax for the articulated lorries. The haulage industry has been forgotten for many a year and it is welcome that it has received some recognition.

The amount of money working parents must pay out for child care is a nightmare and a headache. It is a welcome step in the right direction that this goes to age five or five and a half now. There are working families who must pay to have their children looked after from 12 p.m. The child care package covers care only from 9 a.m. to 12 or 12.30 p.m. After that someone else has to step in and pay. I know there is not enough money to throw around but that would have helped middle Ireland.

I was in Brussels yesterday with Deputy John O'Mahony and Senator Paschal Mooney, from the Oireachtas Joint Committee on Transport and Communications. While there, we monitored what was being said here. I noted the Minister said the reduced VAT rate is coming to an end because Dublin hotels are booming. He needs, however, to understand that there are

hotels in the country that will need this rate for a few more years to lift them off the ground. If the Department of Finance is thinking of increasing the VAT rate in Dublin it needs to make sure that something is there for the hotels in the country.

I do not see much in this budget for the development of rural Ireland. We heard the announcement of a €30 million programme at the National Ploughing Championship, which is welcome. We need enhancements, be it rates in small towns, or giving credit unions the environment to trade and compete. They are the new banks in rural parts of Ireland. They want a fair chance to clear their money at the same price as a bank. They want the facilities to issue a card and get direct debits up and running. That is crucial and will be one of the pillars of the revival of rural Ireland. That will not take money. It will take an announcement and probably legislation to make sure it is done.

Everything the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine announced today was there already, bar the partnership. While he is singing and dancing about the partnership he must remember it is not for a 20, 30 or 40-acre farm. That will not keep the youngster at home. That could be done by making GLAS simpler by having two farmers with the same terms and conditions. He is not doing that, rather he is making it more complicated. The beef genomics scheme is complicated. Sad to say, the Minister does not understand what a small farm is because everything is aimed at the big farm. That is not how things will work.

I welcome the relief for microbreweries because this is an avenue by which we can create employment. It is a forward step and we should encourage young entrepreneurs. I also welcome the capital gains relief. These are the kinds of thing that help a society.

The air ambulance service has been announced two or three times this year in connection with Roscommon County Hospital, but, whether a sum of €2 million, €3 million or €4 million is announced, the air ambulance does not fly at night. That is what we have to conquer. To provide the service in the region, never mind one area, we have to make sure it flies at night. It is possible to get helicopters that can be flown at night and we have to make sure we have them for those who need them.

I hope NAMA is watched when it comes to housing. Nobody argues that we do not need housing - we need it urgently - but I am not in favour of modular housing because we will make people from other countries rich while we have all the material, all the know-how and all the skills we need to build houses. If we are facing an obstacle and need to bring in every Member rapidly to pass emergency legislation to ensure houses are built on a greenfield site and without having to import them, we should do it. If we import a house that costs €100,000, it is money that is going out of the country.

Deputy Kevin Humphreys: They are made in Ireland.

Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice: Some are but most are imported. The ones for which prices are being quoted are imported from abroad. If they are made in Ireland, that is good, but in the long term we must ensure there are no obstacles.

Planning is a problem. I first came into the Dáil last year and there has been a full year for people involved in councils throughout the country to get planning applications through, but what have they done? Someone has to answer questions about this. One does not start cooking the dinner when one is ready to eat it. Someone needs to engage in some forward planning.

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There are specific IDA Ireland budgets for buildings or something else in rural Ireland and they are welcome, but we need to provide infrastructure in rural Ireland to lift it off the ground. Credit unions on their own will not revive it. They are one pillar and broadband is another - something we needed yesterday, not tomorrow.

CAP reform is required to make sure the family farm is protected. I was in Brussels yesterday and we need to explore every avenue such as TEN-T funding which is available in adjoining two countries such as Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland. We need to make sure the Government creates the necessary environment in order that we can lift off in different parts of Ireland. The people will do it if given the chance. If we do not create the environment, it will not happen.

There are some good things in the budget. While I would like more of some things, I would not slate every aspect of it. It is a step in the right direction, but there are things I would have included and I have highlighted them as far as I have been able to do so.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: Like the curate's egg, the budget is good in spots. I welcome those aspects of it that give some relief, however late and inadequate it is. I welcome the measure for road hauliers, an issue I raised in the Dáil three weeks ago in a Topical Issue debate. I thank the Ceann Comhairle for allowing me to do so. The Minister did promise and did deliver and road hauliers are very happy about it. They are a vital cog in the machinery of the State because we could not export without them. They are delighted that they will have a level playing field, at last, with their opposition in Northern Ireland and Great Britain.

I welcome the changes to inheritance tax rates. They are also quite slow but necessary, especially in respect of business and the transfer of land.

I welcome the restoration, after four years, of the respite care grant, although it should never have been cut because carers do a lot of good work.

The reduction in the pupil-teacher ratio is welcome, even though it is only by one. It is a welcome step because we need small schools and pupils need to be in classes of fewer than 33 or 34. I also welcome the extra 600 teachers, but when will they be recruited?

I welcome the recruitment of extra gardaí, but it is too little too late. How many are we losing in 2015-16 through natural wastage? They are valuable, experienced officers who have huge experience and knowledge.

Deputy Kevin Humphreys: Does the Deputy want to close down the Garda College in Templemore?

Deputy Mattie McGrath: I wish the new recruits well. I sympathise with the family of the unfortunate Garda Tony Golden who lost his life in the course of duty this week and who will be buried tomorrow. Gardaí have to face such situations as part of their day-to-day work and the community must support An Garda Síochána. When are the new recruits going to have the training and the expertise they will need? We are losing gardaí with experience in areas such as detective work, etc.

There has been no restoration of the household benefits package. There has been no restoration of the telephone allowance. These were mean, desperate cuts. The Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform, Deputy Brendan Howlin, said yesterday that the Labour Party had

made two promises and kept them. It had made and broken 42. It told us that it would burn the bondholders and that it would be “Labour’s way or Frankfurt’s way”. These were mealy-mouthed words from a party in opposition. Does its members think the people have forgotten? They have not.

There is to be no restoration of the bereavement grant. Two years ago the Government taxed the hearse and I said it would tax the shroud this year. It did not, but it nearly did and would do so because that is the kind of mean-spirited attitude it has. It is not the Labour Party I knew which was founded in my own town of Clonmel and included the former Ceann Comhairle, Seán Treacy, John Ryan from north Tipperary and Dan Spring. They were honest-to-goodness people who represented ordinary people, rather than getting into bed and being a mudguard for a Fine Gael-led Government which only looks after the rich. It was the high earners who gained from all of the tax cuts announced yesterday, not those on low or medium incomes. The former will receive some €900 or €1,000 a year, while the latter will only receive approximately €200 a year.

Deputy Kevin Humphreys: Did the Deputy support Fianna Fáil?

Deputy Mattie McGrath: Since 2009 older people in the State and pensioner households have lost €13 per week and now the Government is giving them back €3. Is the Government not wonderful?

Deputy Kevin Humphreys: The Deputy’s maths are not too good.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: I welcome it, but €3 is paltry.

Deputy Kevin Humphreys: What about the Christmas bonus?

Deputy Mattie McGrath: Pensioners are being undermined by the Labour Party, of all parties. The Minister, Deputy Brendan Howlin, holds a prestigious position among the big four in the Government, with the Minister for Finance, Deputy Michael Noonan, the Tánaiste and the Taoiseach, but 100,000 older people are living in deprivation. They are not my words but those of respected organisations and the likes of Fr. Peter McVerry. The Minister for the Environment, Community and Local Government, Deputy Alan Kelly, could not deliver a house yesterday, not even a prefab. He would not deliver a hen house and has been a shambles. There is a housing and homelessness crisis in which people are dying on the streets day after day. Some 2,000 family units were approved in Tipperary, the Minister’s own county, where 5,600 people are on the waiting list, but he has not delivered a dozen houses in his term as Minister. He talks a load of codswallop about the delivery of this and that, but not even a hen house or a tree house has been delivered. His Department and the local authorities will not deliver houses either. The people who can build them are in the voluntary housing sector, but they are being overlooked because there is no profit to be made and none of them is involved in a big company. Somebody else is going to come in and supply prefab houses and they will make profits. As my colleague said, it is not a good idea to create fat cats elsewhere.

NAMA should never have been set up as it does not act in the interests of ordinary people, yet the Minister for Finance is depending on it to deliver 90,000 houses, some 90% of which will be in Dublin and to hell with the rest of the country - anyone outside the Pale does not matter. I am surprised at him, but that is the way the Government has acted. They will probably deliver no more than 90 for their friends who will not sell houses to people. I have a book in my hand entitled, *Waiting for the Sheriff*. That is what hundreds of thousands of people are waiting

for. I know a man in Tipperary who was given an eviction letter yesterday during the Budget Statement of the Minister for Finance. What will he do given that he will be out of his house? He is in a very serious and perilous situation, as are many others throughout the country.

The Government Members have lost sight of the ordinary people and they are in a cocoon. I saw some Government Members last night who were ecstatic with the budget. They must think the people are wicked fools altogether if they are going to believe this. I recognise the effort the Government has made in some areas. I welcome it and give credit where credit is due. However, we need to remember the torture, the inhumanity.

This book contains the names of 90 Government Members who voted for the eviction Bill - the so-called Land and Conveyancing Law Reform Act. It is eviction legislation to make sheriffs and receivers richer and fatter through their disgusting charges. The way they are treating the people is inappropriate by putting members of An Garda Síochána out there, if they have not enough to do, to defend the sheriffs and receivers. It is a low-grade industry that is paralysing people and has no interest in anybody. They are only interested in how much money they can make.

In some cases the wives or partners of the sheriffs are already the highest court officers in the land. It is despicable and disgusting, but it is all fine because they are all friends of Government Members. It is all friends of Government Members who are appointed to the Judiciary. They promised us new politics and a new era of transparency. This is the most non-transparent Government.

When I first became a Member of this House eight years ago we had a budget day and we had everything in the budget. It started to change shortly after I arrived, but now we get the budget the week before. Last Friday night in the middle of a terrible tragedy in Dublin, the Government was able to announce €1.5 billion, a massive Supplementary Estimate, for health. Why can the Minister not be honest with the people who are waiting for four years for an operation in pain and agony? Why can he not put the money into the hospitals? Why can he not support the front-line nurses and doctors? He comes out with his codswallop about having a free GP-visit card for under 12s, without any consultation with the AGP or IMO. He promised to renegotiate a 40-year old contract. He can run but he cannot hide. He cannot bully the people. Thankfully, young children are normally the healthiest people, except for the ones with special needs and serious illnesses.

The Government has savagely taken medical cards from older people and left them to die in agony. We also have the issue with the trolley count. Why will the Minister not deal with those people and give them medical cards when they need them without any duress and trauma? The same applies with special needs assistants in schools.

The Government parties want to look after the rich, the people who fill their coffers, who go to their breakfast mornings and dinners to support them. The Labour Party Members should be ashamed of themselves. They came to Clonmel to hold a conference two years ago and they could not even hold it. That is a sad state of affairs from what used to be an honourable party. Someone said the Labour Party Deputies would come back here after the general election in a minibus. I think they will come back in a hybrid car, which might only be a two-seater, possibly a four-seater or at most a seven-seater. The people are furious with Labour because it has abandoned them. It has abandoned them in the countryside, in the streets of Dublin and everywhere else.

The Government will not pass legislation. On three occasions I introduced a Bill, the Scrap and Precious Metal Dealers Bill, to protect people in their homes. It will not look at the bail laws. It has too many friends who are solicitors and there are too many Cabinet members who are solicitors and barristers. It will not look at free legal aid because it has too many people making too much money out of it. However, it will allow people to be persecuted in their homes in County Tipperary and everywhere else without giving them any protection. It can pass law after law on gay marriage and abortion - anything but legislation to protect and support the citizens of the country who go out and work every day. They are the entrepreneurs in business who give employment and want to give employment. However, the Government wants to stick to its fancy work in legislation - nothing that would put bread and butter on the table. That would not matter to the Labour Party anymore. It is the modern liberal party. It wants to make its dent in government and it has made a fair dent in it, but, by God, it will not be able to make much of a dent after the general election.

As for the Taoiseach, it is enough for me to say Castlebar is closed down. It is a sad town. People are telling me that the gates are locked on the one business and industrial estate, which is a sad indictment. This morning a man told Deputy Fitzmaurice that people cannot walk on the bogs the Government is trying to close down. People have been cutting turf for hundreds of years. We want someone to vindicate our rights and not to be dictated to by Europe and worse still dictated to by officials here in Ireland. Let the people live. They will live if they are let live and not persecuted with taxes after taxes, while big business is being supported. On NAMA, I could think of another acronym to describe it better. I said on the night it was established it was like a wild animal being released in the woods; no one would know where it would end up.

The Government thinks it will deliver 90,000 houses; it will not deliver 90 and they will be for its friends. They will not sell the houses. I spoke about a man being evicted today. It will not sell the house to his brother-in-law because it wants to sell it to its friends. This is disgusting corruption that is going on in this country and the Government should be ashamed of itself.

Deputy Kevin Humphreys: When is the Deputy rejoining Fianna Fáil?

Acting Chairman (Deputy Derek Keating): The Minister for Health, Deputy Leo Varadkar, proposes to share time with the Minister of State, Deputy Kathleen Lynch. Is that agreed? Agreed.

Minister for Health (Deputy Leo Varadkar): I welcome the opportunity to address the House on the budget and the 2016 health Estimates. This is my second year as Minister for Health to address the House on this matter and, as was the case last year, I am pleased to be here to talk about a budget that provides additional funding for public services such as health, education and child care.

The budget will assist in continuing the improvement of the economy. It will create an environment to sustain more jobs, more investment in public services, health, child care, education and more housing, in particular, social housing.

Last year we were able to achieve the first modest budget increase in health service funding in seven years. Additional funding was provided during the course of 2015 to address delayed discharges from acute hospitals, waiting lists and emergency department overcrowding. I am pleased to announce that the Government is asking the Oireachtas to allocate additional Exchequer funding for the health sector for 2016. The gross current budget for the health sector for

2016 is €13.175 billion. This is equivalent to an increase of €880 million compared with the 2015 allocation of €12.295 billion voted through last year. This represents a 7% increase on the budget for 2015 and a 12% increase on the voted budget for 2014. It is an indication of the Government's commitment to addressing the reductions experienced by the health sector arising from the economic downturn.

Our spending ceiling continues to rise and once again, all savings and efficiencies achieved will be available to reinvest in improving health services. Some €817 million will be available to address service pressures. Funding to cover the full-year cost of a number of initiatives commenced in 2015 - commitments under the Lansdowne Road agreement and the programme for Government. The remaining €63 million goes to meet the residual cost of once-off measures introduced in 2015. In addition, savings and efficiencies of €125 million have been identified in the areas of procurement, prescribing and drug costs, bringing the total available to support existing levels of service and new developments to €942 million.

The funding secured will ease the pressure on the health service to continue providing the optimum level of safe services for patients within the budgetary limits. However, it is essential that we continue to focus on cost containment and cost avoidance as there continue to be major cost pressures on the health service. We have an increased and aging population, an increase in chronic conditions, and new expensive medicines and technologies that we must fund.

I am pleased to confirm that there will be no change to hospital or prescription charges, the monthly DPS threshold, or income thresholds for eligibility for medical or GP-visit cards. Funding for the fair deal will be maintained at a level to keep waiting times at a maximum of four weeks. I believe this shows the Government's continuing commitment to stabilising the direct cost of health services for citizens.

I am grateful to my colleagues, the Ministers, Deputies Michael Noonan and Brendan Howlin, for their support and understanding in dealing with the challenges faced by the health sector.

The level of health services to be provided within the available funding will be set out in the HSE's 2016 national service plan which is being prepared by the executive. I want to take the opportunity to outline some of the issues which will be more extensively covered in the service plan. Funding is being provided to reduce delayed discharges from our hospitals and emergency department overcrowding and to provide for ongoing implications of winter capacity planning.

I have taken a personal interest in emergency department overcrowding and have secured €74 million in additional funding this year to alleviate the problem. This funding came on top of measures already taken in budget 2015, when the Government provided €25 million to support services that provide alternatives to, and relieve pressure on, acute hospitals. This has allowed the waiting time for the nursing home support scheme to be reduced from 15 weeks to four, which in turn has reduced delayed discharges in hospitals from 850 to under 600 - it is actually down to 560 today - freeing up 250 acute beds in hospitals. It has also allowed us to open another 150 district hospital beds, including at Mount Carmel community hospital, formerly a private hospital.

More community beds will be opened before the end of the year. It has also allowed us to increase investment in health services and keep patients out of hospital altogether, or allow them to get home earlier, thanks to community intervention teams, day hospitals and acute medical

admission units. This funding rolls into the budget for 2016 in order to continue this initiative.

While we have seen an improvement in patient experience times in our emergency departments, and a fall in numbers of people waiting on a trolley for more than nine hours, morning peak overcrowding has not improved and is still worse than the same point last year. I understand the distress and hardship that all of this is causing to patients and their families and, of course, staff. Further additional funding of €18 million was provided in July for a winter initiative, which starts in a few weeks time. This includes the provision of approximately 30 additional beds in hospitals across the country in November and December. The director general and his team are visiting the worst affected hospitals to see what can be done to address other blockages such as diagnostics and rapid access to outpatient services. It is also clear that we need more weekend discharges, more evening ward rounds to reduce length of stay and for senior decision-makers to review patients shortly after or before admission in order to reduce unnecessary admissions and length of stay. The full year cost of the winter initiative is being provided to run into 2016, as we will need it for that part of the winter also.

In 2015 significant investment was made to improve the standard of care in residential services for people with a disability, through providing enhanced staffing levels and improving the quality and standard of their surroundings. That investment will continue in 2016 to further improve facilities and to advance the policy of de-congregation of institutions and supporting people to live more self-directed lives in the community.

The Government is committed to the negotiation of a comprehensive new GP contract with the Irish Medical Organisation, IMO. The negotiations have commenced and I look forward to them producing results which we can start to implement in 2016. In the context of the talks, the Government yesterday signalled that it was providing for the extension, in the latter part of 2016, of GP care without fees to children aged between six and 11 years. That will be subject to negotiation with the IMO in relation to the scope of the service to be provided and the fee arrangements to apply and will be implemented in the context of overall new arrangements and not as a stand-alone extension or amendment to the current contract.

As clear evidence of the Government's commitment to primary care, funding will be provided in the service plan to expand direct access for GPs to ultrasound and X-ray. It will reduce the need for people to be referred to hospital to access these investigations on an outpatient basis or through the emergency department which currently occurs on occasion.

The Government is committed to the development of a modern, patient-centred, and recovery-orientated mental health service. We are committed, in particular, to reforming our model of delivery in order that more and better quality mental health care is delivered in the community in line with A Vision for Change. Since coming into office, the Government has increased funding by €125 million for mental health and suicide prevention and there will be a further increase in funding in 2016.

I am committed also to improving access to therapy services. Accordingly, funding is being provided, as announced by the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform, Deputy Brendan Howlin, to expand the provision of speech and language therapy within the primary care setting and to support the reorganisation and expansion of speech and language and other therapies under the progressing disability services programme for children and young people. That will include funding for the development of early intervention services to facilitate the inclusion of children with a disability in mainstream preschool settings, which comes under the remit of the

14 October 2015

Minister for Children and Youth Affairs, Deputy James Reilly.

The further improvement of maternity services is a priority for me, and I am pleased to confirm that additional funding will be provided in the service plan for further maternity service developments in 2016. That will include the necessary funding to establish the national women and infants programme, which is intended to drive improvements and standardise care across all 19 maternity units based on the model successfully used previously for the national cancer control programme. In recognition of the fact that there are staffing deficits in maternity hospitals, and our staffing ratios do not compare well internationally, even if outcomes do, funding will be provided to reduce front-line staff pressures through the appointment of additional midwives, consultant obstetricians and gynaecologists.

As promised, development funding will also be provided for necessary posts in the Dublin Midlands Maternity Network, the country's first managed clinical maternity network between the Coombe and Portlaoise hospitals. In addition, resources will be provided to ensure that every maternity unit has a director of midwifery in place, a recommendation of the HIQA report on Portlaoise. Funding will also be provided to establish bereavement teams in all units and to support the implementation of the maternal neonatal clinical management system which is due to be phased in, initially on a pilot basis early next year.

Significant advances have been made in the National Ambulance Service in 2015, in particular, with the opening of the new national emergency operations centre in Tallaght and the establishment of a single control and dispatch system. In 2016, funding will be provided to build on those improvements and, in particular, to address deficits in the provision of services in rural areas as well as the development of community first responder schemes and increasing capacity in intermediate care, critical retrieval and children's ambulance services.

The recently announced capital envelope provides funding to continue the major programme of investment to replace, upgrade and refurbish health care facilities. Over the period 2016 to 2021, a capital allocation of more than €3 billion is being provided. This includes a significant increase in funding of €568 million over the period of the plan. The increased funding available in the later years provides scope for the commitment of additional investment concentrated towards the end of the programme.

In addition to the five priority projects and the wider capital programme, the additional funding will enable further progress in delivering accommodation compliance in many areas of social care. Quality accommodation is important in supporting the needs of older people and people with disabilities who need long-term care. Additional funding of €300 million over the 2016 to 2021 multi-annual period will enable an expanded programme to replace, upgrade and refurbish long-term care facilities.

The further enhancement of maternity services through the co-location of maternity hospitals with adult acute hospitals will also be carried forward. Co-location enables critical care facilities, such as ICU, to be shared, ensures specialists are nearby and that mothers are not separated from their babies if either mother or baby becomes very sick. The increased funding will enable the development of a wider maternity capital programme towards the later years of the programme.

Both my Department and the HSE recognise that continually strengthening accountability and good governance within the health service is of critical importance. For that reason, the

HSE's 2015 national service plan included, at my request, an enhanced accountability framework which makes explicit the responsibilities of all managers to reach the targets set out in the service plan across the balanced scorecard of quality and safety, access, finance, and HR. A key feature of the framework has been the introduction of formal performance agreements at several levels within the HSE and the establishment of a national performance oversight group to serve as the key accountability mechanism for the health service. The group meets with each national director for services each month and completes a full assessment of all key measures across the divisional balanced scorecards. Areas of underperformance are identified and explanations and remedial actions are sought. Where performance does not improve, the matter is escalated according to the escalation and intervention process developed by the HSE, which is up and running since April. At each level of escalation, there is a clear distinction between supports, interventions and sanctions and there is a menu of options available under each heading.

While the escalation and intervention process is still in its early stages, a number of significant improvements in performance have been made as a result of the level of focus and scrutiny placed on areas of underperformance. These include improvements in the number of child and adolescent mental health patients waiting for more than 12 months for a first appointment and a reduction in the number of patients waiting for more than four weeks for an urgent colonoscopy. Recently, the HSE has begun to take measures against some hospitals that are not meeting their targets in respect of waiting times for inpatient and outpatient treatment.

The need for ongoing strengthened accountability and good governance within the HSE, voluntary hospitals and other voluntary bodies remains of critical importance in 2016. The HSE is involved in an ongoing review of the accountability framework, which will focus on its operation, effectiveness and application throughout the organisation to date in 2015. The review will identify the changes that are required in order to improve the process and will examine, in particular, the intervention and support processes in place to address areas of underperformance. The outcome will be reflected in the HSE's 2016 national service plan which will detail how the executive intends to develop and build on the framework in 2016 to further enhance and strengthen accountability arrangements next year.

Before concluding I acknowledge the hard work and dedication of health care staff throughout the country who provide a good service in what can be very challenging circumstances. There are problems with the health service but there are also many positive elements which too often get overlooked. We must maintain our focus on improving the way services are organised and delivered and reduce costs in order to minimise any negative effect on service provision. We have secured an increase in funding for the health service but I do not underestimate the challenges involved in the delivery of a safe, efficient health service for Irish patients. I remain focused on meeting the challenge in the months ahead.

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Kathleen Lynch): The additional funding for the Department of Health this year will ensure services are provided for people on a daily basis. As the Minister correctly pointed out at the end of his contribution, the majority of people who interact with the health service have a very good experience. That is because we have an incredibly well qualified and excellent workforce across the range of health services.

The areas for which I have responsibility are mental health, disabilities, older people and primary care, which are an integral part of the health service. The Minister referred to his commitment to maternity services. We are now reviewing the implementation of A Vision for Change in order to ensure we do not have the gaps which were there in the past. A Vision for

Change will come to an end next year and we intend to ensure another plan is in place to continue on from where it finishes. It will not be a completely new plan but it most definitely will build on what already is there. In this respect, we intend to take a serious look at a perinatal psychiatry service. It always strikes me that Ireland does not appear to have the same level of postnatal depression as do other countries, which cannot possibly be true. It simply is because we do not look for it here and the provision of that new service will ensure it will be possible to do so. As for the additional funding for mental health services in the coming year, substantial changes already have been made. It is a service in transition and that is changing dramatically from an institution-based service to a community one that sometimes uses an acute unit service when that is necessary. Next year, the priority will be on primary care and for the first time ever, the primary care and mental health services will be sitting at the same table. It always has astonished me that this had not been done previously but it will be done now. Moreover, we will ensure an expansion of the type of services we started to deliver last year in primary care. I refer to services such as counselling in primary care for the over 18s where people with mild to moderate depression who attend at their GP can be transferred directly into counselling without being obliged to first present to the acute service or the psychiatric services. This counselling service worked so well it ran out of money and the figures are quite incredible in this regard. Last year, there were more than 10,000 referrals and more than 31,000 sessions were delivered, albeit not all by people who work for the Health Service Executive, HSE, but by a range of counsellors within the community. Next year, we intend to expand that service and to ensure people under 18 equally have access to it. It should not always be the case that people who have difficulty with their emotional or psychological well-being automatically end up in the mental health services as there are other routes and we intend to ensure that such people can take them.

As for psychology in primary care, there is a shortage and an underdevelopment of psychology services across the country, which has resulted in reduced access to initial assessment. Better access will help to prevent the escalation of presentation to specialist services. At a human level, early diagnosis and intervention can lead to better mental health outcomes and a better quality of life and this is something to which all Members can commit. I am committed to developing a more fit-for-purpose primary care psychology service, which will be a stepped-care model integrated with the specialist service to enhance the service and reduce waiting times. I have asked the HSE to examine how counselling psychologists and clinical psychologists can contribute to developing the primary care psychology service. I have been concerned for some time that because the only psychologists mentioned in *A Vision for Change* are clinical psychologists, they appear to be the only people we are intent on employing, even though the HSE always has employed counselling psychologists and they work extraordinarily well. We seriously examined the waiting list for the child and adolescent mental health services, CAMHS, and discovered there were ways to reduce that list and lessen the amount of time people will spend on it. Sometimes it is not all about resources but thankfully, significant resources are available in respect of mental health.

As for speech and language therapies, the Government has committed an additional €8 million to provide therapeutic services for children. This will be targeted at young children with a disability to enable them to go to preschool. It also will address a more general need of those under 18 who need speech and language occupational therapy and psychotherapy. Speech and language therapy interventions can make the difference between a child integrating in social and educational settings and that child remaining isolated.

I always have maintained that one solution to overcrowded hospitals is within the commu-

nity. While it is not the entire solution, it most definitely is part of it. I intend to continue to ensure that all departments with responsibility in the primary care setting come together, such as primary care in respect of mental health, as they must be at the same table. It is a service that must be delivered in primary care but by the mental health service. Moreover, when it comes to children and the National Educational Psychological Service, NEPS, again this sort of interaction and integration must happen. We have made incredible strides in ensuring that older people who need long-term care will have that more readily and I intend to ensure this continues as it is. The Government is making progress but people must accept the progress it is making is about changing a system fundamentally, which takes time.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Alan Farrell): I understand Deputy Billy Timmins is sharing time.

Deputy Billy Timmins: I am sharing time with Deputies Róisín Shortall, Thomas P. Broughan and Peter Mathews.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Alan Farrell): Is that agreed? Agreed.

Deputy Billy Timmins: While the Minister for Health is in the Chamber, I wish to make a request of him. I have made it in the past and it would cost little or no money, namely, a requirement for medical professionals who must deliver bad news to do so in an appropriate manner and in an appropriate location. I interact repeatedly with people who have received bad news or whose family has received bad news in a corridor in a less than compassionate manner. In Britain, there is a standard mechanism to do this and while people may be obliged to attend a course or whatever, this is a matter I would like the Minister to take up.

I almost feel as though a campaign slogan or poster slogan is coming over me, that is, “Make work pay; continue the recovery”. Between them, the Taoiseach’s two speeches mentioned this perhaps ten or 15 times, as did each Minister who spoke. It is good to see the focus group is alive and well and the Government is adhering to the strict instructions it gets to utter the slogan, “Make work pay; continue the recovery” at every hand’s turn. As for budgets, I must be honest and state I am not someone who really buys into the concept of budget day. Yesterday, for example, Members came into the Chamber to hear the Budget Statement but for several days or weeks beforehand, most of the information was in the media. It obviously was given out deliberately by handlers to soften up and manipulate the public. Members of one political party had extensive documentary details of the budget to hand in the Chamber before the speeches actually took place. Indeed, they had them as they made their way into the Chamber.

On the expenditure side, it is important to realise that what was under discussion yesterday was €770 million, yet total Government expenditure is approximately €55 billion. The entire focus is brought to bear on the aforementioned €770 million and the big picture is missed. I acknowledge there were many things one likes to see, such as the increase in child benefit, the land transfer proposals for farmers, the 2,260 new teachers, the return of the respite grants, the old age pension increase and the preschool measures. In many respects, these are all welcome in their own right but this misses the bigger picture.

If Members really wish to make work pay, they must consider the tax system. Renua Ireland has put forward a proposal for a new flat tax system and I urge people to familiarise themselves with it because it will improve access to employment and will make work pay. It will make employees work more hours and will make employers create more employment because ulti-

mately, before the Government gives money for anything, it must take it away from someone. I do not believe it is fair that 50% of additional income is being taken away from people and irrespective of what is their income, it must be fair. As one hears constantly, Ireland has a progressive tax system but it also is a penal tax system. Renua Ireland proposes a progressive and fair tax system. While we want to look after vulnerable people, we also want to address why people are in the welfare trap. I acknowledge the closing of the anomaly at the lower end of the pay scale which has existed for the last couple of years and which prevented people from taking on employment. However, the only way in which the welfare trap and low pay really can be addressed is through the mechanism of changing fundamentally the tax system. I would like people to familiarise themselves with the flat tax system. Renua has brought forward a proposal for a flat tax rate of 23% across the board with a graduated basic income. Members should check the figures; it does work. It would leave the Exchequer approximately €3.5 billion short of the intake from income tax at present but based on factors such as tax shelters, increased economic activity and the reduction in the black economy, Renua is more than confident, based on tried and tested models and experience elsewhere, that it would work.

In a nutshell, much was omitted from the budget. There is nothing in it about mortgage arrears or Irish Water. In terms of the capital expenditure on health, I would like funding to be made available in the next few weeks for St. Colman's Hospital which is in my constituency. While the aspirations around housing are fine in theory I am not sure they will work. I do not believe the Government and NAMA have thought out their proposal for the construction of thousands of additional housing over the next few years. I do not know if any concrete plan in this regard has been put in place.

In a nutshell, in putting all the emphasis on delivery of an election budget the Government has missed the bigger picture.

Deputy Róisín Shortall: I welcome the opportunity to contribute to this debate and thank Deputy Billy Timmins for sharing time with me. Having listened to all of the pre-budget hype and all of the speeches made yesterday one gets the strong sense of history repeating itself. This budget would do Bertie Ahern proud. It is very much a pre-election budget. It is a budget aimed at spreading the small amount of jam available as thinly as possible in order to buy different cohorts of voters. It shows little foresight in terms of the need to tackle some of the key problems in this country and the need to engage in long-term planning. It is extraordinary that despite all of the awfulness arising out of the recession and all of the talk at the time that these things could never be allowed to happen again we are getting back into the dangerous territory of budgets being used to buy votes, with no consideration of their impact on the country in the long term. Not only is there no appreciation in this budget of the need for long-term planning, it shows no ambition for the country in terms of reform or vision in relation to the type of country we want Ireland to be.

The decision to split the €1.5 billion available on a 50:50 basis between tax cuts and investment in services was a very serious mistake. During the recession the split between cuts in services and increases in tax was 2:1, which was an indication that this Government favoured the slashing of public services. Only one third of the adjustment went towards tax increases. The money available should not be split in that way. Given what happened to services during the recession all the available funding should have been invested in restoring our services to an acceptable level.

The burden of taxation over recent years has been shifted away from the better off to people

on low and modest incomes. With the slashing of services came increases in VAT which made the cost of living much more expensive, the imposition of property tax and water charges and, for many older people, the loss of the waiver in respect of waste charges. Many of the additional charges imposed on people remain in place. The Government should have taken this opportunity to re-invest in the types of services that are important to people. In terms of the shortcomings of those services, according to the statistics there are 500,000 people on waiting lists for hospital services; 130,000 people on local authority housing lists and the number of children living in consistent poverty has doubled over the period of the recession. There are also lengthy waiting lists for social workers because of the under-funding of Tusla. There are a vast number of services that need to be reinstated but, unfortunately, the Government has taken a very short term view in that regard. This budget is all about the upcoming general election.

One of the most stark elements of the budget is the fact that despite the huge problems in our health service, the Government is providing only an additional €18 million in that area. That the same level of allocation is made in respect of the commemoration programme for next year as is made in the health area says a lot. Housing is another major area that has been overlooked. The budget makes no provision in regard to rent certainty and does nothing to bring on-stream vacant properties that could be utilised to help tackle the housing problem.

This budget is a missed opportunity. What the Government has done in regard to taxation cuts is regressive. Yet again we have a budget from the Government that will substantially widen the gap between rich and poor.

Deputy Thomas P. Broughan: With the impending general election the long suffering people finally got some respite yesterday from the implacable austerity forced on them since late 2008. In my own submission a few weeks to the Minister for Finance, Deputy Michael Noonan, and Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform, Deputy Brendan Howlin, I called again for many of the positive social expenditure measures that have been included in the Government's final budget in office. Among these, which it would be churlish not to acknowledge, are the extension of the early childhood care and education scheme from three years and two months to primary school entry, the restoration of the respite care grant to €1,700, the increase in the fuel allowance to €22.50, the partial restoration of child benefit by €5 and the investment in education to slightly reduce the pupil-teacher-ratio from 27:1 for primary schools and 18.7:1 for second level students.

Senior constituents, some of whom I, along with the Minister of State, Deputy Aodhán Ó Ríordáin, met in Dublin Bay North this morning, were not greatly enthused by the €3 per week increase in pensions, even if it is the first rise since 2009. This partial restoration of levels of benefit and income for the most vulnerable after seven years of brutal austerity cannot undo the damage already done to households and individuals.

The biggest disappointment of budget 2016 is, as my colleague Deputy Róisín Shortall said, the Government's failure, particularly the Labour Party, to declare a housing emergency. The plan for NAMA to deliver 20,000 housing units by the end of 2020, with 90% to be delivered in Dublin, is simply a re-run of the old failed developer-led system. Ministers plan to give responsibility for the urgent construction of tens of thousands of homes to developers who built so many substandard fire-traps up to 2009 and have sat on their land banks while they emerged from bankruptcy, supported by us, the taxpayers and NAMA covering up for their reckless failures. The paltry increase of €20 million to ensure 3,000 social housing units are delivered in 2016 will assist only 3% or less of the citizens and households on housing waiting lists. The

increase of €69 million for social housing is also paltry when the actual housing budget of €414 million remains less than one quarter or one fifth of what is actually needed. There was nothing announced yesterday in regard to rent certainty, except for the Tánaiste's statement that it has all been decided. Why was this most critical issue not included in the budget?

One of the most ludicrous announcements yesterday from the Minister, Deputy Brendan Howlin, was that the overall budget for health has been restored to pre-crash levels of over €13 billion. However, he was contradicted by the Minister for Health, Deputy Leo Varadkar, who rightly said that the health budget is at least €1 billion off its pre-crash peak in nominal terms. The Department of Health budget was decimated during the austerity years and while the spend is €13.2 billion, how much has been lost cumulatively since 2008? How does one quantify the suffering of patients on waiting lists, in chaotic accident and emergency departments and the desperately hard-pressed staff trying to care for them? There was no mention in the current or capital budgets about the urgently needed new accident and emergency department for Beaumont Hospital.

As stated by Deputy Billy Timmins, there is nothing in this budget about the elephant in the room, namely, Irish Water. Citizens want to know how much more of taxpayers' money will be pumped into this direly malfunctioning utility. The ferocious vice-grip of the EU expenditure rules was again evident in the 2016 budget for the Department of Social Protection in terms of the retention of the cap on social protection spending at under €19 billion. Increases for this year are based on increases in the Social Insurance Fund.

I put forward options in my own budget submission to gain significant yields for the Exchequer from fair additional taxation, which I am sure, along with other proposals from this side of the House, ended up in the bottom draw of the Minister for Finance. Among my suggestions was the introduction of a 48% rate of tax on incomes over €100,000; a financial transaction tax, FTT, starting with an increase in stamp duty on shares; a solidarity and reparations tax on financial institutions; and a fully effective 12.5% corporation tax. A few weeks ago, Deputy Róisín Shortall highlighted during parliamentary questions the additional revenue that an effective rate of corporation tax would provide.

In his closing remarks yesterday, the Minister, Deputy Brendan Howlin, asked, "Who speaks of Syriza now?" This incredible hubris was apparently prompted by the crushing euro restructuring settlement imposed on Alex Tsipras and his Government by Chancellor Merkel and company, but there is a huge difference between Alex Tsipras's Government and the Government of the Taoiseach which the Greek people recently recognised in their recent re-election of Syriza. Syriza at least tried to renegotiate with the Eurogroup. This outgoing Government never even tried and its failure to even try will result in a huge loss of seats next spring.

6 o'clock

Acting Chairman (Deputy Alan Farrell): The next speaker is Deputy Peter Mathews who has four minutes and 40 seconds. That is the time allocation, as the Deputy is well aware.

Deputy Peter Mathews: Yes, I know. It is pathetic. We are given no chance to speak in Parliament on behalf of the people who elected us on the day the budget is announced and now I am being shoehorned into a absurd timeslot of a little over four minutes. It is disgraceful. It is in the gift of the Taoiseach and his Government to say we will relax the rules a little for this important debate on the course the people will take for the next year.

Where is the imagination in the budget? Where is the courage? It is nowhere to be seen because proper stock has not been taken of the resources, incomes and wealth in this country in setting the scene for the plan for next year. It has been a failure of the Department of Finance and advisers not to point out that in the past 25 years the returns on wealth and capital have been steady every year, at 6% to 8% without fail. Where has there been even a timid effort made to ask corporate multinationals to pay their share for the services they enjoy in setting up here? The wealth of the 300 wealthiest people in the country has grown by €15 billion in one year. The 6% growth in GDP that the Government vaunts amounts to a figure of €10.8 billion, yet the Government states the taxation system is fair - not a bit of it.

David McWilliams has made a documentary in film form that is easy to follow by anybody who does not have the time or perhaps the ability to read the authoritative books recently produced by Joseph Stiglitz and Thomas Piketty such as *The Price of Inequality*. The price of inequality in Ireland is 38,000 households who are in deep distress and mortgage arrears and who should at least have the option of availing of a one-year bankruptcy term to become citizens who would no longer be imprisoned for the rest of their lives. They are at breaking point in terms of their health and even their very lives. It is disgraceful that such a Bill is not at the top of the list of legislation. David McWilliams correctly shows that the top 5% in terms of wealth own half of the wealth of the country and that the top 20% own 80% of it. The bottom 20% own only 0.26%. That is the reality. That is very different from what people think - they think the top 20% own 60%. The ideal, in a poll of 1,000 people, was that the top 20% should own about 30%. The Government has done nothing to address these realities. It is timid. We hear phrases such as “it is about decent jobs and fair wages”, but people are seeking additional temporary work to pay for-----

Acting Chairman (Deputy Alan Farrell): The Deputy’s time has expired.

Deputy Peter Mathews: I am taking a further 30 seconds. They are doing this to pay for light, heat, food, fuel and transport. Overworked nurses are taking on second jobs in hotels and pubs because the wages they receive are not sufficient to cover their cost of living.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Alan Farrell): The Deputy’s time is exhausted. His microphone has been turned off.

Deputy Peter Mathews: They will end up exhausted instead of being refreshed to look after their patients.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Alan Farrell): I ask the Deputy to, please, take his seat.

Deputy Peter Mathews: I want to say again-----

Acting Chairman (Deputy Alan Farrell): The Deputy’s microphone has been turned off.

Deputy Peter Mathews: The reporter is present.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Alan Farrell): I ask the Deputy to, please, take his seat immediately.

Deputy Peter Mathews: It is wrong that Independent Deputies do not have an opportunity to speak.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Alan Farrell): With the greatest of respect to the Deputy, he

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spent 20% of his allotted time making that point. He, therefore, ate into his own time. I will not ask him again to, please, take his seat. His time has expired.

I understand the Minister for Justice and Equality is sharing the next speaking slot with the Ministers of State, Deputies Tom Hayes and Gerald Nash.

Minister for Justice and Equality (Deputy Frances Fitzgerald): Recent days have been a very dark period for An Garda Síochána and highlight the dangers the men and women of the force face every day in the service of their communities and country. The fact that a garda has laid down his life while selflessly protecting the community is a cause of great sadness. I know that all Deputies join me in extending sincere condolences to the family of Garda Anthony Golden, his friends and colleagues in Omeath Garda station and the entire Louth division and all members of An Garda Síochána. This is a very difficult time for all of the family and his colleagues and I know that the thoughts and prayers of the people of Ireland are with them. Of course, An Garda Síochána and all of us will see what lessons can be learned from last Sunday evening's dreadful events in the light of the full Garda investigation into them. For now one thing is crystal clear: Garda Golden behaved in an exemplary manner in trying to protect the community and the nation mourns him.

Yesterday I announced details of the 2016 Estimates for the justice and equality sector, including the provision of an additional €89 million in current expenditure for the sector in budget 2016. In total, €2.264 billion in current expenditure and €130 million in capital expenditure will be provided in 2016 across the justice group of Votes. This budget allocation for the justice sector will help gardaí to tackle crime and support vital reforms and development in An Garda Síochána and across a range of agencies.

The total allocation for An Garda Síochána in 2016 will be €1.5 billion, which includes over €67 million in additional funding. More importantly, this funding will allow the recruitment of 600 new gardaí in 2016, in addition to the 550 recruited since September 2014. The ongoing recruitment of new gardaí is crucial for An Garda Síochána and also for the safety of communities throughout Ireland. The Government reopened the Garda College in Templemore in 2014. It was effectively closed by the previous Government in 2009. With this budget allocation we are delivering on our promise to ensure it will not close again. I said there would be ongoing continuous recruitment and the Government has provided the funding to allow that to happen.

I point out that the additional recruitment and budget allocation for surveillance and special operations builds on the current high level of investment in Garda vehicles, as well as recent announcements. It is worth recalling that since 2012 the Government has invested €29 million in new Garda vehicles; 370 new vehicles have come on stream since the start of this year; €46 million has been allocated in the Government's capital framework 2016-21 for the provision of new Garda vehicles; and €700,000 was recently allocated for the purchase of specialist vehicles to support gardaí in tackling highly mobile gangs. Criminal gangs change their methods. We must ensure we have a police force capable of responding to the new challenge, threats and methods these criminals gangs employ. Up to €1.75 million was recently allocated for the upgrade of the Garda air surveillance unit, another important tool, to interrupt the work of criminal gangs and deal effectively with them.

An additional €205 million has been allocated in the Government's capital framework for the development of Garda technology and information and communications technology, ICT, systems. The Garda Inspectorate's report highlighted the need for this last year and we are now

putting in place the type of ICT needed to respond effectively. I have announced extra funding for additional civilian experts to be recruited to develop and roll out this ICT investment programme.

I am working with the Garda Commissioner who will be announcing new initiatives to deal with crime and burglaries in urban and rural areas. Funding has been provided in the budget for these initiatives. Grants are being doubled for crime prevention measures to support Community Alert and Crimestoppers. These measures have been effective so far and will have their total allocation doubled to €397,000 in 2016.

Deputies will welcome the 21% increase in funding to be provided for the Victims of Crime Office, which will bring its total budget to almost €1.5 million in 2016. Funding for Cosc, the National Office for the Prevention of Domestic, Sexual and Gender-based Violence, will increase from €1.9 million to €2.4 million. It will aid Cosc in its efforts to combat domestic violence by reaching out to victims to ensure nobody suffers in silence. A new national strategy to deal with domestic, sexual and gender-based violence will be announced shortly.

The budget includes an additional allocation of €1.3million to recruit additional staff for Forensic Science Ireland to allow for necessary expansion following the forthcoming introduction of the DNA database.

I welcome the allocation of €109 million for the Courts Service, including an additional provision of over €1.75 million which will allow for additional staffing. This will support the delivery of an effective courts system and help in reducing court delays which are a current difficulty.

Legislation is going through the Dáil which will see the establishment of a new independent policing authority, the most radical change in policing since the foundation of the State. Funding of €2.7 million has been allocated for the establishment of the authority. I thank Ms Josephine Feehily for agreeing to be the independent chairperson of the new body. The process of selecting board members is well under way with the Public Appointments Service.

Over €9 million is being allocated in budget 2016 for the Garda Síochána Ombudsman Commission, GSOC, to enable it to deliver its important mandate. It is important we have an independent complaints mechanism. GSOC fulfils that role and it is important that it can do so effectively and efficiently.

The Charities Regulatory Authority will receive an additional allocation of over €1.2 million, bringing its total budget to €2.7 million. We are in the position to fund these services because we have a stable economy. If we did not, we would not be able to make the investment in all of these critical and essential areas. People know that it is important to have an effective functioning Charities Regulatory Authority. We saw recently, when we had several scandals with charities, how important it was to have that regulatory function. We now have it and can fund it because we have the stable economy that leads to investment in services.

Additional staffing for the Probation Service will allow for an increase in its use of supervised community sanctions for first-time and non-violent offenders. We need to do this to create the places in prison for serious and serial offenders who should be in prison.

The Legal Aid Board and the Office of the Data Protection Commissioner will be supported. Up to €332 million will be available to the Irish Prison Service. The Department supports the

work of the National Women's Council of Ireland which does critical work in the area of equality, reaching out to victims and ensuring the needs of more marginalised groups are addressed.

Funding needed for the Irish refugee protection programme will be provided. The Government has been supportive with the initiatives it has taken in this regard. We will have the Syrian and Eritrean refugees arriving before the end of the year and throughout next year. Funding has been provided for this purpose.

The budget delivers on my commitment to ensuring the Garda, as well as the entire justice system, is staffed, supported, resourced and well managed to deliver an effective service for the 21st century and to tackle the realities of crime in communities, both urban and rural. The budget is important because it points to the recovery that is under way. While the recovery is fragile, we must ensure it continues through this type of investment. We know that the best way to ensure it continues is to make work pay and support families. We have taken many workers out of the universal social charge and minimum wage net. We are extending free preschool services in order that all children will qualify from the age of three years. We are introducing a new €550 tax credit for the self-employed, cutting commercial road tax and increasing weekly pension rates by 3%. This is a good budget for Ireland, all workers, all families and the people. I commend it to the House.

Minister of State at the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Tom Hayes): In the past eight years the agrifood sector has been a beacon of light on the dark landscape of recession and crisis. We are now standing on the crest of enormous new possibilities with the ending of milk quotas. We can see the bright future this promises in economic growth, the social development of rural areas and jobs for the people. The beef sector is expanding, with markets opening up all over the world, particularly in China and the United States. This augurs well for the future of the agriculture industry which will bring enormous benefits to rural areas.

Up to €113.8 million will be made available under the forestry programme in 2016. This will provide for existing premia payments and support the planting of approximately 7,000 ha of new forests. These new forests, in addition to their eventual value as a raw material for the processing industry, will make an important contribution towards meeting climate emission targets through carbon sequestration and fossil fuel replacement. The removal of forestry income from the high earners restriction for active foresters and farmers is a significant measure in support of national forestry policy. This is a progressive move, the benefits of which will be felt long into the future. Forestry is of major economic importance in rural Ireland, as well as providing social and recreational benefits. It also plays a significant role environmentally in carbon sequestration, the potential of biomass energy and the preservation of biodiversity and natural habitats. Up to 12,000 people are employed in the sector which has a significant impact on many areas. Large areas of marginal land could be used for forestry. The budget announced yesterday will make it an even more profitable sector in which to be involved.

Food safety is perhaps the most important issue for the sector and a major focus of the work of my Department. Our high standards provide the platform for all our other opportunities. An allocation of €83.2 million for food safety and animal and plant health, including €34 million for TB eradication and ongoing brucellosis testing and €5.5 million for animal welfare, is included in the Department's Vote for 2016.

I am delighted that an additional €1.2 million is being provided in 2016 for the greyhound

sector. This brings total Exchequer funding for greyhound racing to €14.8 million in 2016. This additional funding should be used to encourage participation in the sport. I will be asking Bord na gCon to give that money back in prize money to encourage all the small breeders up and down the country to get involved in this business, which has a great future. It will create approximately 10,000 jobs across rural Ireland.

The commercial horticulture sector has gained €4.3 million. This is so important for the development of that sector, which will be able to substitute imports. Some €12 million has been provided for the organic farming sector. This sector has enormous growth potential. On Monday I stood in a supermarket in Germany which wants to get more Irish organic food. There is huge potential in this area, which is something I welcome.

Minister of State at the Department of Jobs, Enterprise and Innovation (Deputy Gerald Nash): The budget announced yesterday represented a key milestone for the country and its citizens. After many arduous years brought about by the profligacy of the previous Government, the fruits of the hard won economic recovery the Government has delivered have enabled us to plan for the type of social recovery we all want to see so badly. When I speak of a balanced recovery, I do not speak merely of a recovery spread geographically across the country or one which is merely spread into every economic sector. I also mean a recovery for every household, cohort and single socioeconomic group. Yesterday, in that context, I signed an order to increase the rate of the national minimum wage by 50 cent an hour from 1 January. The Government has accepted the advice of the Low Pay Commission, which I established, and ensured that the employee and employer PRSI issues highlighted by the commission in its report to me in July have been addressed. By the time this Dáil is dissolved next spring, we will have twice increased the rate of the national minimum wage during the lifetime of the Government, increasing the pay of a full-time worker on the national minimum wage by a cumulative €60 per week or more than €3,000 per year.

Job creation continues to be my first priority and that of the Government. During the crisis, we suffered one of the largest job losses in the advanced industrialised world. We lost 22% of all full-time jobs over a very short period of time. However, the creation of 130,000 in just three years and the fall in unemployment to 9.4% from a peak in 2012 of more than 15% really is an incredible turnaround, but that work is far from done and we are committed to reaching full employment by 2018 and to building on that to ensure we have an overall participation rate in the workforce of 70% by 2026. Alongside this drive towards full employment, I am committed to making work pay. We have no interest in jobs at any price. We will not stand over a recovery that is simply a race to the bottom in terms of pay and terms and conditions of employment.

I have reformed industrial relations laws in this country to ensure workers, through their trade unions, have the legal right to collectively bargain with their employers. Registered employment agreements have been restored and we have introduced a new system of sectoral employment orders. These systems represent not only an opportunity for the economy to continue to grow at a sustainable rate but also an opportunity to ensure industrial peace and that working people are fairly compensated for their hard work and the contribution they make to their enterprises. As Minister of State with responsibility for business and employment, I am acutely aware of the need to balance employment protection and job creation, but the bottom line is that workers need and are entitled to decent pay and basic security in their employment. Neither side wins when employment is insecure and employers are undercut by other firms using exploitative working practices. That is why the increase in the national minimum wage is

such an important expression by the Government of our commitment to low-paid workers.

As a direct result, from 1 January, 120,000 low-paid workers across the economy will see an increase in their pay packets. For those working full-time, they will see a gross increase of €1,000 a year. A single person working full-time on the minimum wage will take home an extra €708 per annum, or €14 per week, as a result of the changes announced yesterday to the national minimum wage. Allied with this introduction on 1 January, we will have adjustments to the universal social charge and PRSI which will ensure they take home that increase. A married couple with a single income, on the national minimum wage, will see themselves €911 better off per year, which is the equivalent of €18 extra in their pockets every week. I am very pleased that in budget 2016, we have delivered the increase in the national minimum wage alongside the changes to PRSI and the universal social charge. We are consistently seeking to make work pay and to ensure work is always a positive option for people.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Alan Farrell): The next speaking slot is for a Fianna Fáil Member. Deputy Colm Keaveney has 20 minutes.

Deputy Colm Keaveney: An allowance of 20 minutes speaking time is very generous on the part of the Acting Chairman and I am grateful to him for it.

A tweet was placed by *thejournal.ie* yesterday saying that an anonymous Labour Party Deputy - they were all anonymous until the past number of weeks because they belong to the anonymity party - had quipped that the budget was good and that I, as a consequence, would possibly consider returning to the anonymous party. I can tell the Labour Party, in its glorious anonymity, that I remain to this day incredibly embarrassed about my association with it. I am as embarrassed today as I was the day I quit its ranks. In December 2012, I voted against budget measures that were nothing less than an attack on those on the lowest incomes in this country. Families struggling to put food on the table and into the lunch boxes of their children going to school were attacked by the Government in that budget. The context then was the same as that of today. I say that because child poverty has increased significantly since the Government entered into office in 2011. What the Government has done since 2011 is equivalent to the robbing of a woman's umbrella in the midst of a heavy rain shower and then the seeking of credit and gratitude from the public for the sun coming out. The Government is demanding gratitude from the drenched lady, saying it is sorry for robbing the umbrella.

There have been cuts after cuts, of which only two have been reversed. Some 40 cuts were initiated by the Labour Party over the course of the period 2011 to 2015 and yet today, we have what constitutes a perverse recollection of the situation over the course of that reference period during which the most draconian attacks took place on the poorest communities in this country. These attacks have inflicted enormous damage on the social fabric of our society precisely at a time when vulnerable people needed a Government which would protect a threshold of decency and defend them and their views within it.

Yesterday, the Government announced the restoration of the respite care grant. Fianna Fáil has called for its restoration over the course of the past few years. However, let us not have Fine Gael or its anonymous colleagues in government crow that this constitutes a reversal of the savage, regressive cuts made in the area of social protection because the vast majority remain untouched. There were 40 cuts, yet we have members of the anonymous party somersaulting on the plinth saying, "We are back in business." It has only reversed two of the 40 cuts. It is hardly worth the celebration taking place on the plinth. The statistics do not lie. CSO figures

show that the at-risk-of-poverty rate rose by 14.4% during the reference period of 2009 to 2013. The level of consistent poverty rose from 4.2% to 8.2%, while the level of deprivation increased in the same reference period from 13% to 31%. These figures are shocking and a shocking indictment of a Government. However, instead of feeling any shame, the cause of celebration about being back in business is that the Labour Party has adjusted two of the 40 cuts. That party now claims to be a social democratic party and is boasting that this is a significant achievement in government.

During the general election campaign in 2011 the Taoiseach and the now absent Deputy Eamon Gilmore promised to prioritise disability services. How hollow that rings when we saw, prior to the recess and a sitting of the Dáil this year, people with profound disabilities camped yet again outside the gates of Leinster House to secure the protection of personal assistants. They have done it consistently from 2011 through to 2015, yet the Government has repeatedly attacked the capacity of people with disabilities. It has ensured their participation has been challenged. I ask it to state why it has failed to advance ratification of the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. It has failed to advance any human rights cause with respect to the equality of people with disabilities.

The motto of the Government has been, “yes to equality”, but only for some. Orwell’s *Animal Farm* comes to mind - all are equal but some are more equal than others. Economic equality or equality that costs the Exchequer a penny will be resisted. Ultimately, it will be refused and blocked. Despite the promises made prior to the last general election by the Taoiseach and Deputy Eamon Gilmore, the cause of people with disabilities over the course of the past four years has been horrific. There is little respite in budget 2016 for people with disabilities. The €3 increase in pensions does not apply to those in receipt of invalidity pension or blind pension. People with disabilities saw all of their services eroded in the years from 2011 to 2013. This is a group that is vulnerable to poverty and social exclusion. They do not have equality.

Deputy Paudie Coffey: The Deputy joined the party that cut them.

Deputy Ann Phelan: Fianna Fáil cut the rate by 8%.

Deputy Colm Keaveney: Why is the Government resisting signing the convention? Why is it paying lip-service to people with disabilities? The budget failed to restore the housing adaptation grant that was cut for people with disabilities.

Deputy Paudie Coffey: We restored it.

Deputy Colm Keaveney: You cut it and instigated an attack on people with disabilities. You smile here today at your own cuts. How dare you? How dare you smirk at people with disabilities?

Deputy Paudie Coffey: I am smiling at how the Deputy ran when it got too hot for him.

Deputy Colm Keaveney: You and your backbenchers smirk and giggle. You cut the adaptation grant for people with disabilities and the most that could be offered to them was a cold cup of coffee. You were the architect of the cut for people with disabilities. How dare you smirk?

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Can we have order, please? Will the Deputy, please, through the Chair?

Deputy Colm Keaveney: The budget failed to restore the housing adaptation grant that he cut. We have led in this area and called for its restoration in our pre-budget submission. There has been no alternative and there is no evidence of one in any line of the proposed budget. Even the mobility grant has been cut by those on the other side of the Chamber, yet the Government launched an announcement last week on the integration of people into the employment market, without any cognisance being taken of the capacity of somebody to get to work. It has singled out the most vulnerable people in society, people with disabilities who have been overlooked in the budget. Much of the infrastructure required by them to lead an independent, equal life and to be brought from the periphery to the centre was dismantled by the Government. The adaptation grant for people with disabilities to make it possible for them get into a shower was cut by the Minister of State. That is his legacy.

The commitment of the Government to mental health services is questionable, to say the least. There has been no mention of mental health services in the budget in the past 48 hours, which is quite telling. There is no mention of disability or mental health services. It goes far in telling us what the Government's priorities are and about its type of recovery - leaving people behind. Its instinct for self-preservation kicks in at the cost of mental health services and the most vulnerable people in society. The health allocation announced yesterday includes no reference to disability or mental health services. That is in sharp contrast to the commitments the Government made prior to 2011.

In terms of mental health services, we have real cause for concern. Every year since 2011 the Government has broken its commitment to deliver ring-fenced funding of €35 million for the development of a community mental health service, the virtual ward in the community. It has not happened. Last year 500 people died by suicide, yet the Government has consistently cut mental health services. In my home county of Galway there was an underspend of €6 million. Members opposite smirk at me for raising the cause of disability and mental health services. How dare they? They attacked the most vulnerable and the evidence speaks for itself. In every budget since 2011 and again this year the Government has cut the allocation and underspent. It failed to recruit 2,500 staff to ensure the transition from acute mental health settings to the community setting would happen. The crisis is of the Government's making. There is no mention of mental health services in the documentation produced in the past 48 hours on budget 2016. That is an indictment of the Government.

At yesterday's press conference there was an exchange between the Minister, Deputy Leo Varadkar, the Minister of State, Deputy Kathleen Lynch, and Sara Burke which I wish to read. Ms Burke said: "I realise you are kicking to touch a lot on the service plan for details but surely somebody has done the sums ... for example of the €35 million that you have sought but not always gained before, Minister Lynch?" The Minister, Deputy Leo Varadkar, the man of the year, intervened and said: "I don't want to give that yet because it's not decided yet and they are dynamic figures ... we need to actually sit down and work that out." Then the Minister of State, Deputy Kathleen Lynch, interjected to say: "But it's not that it's not done, it is done. It's very obviously done; it's just that [we have not done it yet]." The Minister said: "It's within a range." Ms Burke asked, "Can we get that range?" and if people could be given it that evening. He said they could not and that "We want to make sure they are right." Ms Burke quite frankly asked whether the additional €35 million not spent in 2011, 2012, 2013 and 2014 in current expenditure would be spent on mental health services in 2016. The Minister of State jumped in to say, "Yes," that there was a commitment to provide €35 million for mental health services. That was the end of an exchange. The Minister of State's commitment in her final comment is

of little comfort to me because she failed to protect the sum of €35 million in 2011, 2012, 2013 and 2014. It is the greatest public health crisis of our generation. More people die by suicide than die on the roads, yet the Minister of State could not give a straight answer. To be fair to the man of the year, he made a greater attempt to be transparent on the status of the €35 million. Members opposite can smirk and might think it is funny, but the lack of progress in filling these posts and the lack of transparency on the applications for them point directly to a failure of political will in disability and mental health services.

The response to a parliamentary question I put recently in this area demonstrates how poor is the practice and the delivery of services in child and adolescent mental health units.

One mental health issue that has emerged under the Government which overlaps with a core group in society has been the failure to deliver mental health care for people who are homeless. We all remember Jonathan Corrie, but do we know the name of any of the six people who have died in the meantime? The Government has successfully managed to normalise the situation because it believes in austerity. Mental health and homelessness have a very complex relationship in the midst of the housing crisis. Despite this, we have seen no budgetary provision for mental health or respite care services in the context of what is happening on the streets. I walked from this Chamber today to the Hibernian Archway and along the way I walked by four homeless people. I have no doubt that they are not voters and, therefore, do not matter because this is a Government run by focus groups, as we could judge from the front page of the *Irish Examiner* yesterday which stated: “A budget for the voter”. Mental health and homelessness have a complex, dynamic relationship that seems to have been forgotten by the Government because yesterday’s announcement was appalling. It is appalling to think there was not one provision to deal with homelessness, mental health or disability services. That will be the legacy of the Government.

Alongside that failure, there was no provision made for palliative care for a citizen who knew he or she was going to die. Where would such a person go to spend his or her last moments? On what street would he or she choose to die? In truth, this is a question that bothers me. It is also bothering all of the homeless agencies, but, nonetheless, there was no provision made in the budget for respite or palliative care services for homeless people.

I mention housing and homelessness, great social challenges for this country. Labour Party Ministers sat at the Cabinet table for four years with the housing portfolio and simply watched this happen, day by painful day. This crisis has been brewing since 2012, but the then Minister of State with responsibility for housing, Deputy Jan O’Sullivan, did nothing about the issue until that man came in. The Government only finally seemed to notice the problem in our communities and high streets when we stepped over a dead man while walking into work. His name was Mr. Corrie and he was found 100 m from here. The Minister, Deputy Alan Kelly, took it upon himself to solve this crisis and, at first, it seemed that something might be done, as there were significant announcements. We were told that the Minister was kicking down and opening doors, that we were going to have a resolution and that no firing pin would be held in. We were told that the dynamic that would emerge would be unequalled. Of course, the Minister is not alone in his failure to confront this issue. His party leader, the Tánaiste and Minister for Social Protection, has played her own part. Despite being advised to do so by organisations such as Threshold and Focus Ireland and by Fr. Peter McVerry, she stubbornly refused to increase rent supplement limits. The consequences are to be seen in my own home town, where families are sleeping in turf sheds. That is the result of the Government’s policy. I apologise if I have broken protocol by displaying a photograph, a Leas-Cheann Comhairle, but it is critically

important that we are transparent and close to the truth. The homelessness crisis is not Dublin-centred; it prevails across rural Ireland and is impacting on families. Children are living in a turf shed for a ninth week. That is the legacy of the Government.

Of course, the Simon Community tells us that we are faced with a situation where 93% of the properties for rent are for figures outside the rent supplement cap. On the day this was checked, not one property was available to rent in five of the largest cities in the country. The crisis is quite evident in Dublin and my constituency of Galway East where the Government has abandoned a family to a turf shed. They have been homeless for nine weeks. That is what is happening in this country. Tonight that couple will sleep in a shed and their children will sleep on the floor adjacent to them. They will sleep there for months while voids are boarded up because the local authorities have been starved of the resources to help the most vulnerable.

The budget is final confirmation that the members of the Government have delivered exactly the fabric of what they are - a right-wing Government. It is long overdue that this has been said to them. The damage they have done to society, year after year, with budgets that were independently validated as regressive-----

Deputy Paudie Coffey: As I remember it, the Deputy voted in favour of a couple of them.

Deputy Colm Keaveney: I appreciate that the truth hurts, which is why Members opposite try to disrupt it. They should go and listen to the people outside, the homeless, if they would bother to do so, because obviously they are not listening to their representatives. They have ignored them, as they have ignored people with disabilities. The most they are worth is a cold cup of coffee on a September morning with the Prime Minister of the country.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: The Ministers of State, Deputies Paudie Coffey and Ann Phelan, are sharing the next speaking slot.

Minister of State at the Department of the Environment, Community and Local Government (Deputy Paudie Coffey): I have listened carefully to the Member opposite. I will deal with some of the charges he made as I go through my contribution, but it is ironic to listen to a Member who literally abandoned the party for which he was elected and which he joined-----

Deputy Colm Keaveney: Who broke every promise? Who lied to the people?

Deputy Paudie Coffey: The Deputy mentioned that we had not listened to the facts.

Deputy Colm Keaveney: You would not know them. The only facts you know are the ones put in front of you.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Order, please. Will Members, please, speak through the Chair?

Deputy Paudie Coffey: Deputy Colm Keaveney might not like what he is about to hear. However, he is the very Deputy who abandoned the party for which he was elected and abandoned the Government that is putting right the mess caused by the party he is with.

Deputy Colm Keaveney: Who abandoned the most vulnerable people? You are a right-wing Tory.

Deputy Paudie Coffey: The Deputy might be sore this evening, but I will take no lectures

from the likes of him.

Deputy Colm Keaveney: You are a right-wing, Blueshirt Tory. You are responsible for destroying people with disabilities.

Deputy Ann Phelan: Where are your solutions? You ran away.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Will Members, please, speak through the Chair?

Deputy Colm Keaveney: You are responsible. You went and took 40 shillings, did you not? Forty pieces of silver.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: I will have to suspend the sitting if this continues. The Minister of State, Deputy Paudie Coffey, is in possession.

Deputy Colm Keaveney: You took forty pieces of silver. You are a right-wing Tory who attacks the most vulnerable.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Please, Deputy.

Deputy Colm Keaveney: That will be your legacy - forty pieces of silver for your seat. How dare you?

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: The Deputy has had a good innings. He had 20 minutes.

Deputy Paudie Coffey: I am glad to have the opportunity to make a contribution. The Deputy opposite might rant and rave, but that does not solve any problem. It does not resolve any of the issues he has highlighted and the challenges that remain.

Deputy Colm Keaveney: The ones you created.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Please allow the Minister of State to speak.

Deputy Paudie Coffey: The reason hard budget decisions had to be made was the Government had to correct the horrendous public finances inherited from Fianna Fáil.

Deputy Colm Keaveney: As they did not want to attack the rich, they attacked those with poor mental health and disabilities.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: The Deputy has had his say.

Deputy Colm Keaveney: You took 40 shillings. It was a sell-out, a sell-out of working people.

Deputy Paudie Coffey: The position is that the deficit has fallen from €22 billion in 2010 to a forecasted €4.5 billion in 2015. In contrast, the Fine Gael-Labour Party Government has guided the country out of the bailout programme that we inherited from the party of which the Member opposite is a member. We have corrected the public finances more quickly than anticipated. That might be difficult for him, now that the recovery is under way. The people will decide.

Deputy Colm Keaveney: It is not difficult at all. Now that you have betrayed them, chew them up and spit them out - Judas.

Deputy Paudie Coffey: Everybody on this side of the House and I accept that the issue of housing is a significant challenge because it is a dysfunctional sector that has experienced a huge bust. However, we are determined to give the issue priority. The Minister for the Environment, Community and Local Government, Deputy Alan Kelly, and I already announced a €4 billion social housing strategy earlier this year.

Let me provide some of the key figures for the housing spend in the budget. We have increased the budget by 18%, from €686 million to €811 million. We are providing an additional €56 million for capital programmes and an increase of €69 million in current spending, a total increase of €125 million. In addition, €112 million will be provided directly by local authorities. Some 7,100 housing units will be delivered by 2016 through current and capital spending, including the refurbishment of 1,600 vacant units. I wish to make it clear that funding is now being provided for the projects submitted by every local authority to the Department. The funding is available and the challenge now is for local authorities to deliver. I call on Deputies like Deputy Colm Keaveney and others to ensure local authorities deliver on the projects they have submitted.

Homelessness is a challenge that must be addressed. An additional €17 million has been included in the budget, giving a total of €70 million, to deal with the homelessness issue. The Dublin homeless HAP initiative issue is being addressed and interventions are being made to raise the threshold. This will assist directly those in emergency accommodation. In order to bridge the supply gap until the sector normalises, we are engaging in a procurement process to deliver 500 modular housing units so as to take people off the streets and out of emergency accommodation. We will do this until the housing units are built because it takes time for that to happen.

An issue for which I take direct responsibility is that of pyrite, another legacy of the sub-standard construction sector inherited by the Government in 2011. I am glad to report that an additional €9 million for pyrite remediation is being provided, bringing the total to €19 million. This additional funding will afford us the opportunity to ramp up the remediation projects that are under way or in the pipeline. We will, at last, be able to eradicate the nightmare for those who live in pyrite affected homes.

The budget also provides for an increase for Traveller accommodation. A provision of €5.5 million in 2016 will support the progression of a range of Traveller specific accommodation schemes.

A provision of €85 million for regeneration and remedial works demonstrates the Government's continued commitment to target the country's most disadvantaged communities.

A provision of €17 million will allow for the continued upgrading of social housing stock under the energy efficiency and retrofitting scheme, providing for warmer and more energy efficient homes for thousands of families. This builds on the progress made in 2014 and 2015. A further 1,500 vacant units will be refurbished and brought back into productive use.

With regard to private housing grants, funding of €45 million will provide for some 8,500 grants in 2016 which will assist adaptation works to enable older people and people with disabilities to remain living independently in their own homes for longer. This contradicts directly the contribution made by Deputy Colm Keaveney.

The allocation of €17 million for the mortgage to rent scheme will allow for the expansion

of the scheme and assist in meeting the Government's commitments on mortgage arrears.

The provision of €76 million for the capital acquisition scheme will ensure a continued focus on meeting the housing needs of vulnerable groups, with some 450 units to be provided for people with specific needs in 2016. Under the capital scheme for local authority housing, total funding of €180 million for the provision of local authority housing will deliver more than 1,000 new units through a construction and acquisition programme.

Under current programmes, leasing will receive increased funding of €20 million which will allow local authorities to bring approximately 3,000 leased units into operation in 2016. Under the rental accommodation scheme, funding of €135 million will allow for 1,000 new RAS transfers in 2015. The funding for the housing assistance payment scheme is being increased by €24.5 million, to a total of €47.7 million, in 2016, in line with the expansion of the scheme. This will assist an additional 10,000 families to secure suitable accommodation. The 2016 allocation for the capital loan and subsidy scheme will be used to make loan repayments in respect of projects already delivered or under way.

I have already outlined the allocation of an additional €17 million to address the issue of homelessness. This will help to ensure the increased demand for homeless services is addressed. Some €135 million is being provided under the community and rural development programme under the responsibility of my colleague, Deputy Ann Phelan, the social inclusion and community activation programme, SICAP.

All in all, I rebut the contention of those who say the Government is doing nothing about housing. Substantial funding in the Department's Vote is allocated for housing provision. The challenge remains, however, and until the private supply increases and until we can address the demand, we need to focus on the gaps and bring local authority projects on side. In the meantime, the modular housing units will go some way towards addressing the issue.

It is welcome that entrepreneurship and the incentive to create jobs is being supported in the budget. Agriculture, too, is being supported and the transition model for farms will bring new rural economic development. Many other initiatives such as those on child care are positive. The budget is positive and will assist the productive sector, working people who have carried the can in the past few years. It is welcome that they are now being rewarded, albeit in a small way. The budget builds the pathway to further recovery and sustainable growth. I commend it to the House.

Minister of State at the Department of the Environment, Community and Local Government (Deputy Ann Phelan): I draw attention to some of the statistics at the time the Government came into office in 2011. At the time we only had enough money for five months to pay teachers, nurses and gardaí and to try to keep public services on the road. We had an unemployment rate of 15.5%, which is now down to 9.4%. The IMF and the troika were here as the Fianna Fáil-Green Party Government was walking off the stage, leaving behind it a catastrophe. We are now creating over 131,000 jobs, which is a remarkable turnaround. This is a tribute to the resilience of the people. I thank those Deputies who stayed with us and did not walk away or shirk their responsibility. They did not shirk the hard work that had to be done to find a solution to help our collapsed economy to recover. They made the tough decisions and the budget is testament to their hard work and that of the people. We did not do as the Deputy opposite did. He ran away and shirked his responsibilities and is now trying to taunt the Government for not delivering on some issues.

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In his Budget Statement yesterday afternoon, my colleague, the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform, Deputy Brendan Howlin, announced €135 million in funding to support the community and rural sector next year. Some €45 million will be invested in marginalised communities through the social inclusion and community activation programme, SICAP, and other supports in 2016. This is testament to the Government's commitment to this important front-line intervention for those harder to reach in society, including the people mentioned by Deputy Colm Keaveney. As this new programme continues to develop, the priority will be to focus on ensuring the needs of the most disadvantaged communities are protected through optimising resources at the coalface. This is in line with a rural economic development zones, REDZ, initiative we launched and to which we committed €4 million. It forms part of the CEDRA programme for which I have responsibility and which concerns the development of rural economic development zones.

7 o'clock

I also welcome the 50% funding increase from the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine to support the CEDRA report.

The social inclusion and community activation programme, SICAP, will be achieved through supporting those workers who engage, often through very intensive supports and interventions, to make a real and meaningful difference in the lives of the marginalised and of their families. In so doing, we must continue to ensure that ancillary and administration costs are minimised and that disadvantaged communities benefit from a more focused programme and better integrated actions.

The Leader elements of the rural development programme have provided resources to support the sustainable development of rural communities since it began in 1991. Some €40 million will be invested in the new Leader programme in 2016 which will fund enterprise development, job creation, rural tourism and recreation. In addition, it will promote social inclusion through building community capacity, training and animation and basic services for hard to reach communities, which will also be eligible.

Other areas of possible activity include initiatives aimed at rural youth, renewable energy, the protection and sustainable use of water resources at a local level and the protection and improvement of local biodiversity. I expect that the new programme will be operational in all areas by March 2016.

A €12.65 million allocation will provide supports towards the community and voluntary sector and includes a range measures and schemes such as the scheme to support national organisations; the promotion of active citizenship and volunteering; the seniors alert scheme, which is so important to people who live on their own in rural areas; and supports for volunteering and citizen engagement. The seniors alert scheme aims to encourage community support for vulnerable older people to continue to live in their own homes, independently and with peace of mind by providing grant assistance towards the purchase and installation of personal monitored alarms.

I commend the budget to the House.

Deputy Fergus O'Dowd: I welcome the budget. It is the first in at least five years, since we have been in office, that is positive news for all of our citizens, particularly for the most disadvantaged and those who have suffered most. I acknowledge the pain and suffering inflicted on

the country because of the previous Government's economic policies. There was the near collapse of our entire banking system and almost 300,000 people out of work. All of that has been reversed now due to Government policies and particularly due to the sustained support of those who had to bear the brunt of tax increases and reductions in living standards over many years.

In chemistry, when one is titrating two liquids, there is a titration point, an absolute change, which is called the end point of the titration. It means things have changed utterly. This budget is the point at which things have changed utterly for our people. After all of the extremely serious, difficult situations experienced by tens of thousands of our citizens, they can now look forward to hope for the future.

There is hope and progress. There are significant changes being made; although they are not all the changes we would like to see, nevertheless they are very important. People want the future to be secure, particularly for our young people. They hope that our children are going to bigger and better schools and that there are more teachers. We will be increasing the supply of teachers in our schools by in excess of 2,250 in this budget. That is positive news for all of our schools.

The increase in child benefit of €5 per week is hugely important and it recognises the increasing needs of those children and the fact that families will be supported in supporting and looking after them.

I come from County Louth where, tragically, one of our own gardaí was murdered most foully and most cruelly this week. The Government is creating 600 new garda training places. That will make a significant difference to the Garda complement up and down the country. Clearly, it is something that will continue as the years go on.

Notwithstanding the criticisms people make, the increase of €3 per week for our senior citizens along with the increase in the fuel allowance of €2.50 per week makes a significant improvement to their standards of living.

Housing is a huge issue. Of all the people who come to my office, housing is of the greatest need. I welcome what the Minister of State, Deputy Coffey, has announced. We need to go further and do a lot more. We should be able to tackle some of the greedy exploiting landlords who are putting people out on the street. This very week in my constituency a landlord is threatening a woman with four young children, the youngest of whom is two months old, that he would go into their house after his 56 days notice on the Friday and put them out. They had nowhere to go and could not get other accommodation. We need to increase the legal notice which landlords are obliged to give before they cease a tenancy.

I welcome the building programme. It needs to go further and we need to make the changes which are under discussion and have not yet been announced.

I welcome the increase in caring for our elderly and the increase in the fair deal scheme. I would like to see a very significant increase in home help provision. The key thing is not to have people going into nursing homes if we can keep them out. We should support them in their homes, increase home help and give families rest and respite. We should give them the opportunity to live in their homes for as long as possible and sustain people in their natural environment where they have lived all of their lives. That is a significant issue which no doubt will be addressed shortly.

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An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: The next speaking slot is shared by Deputies Dessie Ellis, Brian Stanley, Caoimhghín Ó Caoláin and Michael Colreavy. Cúig nóiméad an duine.

Deputy Dessie Ellis: Deich nóiméad.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Deich nóiméad for you.

Deputy Dessie Ellis: Go raibh maith agat. I would like to express my sympathy to the friends, family and relatives of the ten members of the Traveller community so tragically killed. I also express my sympathy to the family, relatives and friends of Garda Tony Golden, who was tragically killed while performing his duties.

This Government is a master of spin. It may have managed to lead RTE into believing it was announcing a major new investment in housing or some kind of decisive move against homelessness, but anyone who knows much about these issues or cares to look behind the spin is aware of the scam those claims represent. The entire housing strategy being pursued by the Government is an operation in spin. The best thing campaigners will say about it is that it exists and that at least is positive. Numbers were plucked from the sky and housing need defined on a whim.

Tens of thousands were condemned to relying on the private market which cannot and will not house them adequately without billions of euro in subsidies. Thousands more, it was decided, would sort themselves out over time. A bare minimum of the State's responsibility was decided and with that, a plan to pretend to be providing housing was devised, which would do well until an election with results projected for just before the general election after next. Some €3.8 billion was promised over six years, amounting to a modest increase in the annual budget. This figure was announced, re-announced and repackaged to generate as much confusion in the public domain and as many column inches as possible. Even the Taoiseach regularly mis-states the planned spend, confused by his own Ministers' misinformation.

In reality, an immense sum was being ring-fenced for the subsidy of private landlords and developers over six years, with a meagre sum apportioned for local authorities to build or refurbish - a meagre sum which for many councils has proven very hard to get. How many homes were councils set to build by 2017 under the Government strategy? In Dublin city, it was just 167 while across the State, it was just 1,750. This is barely enough to house the people on the waiting list in Waterford, not to mention the 43,000 people in need of housing in Dublin city.

The budget is a continuation of this kind of spin over substance. There is more focus on private profit over the public provision of a housing solution. The obscenity of the profit being made off our homelessness crisis by hotels in particular is hard to take. Dublin City Council is paying millions each year to put families in hotels and bed and breakfast establishments, which are often located miles from the schools these families' children attend. Modular housing may offer a more suitable option for an individual family but the concern that families will be dumped in emergency accommodation villages for periods well beyond what constitutes temporary is real and fair. We need homes and we need communities. That is the only solution. Anything else is a stopgap measure. That is not just my opinion. It is the reasoned opinion of all involved who have grasped the nature of the crisis.

Focus Ireland, one of the leading campaign groups that advocates for homeless people and for housing solutions, said of the budget that it "completely failed to deliver on stemming the rise of homelessness." Of the increase in the homeless budget, it said that "all of that will be

paid to hotel owners or to provide modular emergency housing.” It said that there is “nothing at all to slow down the shocking number of families becoming homeless.” There is nothing to stop an increase in the 740 families with 1,500 children who are already homeless and depending on emergency accommodation. When we spend nearly €3,500 a month on each family to put them in a hotel, how soon will €17 million be forgotten while homelessness remains a daily nightmare for more and more people? Some of this will, of course, be spent on modular homes, which may well be finished to a high standard but are not the solution to our housing shortage and will not provide the new communities we need to create a home for the thousands who have none.

The Peter McVerry Trust, that thorn in the side of the Minister for the Environment, Community and Local Government’s spin doctors, did not have much that was positive to say yesterday either. Not only did it say that the budget fails to adequately address the crisis, it said that the Government fails to even understand the nature of it. It said the budget did “nothing of note” for homeless people. The €17 million proposed will barely help services stand still with no change in the numbers. The problem is the Government has failed to act to stop the flow of tenants into homelessness and so numbers will rise. They have quadrupled this year alone and rents in Dublin have risen by 9.2% during in past 12 months. The measures needed were floated endlessly but were never grasped by the Government. To people struggling to pay rent each month, it appears that the Government simply does not care enough to act or understand.

Focus Ireland says that there will be a need for at least 160 extra beds this winter. Inner City Helping Homeless meets 150 people a night who are sleeping rough and says it misses many more. There are also 40 to 50 people sleeping on the floor of the night café run by Merchants Quay Ireland. We are on a collision course for more tragedy and more Jonathan Corries. I say this not to score points but to really plead with the Government. Whatever about yesterday, we cannot let people go without shelter this winter for lack of action.

A major announcement yesterday, albeit a leaked one, was that NAMA, the organisation which has struggled for four years to provide just 1,300 out of a promised 4,000 houses for use under social leasing, had looked under the cushions and found 20,000 homes it was willing to invest in to bring to sale. How on earth have these homes not been made part of NAMA’s promised social dividend? NAMA has failed utterly to live up to its commitments on social housing. There has been no stock transfer, very little discounted sale of property to social housing and a fraction of social leasing delivered which barely constitutes social housing anyway and now it will be playing big-time developers and selling off homes as part of the Government’s ill-fated and ridiculous plan for housing. The speeches yesterday said they would be affordable and starter homes. To most people, “starter home” is a nice term for a shoe box with windows and affordable housing has become an oxymoron. The Minister yesterday described affordable housing as housing below €300,000. Perhaps that is affordable on a Minister’s wage but to the 50% of people earning less than €27,000 a year, that is nowhere near being affordable and credit is simply unobtainable.

We welcome private investment in sustainable new housing developments but it is not the solution to the crisis in affordable housing when most of the population are unable to afford private rates. This is why when demand for rental property skyrocketed after the collapse due to a lack of credit, development did not follow. The mass of people in need of rental homes pushed rates up but many of these people could never have afforded these rates for long in any event. NAMA developers get another hand out to profit from the needs of the Irish people. I await more details of this plan from NAMA. I hope the Government will be an aid in getting

such information given NAMA's notorious approach to keeping this House informed of its actions. What scrutiny will be put in place?

The Government seems to want to throw every number at us bar the figure of how many houses local authorities are actually expected to build next year and exactly how much money will be provided for that. The Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform said that €500 million is being provided but the capital budget for housing is just €432 million for 2016. The only way the Minister could arrive at such a figure is to combine the capital budget, which is supposed to pay for construction, and some other moneys. This kind of misleading approach is to ensure that when the Tánaiste and Minister for Social Protection makes wild claims that more money is being spent on housing than ever before, it does not sound quite so silly. It is still nonetheless very wrong. In fact, the capital spend on housing for 2016 is only €35 million more than it was in 2011 when this Fine Gael-Labour Government took office and started slashing it. By 2013, it cut nearly €100 million a year so in fact they are only beginning to make up for its cuts. In 2010 the budget for housing was over €1 billion, which is more than the allocation today. Talk about fairy tales.

Deputy Brian Stanley: I welcome the opportunity to speak about the budget. It is regrettable that the Minister for the Environment, Community and Local Government is not here but I welcome the fact that my constituency colleague, the Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade, is present. It is obvious that, when one reads the small print, Irish Water features in the budget. The Estimates contain a working capital loan of €58 million next year on top of €96 million in 2015 and another €184 million in 2016 as a capital contribution. This is more taxpayers' money and there will be many more announcements. I know that as time moves on, there will more money moved across so the Government is throwing good money after bad. Could the Minister explain exactly what that money will go towards? Millions, and heading for billions, of euro have been spent on obsolete meters, consultancy fees and establishing call centres - everything bar fixing leaking pipes and providing the service. Of course, the entire Irish Water project is based on fantasy economics. I pointed out four years ago that this was where this was heading. I will outline a few facts based on answers from the Minister for the Environment, Community and Local Government and other Ministers. The Department estimates that the gross contribution from domestic water charges that could be collected with full compliance in 2016 would be €209 million. Out of that, one must take €20 million for collection costs, €6 million to administer the so-called water conservation grant and €130 million for the water conservation grant itself. Take all of that away and one is left with a grand total of €53 million. That is the sum total of the gain from the hundreds of millions of euro wasted on Irish Water and the hardship and anxiety caused to householders. We know from figures supplied that the cost of running the show from day to day is €900 million and on top of that it will need a capital injection of approximately €600 million to €700 million a year. When that is added up it is close to €1.5 billion. That is a long way from €50 million. There is a huge hole. How is the Government going to fill that hole? To date it has pumped in taxpayers' money into this quasi non-governmental organisation, quango, or corporate monster. The only option for those who are returned after the election will be to do a complete U-turn on the commitment not to increase water charges for the next two years and to hike them up.

On the problem of housing, there are people living in sheds and sleeping in cars and on the streets. I am sure they go into the office of the Minister for Foreign Affairs, Deputy Flanagan. They certainly come to me. They are in Portlaoise, Mountmellick, Portarlinton and Monasterevin. They are all over the place. There are almost 1,800 households on the council waiting

list in County Laois and 7,000 families seeking accommodation in Kildare. The €69 million in the Estimates will not go anywhere near meeting that demand. We proposed €325 million extra for a housing package on top of what the Government has announced several times this year. The figure the Government gives will provide for only an extra 450 houses. If that was allocated on a population basis Laois would get approximately seven or eight council houses and Kildare would do somewhat better with 11 or 13 extra houses. The Government is happy to continue subsidising private landlords and it is not delivering. The rental accommodation scheme, RAS, is crumbling in Laois. Landlords are walking away from it by the day and people are winding up homeless and having to be pushed into emergency accommodation. It is crumbling in Kildare too. That is the fact. There is no word of when the housing assistance payment, HAP, is to start in the county. That needs to be addressed. I am very disappointed that the housing issue has not been addressed. It is a huge problem. The Government has not done anything in this budget to get to grips with this problem. It has failed to bring in rent controls despite having four and a half years to do it. If it does not bring in rent controls it will not solve the problem.

Deputy Caoimhghín Ó Caoláin: Yesterday, while this Government outlined its budget measures for 2016, 469 people lay on trolleys in hospitals across this State. While it glorified a budget that will give €181.9 million back in taxes to the top 14% of earners, nurses at St. Vincent's University Hospital began a work-to-rule in protest at the appalling conditions staff and patients are subjected to on a daily basis.

The additional funding allocation announced yesterday for health amounts in real terms to a miserable €18 million, the lowest additional allocation of the seven named Departments in the Government's budget 2016 new expenditure measures.

This is a damning indictment of this Fine Gael-Labour Government and shows that it is refusing to listen to the concerns of patients and staff. Emergency department services have been at crisis point for a very long time, as highlighted daily by the trolley watch survey carried out by the Irish Nurses and Midwives Organisation. During September this year there were a shocking 7,630 patients on trolleys. This represents a 17% increase, when compared to September 2014.

I acknowledge that an additional 440 beds have been promised and are to be made available before Christmas. While this is a step in the right direction it is still wholly inadequate, not least because there are not enough staff in place to manage the number of beds promised. This will only work if additional nurses and support staff are employed. Adequate funding is necessary but the current problems will not be abated any time soon by yesterday's announcement. As we face into another winter the crisis will not only endure but will deepen across our hospital sites.

I note with interest that the Government has said that the extension of free general practitioner care for children aged under 12 will cost €10 million. When costing this measure through parliamentary questions I tabled, the Department for Public Expenditure and Reform told us that the cost of the same measure would be €39 million. It would therefore appear that the Government has set aside money only for the last quarter of 2016 and has totally ignored the real cost over a full year. Why can it not be up front and honest with the people? This massaging of the facts and the figures is frankly a disgrace and shows that this measure is all about the election and nothing else.

In addition, the approach is far from what is actually now needed and most appropriate. As

outlined in our alternative budget, medical need and household income should be the priority for the interim roll-out of free GP care, pending universal delivery. This view is supported by many, including the Society of St. Vincent de Paul. I would also like to remind the Government that in its 2011 programme for Government the Fine Gael and Labour Party's original intention was to prioritise medical need in the roll-out of free GP care. This commitment to those with chronic illness and disability has long since been abandoned by this Government which has engaged in a long series of U-turns, sell-outs and betrayals. In our alternative budget Sinn Féin committed to a €383 million additional spend on health. It is spending of this magnitude that is urgently required and we have shown how this is possible. I call on the Government to read what we propose. Urgent action is needed to address these pressing issues, to ensure patient safety and to alleviate the pressure on staff who are forced to deal with the consequences of a health system that is falling apart.

Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade (Deputy Charles Flanagan): Budget 2016 is a positive budget which is testament to the progress we have made as a country over the last few years, coming through a most difficult time for many people, to a position where we can now introduce measures to provide relief for people, increase and enhance services and support our ongoing economic recovery. In the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, budget 2016 provides a modest amount of funding for key strategic activities which are centred on better meeting the needs of Irish citizens at home and abroad and supporting the world's most vulnerable people in the way we always have done. I take this opportunity to express my appreciation of the dedication of the staff of the Department who, like their colleagues across the public sector, have worked tirelessly, relentlessly and flexibly to deliver services in very difficult economic times, working diligently to provide services to our citizens, to promote peace and reconciliation on our island, to project our values internationally and to strengthen our influence internationally, including within the European Union, the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe and at the United Nations.

Irish diplomats have also played an important role in driving Ireland's economic recovery through our trade division at home in the Department's headquarters and in our mission network around the world. That network has expanded in recent years with new offices in Asia, Europe, Africa and the Americas. The Export Trade Council, which I chair, brings together key Departments, State agencies and representatives of the private sector to maximise opportunities for Irish exports, attract inward investment and tourism and build international partnerships in fields such as education and more.

This work complements the very successful annual action plan for jobs model pioneered by my colleague, the Minister for Jobs, Enterprise and Innovation, Deputy Bruton, which has helped deliver 125,000 jobs since the first action plan in 2012. Ultimately, our focus is on jobs for people here at home and creating a sustainably healthy economy that will allow the Government to provide more and better public services. Budget 2016 as a whole is focused on providing relief and better services for the people through steps like the cut in the USC, more nurses and doctors for the health service, more affordable and quality child care and ending the unfair treatment of the self-employed. All are sensible and affordable steps that will keep the recovery going and bring benefits to even more households. In line with Government policy, budget 2016 provides opportunities for my Department to deliver more for our citizens and for the most vulnerable people around the world.

Last week I launched the passport card, the first of its kind in the world. The card was introduced to offer a more convenient way for Irish people to travel and it is now accepted in

31 countries throughout Europe. Innovative Irish technology companies were involved in its design and the ease of application for passport holders, through an application or online, has generated over 6,300 applications since its launch less than ten days ago. Through budget 2016, I will continue this process of passport reform and modernisation. The demand for passports continues to grow with increased travel and our expanding population and the use of the passport as an identity document. Passport entitlement decisions are becoming more complex due to the wider diversity of family situations and changes to guardianship provisions. We also face a continued serious threat from sophisticated fraud and attempts at identity theft. Coupled with these challenges, the expectations of citizens in terms of the efficient, flexible and timely delivery of public services has grown, and rightly so.

Our passport service needs to respond fully if we are to continue to deliver the highest levels of customer service and maintain the integrity and excellent international standing of the Irish passport. We have made great strides. Our passport book meets the highest international design and security standards and turnaround times for passport applications have improved. All that said, the technology which underpins the passport service is over ten years old and can no longer be considered sufficiently flexible to adapt to the changing needs of the service. Nor is it adequate for future needs. The reform programme, to which we are allocating €4 million under Vote 28 in 2016, will see new technologies radically re-shape how passports are delivered over the next three years. The result will be a more streamlined system to process passport applications, including online renewals, and a stronger focus on first-time applicants and areas that are potentially vulnerable to fraud. It will also ensure a more seamless and consistent service for citizens wherever they apply for a passport around the world. An efficient passport service is essential for every country and particularly so for Ireland, which is so interconnected globally. This ambitious reform programme aims to deliver a more citizen-focused service and build on the integrity of the Irish passport for the benefit of all.

An aspect of the work of my Department and its missions that is usually necessarily under the radar is the consular assistance which we provide to over 1,600 Irish citizens and their families each year. Very often, these sensitive cases involve death, arrest or hospitalisation overseas. This year, we were all proud that our diplomats provided the best of service to citizens in the worst of circumstances during multiple consular crisis situations. From the heartbreak of the balcony collapse in Berkeley to the terrorist atrocities in Tunisia and the aftermath of a horrific earthquake in Nepal, the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade has always sought to respond to tragedy with quick, compassionate and effective consular assistance to those impacted and their families. This is a commitment to serving our citizens of which we can rightly be proud, but we must ensure that we can sustain this quality in the face of new global challenges. To do so we need to review our delivery and reform where necessary.

With more Irish people travelling to less secure parts of a volatile world, we have to expect additional demand for consular assistance in non-traditional geographic locations and on increasingly complex issues. We will use our budgetary allocation to reinforce our consular crisis response capacity, to better communicate with Irish citizens travelling abroad and to develop innovative ways of providing advice and services quickly to those who need help most. My colleague, the Minister of State at the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, Deputy Jimmy Deenihan, will address the House on his priorities for 2016. I am very pleased that budget 2016 will see this Department maintain its steadfast support for Irish community groups in very many corners of the world through €11.6 million in funding under the emigrant support programme. The Minister of State will address this area in greater detail and I would like to take this oppor-

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tunity to commend him for his passionate and energetic approach to his Ministry. I can think of no better person to fill the role of the State's first ever Minister with special responsibility for diaspora affairs.

I am proud that this budget confirms clearly that international development and the fight to end global poverty and hunger are firmly at the heart of Ireland's foreign policy. The Government has committed an additional €40 million for ODA in this budget, a significant 7% increase. This funding will go, *inter alia*, towards addressing the very serious humanitarian crisis we are facing in the Middle East and the Horn of Africa. The Minister of State at the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, Deputy Sean Sherlock, will address this area in greater detail shortly. I commend the Minister of State, not only for his work in overseas development aid on a continuous basis, but also for his resolve in attending the talks in Northern Ireland on very delicate and sensitive issues.

I commend budget 2016 to the House. I look forward to my Department continuing to deliver crucial services to the Irish people and playing our part in sustaining and enhancing our economic recovery in the best interests of all our citizens.

Minister of State at the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (Deputy Sean Sherlock): Yesterday, the Government demonstrated the seriousness of our commitment to international development as a core element of Ireland's foreign policy. Having stabilised funding for the Irish Aid programme over the past four very difficult years, we have now provided for the first substantial increase in official development assistance in seven years. It is hugely significant that we are providing €640 million for development assistance in 2016, an increase of €40 million or 7% on 2015.

Just three weeks ago, I was part of the Irish delegation at the UN summit, also attended by the Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade, Deputy Charles Flanagan, which adopted a new set of sustainable development goals which will guide international policy and action up to 2030. The aim is nothing less than to eradicate extreme poverty and hunger over the next 15 years. Ireland played a leading role in developing the new global development framework and we are committed to maintaining our strong role in achieving its objectives. I take this opportunity to thank the Irish ambassador, David Donoghue, and his colleagues in New York for their wonderful work in achieving that agenda.

We are very conscious that we make this commitment in the context of progress under the millennium development goals but we also recognise current setbacks as a result of the unprecedented level of humanitarian crises and suffering across the Middle East and Africa, which have created the appalling refugee crisis in the Mediterranean region. This budget is a vitally important signal internationally that we will reverse the slide in the percentage of our GNP which we provide in aid. We expect that there will be a small but significant increase in the percentage, from an estimated 0.35% in 2015 to 0.36%. We know it is modest but we are committed to making progress towards the UN target of 0.7% and to doing so in a sustainable and effective manner. Ireland played a central role in brokering agreement among the EU development Ministers in May to recommit to the target and to reach it, collectively, by 2030.

I visited Jordan last week to see for myself the extent of the refugee crisis as a result of the conflict in Syria. We are fully aware of the burden being borne by neighbouring countries, especially Jordan, Lebanon and Syria. I was moved and impressed by the generosity of the Jordanian Government and its people, even as their economy is squeezed by instability and con-

flict on their borders, in providing for their neighbours in their time of need. Jordan, a country the size of Ireland with a population of 6.3 million, many of them refugees themselves, is now hosting some 1.3 million Syrian refugees in camps and in the community. The challenges for Jordan and for the refugee families I met are immense. I am convinced that Ireland and our EU partners can do more to assist them.

Over the past three years, Ireland has provided over €300 million to address humanitarian crises worldwide. This includes over €100 million for the Middle East and the Horn of Africa, over €40 million of which has been for victims of the Syrian conflict. We have not forgotten the victims of other humanitarian crises in Europe's broader neighbourhood, in South Sudan, Central African Republic and the Sahel. We have also deployed our naval personnel to the Mediterranean to rescue people driven to attempting the crossing in unseaworthy boats. With the resources provided for ODA in 2016, we will do more. I am determined that we will increase our direct humanitarian funding for the refugee crisis, which is a crisis for Europe also. Ireland can play a leading role in a comprehensive European response, addressing the immediate needs of the victims of the crisis and its root causes in poverty, underdevelopment, conflict and climate change.

We will review all aspects of our aid programme to ensure that the Irish people's funding has maximum impact for vulnerable communities. I want to ensure that we will use our humanitarian aid and our long-term development aid, especially in our key partner countries, in a more co-ordinated way. Our objective will be to respond to the immediate humanitarian suffering and to build the resilience of endangered communities against future crises. We will work closely with our key partner countries, with the United Nations and with our NGOs to do so. I take this opportunity to pay tribute to the Irish NGOs and our multilateral partners who are working so hard in their respective fields to deliver on the global development agenda.

Minister of State at the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (Deputy Jimmy Deenihan): Budget 2016 will see the Department of Foreign Affairs maintain its steadfast support for Irish community and diaspora groups in many corners of the world through €11.6 million in funding under the emigrant support programme. The Government's emigrant support programme is focused on supporting cultural, community and heritage projects that foster a vibrant sense of Irish community and identity.

In particular the programme supports organisations that deliver front-line advisory services and community care to Irish emigrants, particularly to the more vulnerable and marginalised members of our community abroad. In recent years the programme has also funded capital projects that ensure the long-term future of Irish communities. I refer to projects such as Shannon Gaels football club in New York, Treasure Island football club in San Francisco, Ruislip in London and the Irish Arts Centre in New York. Through this fund the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade has made a major contribution to the Irish Arts Centre in New York together with the City of New York. It should be a very exciting project for Irish people in New York and also for people from this country who will be travelling to New York with various shows, including performing and visual artists. This is a very exciting project.

Since 2003, the Government has awarded over €130 million to Irish organisations all over the world since the establishment of the Irish abroad unit in the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade. I am not aware of any other government in the world that makes such an investment in its diaspora. The Irish diaspora appreciate this and wherever I have gone they are very quick to acknowledge the support of the Irish taxpayer. This funding is through the emigrant support

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programme. I am proud that, despite the severe economic downturn of recent years, we maintained ESP funding at significant levels. It made a very strong statement about the commitment of this Government during our time in office that there was no great reduction for our emigrants compared with other programmes in this country.

In 2014 the emigrant support programme provided €11.99 million to 206 organisations, based in more than 20 countries. This funding was provided to non-profit organisations and projects to support Irish communities overseas and to facilitate the development of more strategic links between Ireland and the global Irish. Approximately 70% of this funding went to support front-line welfare services, targeted at the most vulnerable members of our overseas community in, for example, mental health services. In conjunction with Pieta House in New York we are providing services for addiction, providing hot meals for people, providing counselling for people and a range of other services that but for this programme would not be available to many Irish people of all age groups.

More than half of the organisations funded are based in the UK, with 38 organisations in the US receiving funding along with 17 in Australia and 12 in Canada. We were delighted to be able to fund an important scheme in Newfoundland this year.

In the past year some exciting things have happened in diaspora engagement. The global civic forum, with representatives of all the communities that receive grant aid coming together in Dublin Castle in June, was a major success. There was serious collaboration between the various groups. They discovered that they had a considerable amount in common and they established that problems that they may face in London may be similar in Sydney, Melbourne, New York, San Francisco, Boston, Chicago, Birmingham or Liverpool. We are now encouraging more collaboration between all centres so that they can learn from each other and also share good practice.

In this Chamber we held the Global Irish Parliamentarians' Forum attended by parliamentarians from Capitol Hill, Canada, Australia, the state legislatures in Australia, and also from the assemblies in America and, of course, Westminster. There was a huge contingent here and it was a major success. We got very positive feedback from it. They had a session here in this House and they were very proud that they were the only parliamentarians ever to speak in this House apart from Presidents Clinton, Reagan and Kennedy, and the former Australian Prime Ministers, Mr. Hawke and Mr. Keating, and the former UK Prime Minister, Mr. Blair. So it was very special for them.

Under the Minister's guidance we are now preparing for the global economic forum on 20 November. People will be very proud of the progress the country has made. I have travelled extensively over the past year. Many of our young people who left the country in the past five years are very proud of the country's achievement. They are very proud that we have a budget deficit of less than 2%, which will be eliminated next year. They are very proud that we have the fastest growth rate in Europe. They also look at the ratings from the ratings agencies. For example, in June Standard and Poor's gave Ireland an A+ rating. That was because of our strong growth and debt reduction. That clearly indicates the current Government's economic policies are obviously working.

Deputy Maureen O'Sullivan: Tá rudaí dearfacha ann sa bhuiséad seo agus tá daoine áirithe níos sásta leis an mbuiséad seo ná mar a bhí siad leis na buiséid a bhí againn le déanaí ach bhí sé dochreidte a bheith ag éisteacht leis an Aire agus é ag rá gur thug an Rialtas cosaint

do dhaoine óga, do sheandaoine agus do dhaoine ar an imeall sna buiséid roimhe seo. I know only too well from my constituency that the people who have been suffering most because of recent budgets are children and vulnerable people. I was incredulous to hear the Minister deny that inequality had risen. We have the statistics to show that inequality has increased. I do not know why anyone would not believe the CSO when it tells us this.

Those with the most have not given the most. All the NGOs working with those in vulnerable situations are aware of that and tell us so. It would have been more admirable to have acknowledged that and to have said that the driving force behind the budget was to address those inequalities. So were they addressed? The overall feeling about the budget is that the tax cuts still benefit the top one third of income earners more than those on lower wages in cash terms.

The Government claims the budget deficit has reduced and it has provided various statistics. However, we know that is not being felt by everyone. The next few months will tell the tale if the percentages and statistics translate into real improvement for those most affected by previous budgets.

The most pressing and urgent issue for this country is housing and homelessness. It is almost a year since the death of Jonathan Corrie across the road from the Dáil and there have been two other deaths since then. For many, living on the streets, in emergency accommodation in hotels and bed and breakfast accommodation or staying on couches in the houses of relatives and friends, it is almost like a slow death for them. It completely and utterly takes their dignity away.

The Minister was correct to refer to the underinvestment in social housing in the past and we can add to that the cuts to funding for local authorities. We all have examples of people with a disability who have waited two to three years in order to get the grant for an extension which will make a difference to them. One such case is currently on my desk. I thought the situation was improving. I was waiting to see what the budget would do about the housing situation. Unfortunately, it was the same rhetoric. The Minister said last year the Government announced a €2.2 billion package to begin to deal with legacy, but one could ask where is the action following those words. A total of €500 million is available this year. I would like to see the plan for that €500 million, the locations and the type of housing. Has it been broken down into size of unit, whether one, two, three or four-bed accommodation? A further €69 million was allocated to enable local authorities to secure accommodation for an additional 14,000 households. How exactly will that happen so it is not just a case of empty words? I was told local authorities have the funding to clear the voids but why is that not happening?

I accept the main budget speeches are not about the nitty-gritty of how exactly the funding will be allocated, but housing is such an emergency that more detail is needed and the Government had an opportunity to show its seriousness on the issue by not speaking in figures alone. In 2008 the Peter McVerry Trust worked with 383 participants but by 2014 the number had risen to 4,460 and that is just one organisation. We are told that 20,000 units are guaranteed by 2020 but that is not a comfort to children staying in emergency accommodation which is not suitable for them to do their homework and does not provide facilities for families to cook and do their laundry, not to mention the mental strain on parents who have to live with the possibility of having to move.

The housing lists are increasing all the time. One of the contributing factors is the private rented sector. Rent is being sought in this landlord's market that cannot be matched or reached

by those renting, whether they are on rent allowance or paying the rent from their income. When rent is increased for those on rent allowance and the rental accommodation scheme, RAS, they have the option of seeking assistance from the community welfare system. The Minister keeps telling me that and I know good work is going on to increase the allowance. I am not into lining the pockets of landlords who can increase rent at will, with no additional improvements or additions, by between €100 and €400 a month. Therefore, it is vital that there is rent certainty. Nobody wants to use the term “rent control”, but many cities in Europe have many people living in rented accommodation and they do not have the crisis we have. Those who rent privately who are not on an allowance have nowhere to turn when faced with a rent increase. We all want to see people in employment but if those who are employed cannot afford the increase in rent that will add to the numbers on the homeless list, which will interfere with their ability to work and result in them needing emergency accommodation. I get such calls every day from lone parents who work and who pay their rent but when it is increased, which can happen at any time, and that jeopardises their employment and the contribution they make to society.

Landlords are entitled to make a return on their money. They are not into renting property as a social service but there must be some way to assist landlords who are tax compliant and registered to buy into rent certainty or rent control, perhaps by means of a tax relief. I have a suggestion concerning people who are living in overcrowded accommodation. The situation could be alleviated if we introduced grants for extensions and that could reduce the number of people on the housing lists. People could be taken off the list who previously had no room to stay in their accommodation. We are told that NAMA could provide the answer but serious issues arise in that regard.

There is a diversity in reactions from organisations. However, it is the case that resources have not been targeted at the poorest. The European Anti Poverty Network Ireland put it succinctly in saying that the resource measures are welcome but they are not nearly enough to undo the damage of eight years of policies. The ESRI has shown that the poorest 10% have paid more than any other group. I endorse its welcome of the restoration of 75% of the Christmas bonus because I know the impact of its abolition, in particular on elderly people on the State pension, especially grandparents.

The 50 cent increase in the price of a packet of cigarettes will not stop those who are addicted but what it will affect is the local retailer because smokers will again turn to illegal traders and pay between €3.50 and €5 for a packet. The sale of illegal cigarettes is rampant in the inner city. I acknowledge the work of Customs and Excise, Revenue and the Garda have done to intercept illicit tobacco products but there is a loss to the Exchequer. A recent reply to a parliamentary question indicated that in 2014, the loss was €210 million. It is a dilemma that we are making money out of something that is harmful to people’s health. That begs the question of the lack of a tax on other unhealthy products such as fast food and drinks that are high in sugar. Small local retailers have no difficulty with a complete ban on cigarettes and they are supportive of any initiative to promote further healthy options. As I indicated, the 50 cent increase in the price of cigarettes is adding to the black market trade. We have enough young people who turn to the black market to make money. I would like to think the extra 50 cent would stop people from smoking, but all it will do is encourage more people into the illegal trade where they will not know the tar content of the cigarettes they smoke.

One group of which I am particularly mindful when it comes to the budget is those with a disability. Apart from housing, this is an area of great disappointment. Their reaction is one of

bitter disappointment and deep concern. The Disability Federation of Ireland reminds us that when the Government came to power, its commitment to disability was its first social justice priority. There are some long-awaited reliefs for people with disabilities and their families but the budget does not go sufficiently far to show a real commitment to people with a disability.

An employment strategy was launched for people with disabilities but one could ask whether it is just words. The feeling among people with disability is that inequality will rise for them. Poverty and exclusion are part of their daily lives. At meetings I have attended, it has been heartbreaking to listen to their stories of how difficult it is for them and the additional stress coming up to budgets because they feel they will be again targeted.

I am a member of the Oireachtas group on mental health which agreed to a pre-budget submission. I did not have an opportunity to hear what the Minister said but we sought additional funding for suicide prevention. We hear about the magic sum of €35 million each year but we need a monitoring system to see exactly where it is going. My personal focus is on the area of intellectual disability nursing. The Government must guarantee that the course will continue. There is a need for such nurses in accident and emergency departments.

Last week some Independent Members tabled a Private Members' motion on tax justice. It was not a very radical approach. All it sought was full financial transparency from multinational companies in terms of making annual country-by-country reporting public and closing the tax loopholes. Work has been done on the double Irish but can the Government guarantee that the knowledge box will not become another mechanism for large-scale tax avoidance and tax evasion by multinationals? We know the increase in the tax take from such companies recently, so let us imagine if they all paid the full 12.5% tax and if there was even a 1% increase. I attended a Social Justice Ireland briefing today. It produced the figure that a minimum effective tax rate of 6% for corporations would bring in an additional €1 billion in tax revenue annually.

We must identify the disconnects. There is a disconnect between the contribution from multinationals and society. Another disconnect arising from the budget is that single unemployed people will gain €95 a year. Single people earning €75,000 a year will gain almost ten times that, approximately €900. An unemployed couple gain €157 a year, whereas a couple with two earners on €125,000 a year get almost €1,500. I am in favour of everybody getting an increase but it must be proportionate. The increase to the minimum wage is welcome. A full-time worker on the minimum wage will gain €1,000 but the minimum wage is still 25% below the living wage, which means that is another disconnect.

I visited a project in the north inner city today which works with women in treatment for addiction and their children. While it appears that the budget for this type of work is the same, it does not take into account the growing needs.

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For example, those responsible for the aforementioned project and community employment scheme tell me that younger women are presenting with more complex issues such as poly-drug use and with children in need of child care. However, they need special child care that can be provided by those who understand addiction. I also am aware, as I am sure is the Minister of State from his constituency experience, that community employment schemes are not getting other people into them, namely, those for whom CE initially was set up. They are the people who need CE to move on from unemployment into education, into training and then back into

employment. The additional €20 is not even matching the costs for them of getting to the CE scheme site. Many women who enter community employment opt for child care and are supported during that. Such women will emerge with a proper qualification in child care and as work is available in child care, what is happening in this regard is good.

However, because there is no additional incentive for them and it is costing some of them more to be in community employment, it is not reaching them. Community employment works and consequently, failing to fund it adequately to encourage such young women on to such schemes will cost more ultimately. There is another knock-on effect if these young women can be induced onto CE and into projects, namely, the effect on their children. Again, the staff of projects are assisting those women in addition to get the children into school and the pattern is being set for children to continue into school. Even if the addiction continues, the children have the pattern and the habit of going to school and they will bring along younger brothers and sisters. As for the child care aspect, it is vital to get this right and to have quality child care right from the outset. The Minister of State and I spoke at the same event on this issue last week and it is welcome that there is funding for children with disabilities.

I note money also is available for after-school services. I have been to a number of such facilities and am familiar with what happens. Some of them emerged through the school completion programme and I have a question as to the Government's support for school completion, because there were earlier concerns in this regard. In addition, it does not make sense that school completion is not under the aegis of the Department of Education and Skills but is with a different Department. The improvement in the pupil-teacher ratio is a start and I heard what the Minister had to say earlier about guidance and principles. However, I have a question regarding the salary scale for new teachers and note it will take quite some time to row back from the cuts of previous years. As for extending GP care to children under 12, it does not make sense until a review has been carried out of the current scheme for children under six. While I am all for a functioning, professional free health care scheme for everyone, in its absence I do not see the rationale for providing free health care to healthy people when others in ill-health are waiting for medical treatment and it appears as though the lists for hip and knee replacements are getting longer. Similarly, Members are familiar with the struggles of and the cuts imposed on those in addiction. I note the word "prevention" is not often seen and I did not hear it often in the various contributions made by Ministers. One needs targeted measures and one such measure must be prevention, regardless of whether it is to do with addiction, health or whatever.

A topic in which I take a personal interest is animal welfare and I acknowledge the work of the Minister, Deputy Coveney, in this regard. However, there is another disconnect here in that although he funds animal welfare organisations that work with animals, which is great, we continue to allow cases and so-called pastimes in which cruelty to animals is involved and I am referring to coursing, the badger cull, the fur farms and the digging out of foxes. The Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade was present in the Chamber earlier, I am sorry he has left, and I acknowledge Ireland's commitment to overseas development aid. However, we do not appear to be making much progress towards the 0.7% target as although there has been a slight increase, it is not enough. I note the OECD development assistance committee, DAC, report was very positive about Ireland. The Taoiseach spoke in New York about being honoured that Ireland was co-facilitating the conference in Addis Ababa and committed Ireland to moving towards the 0.7% target but there is a lack of detail about that. I also note that Ireland is giving €10 million to the UN World Food Programme, which is great. However, Ireland also is giving an additional €18 million to the EU development co-operation fund. From being a member of

the Joint Committee on Foreign Affairs and Trade and from chairing the Irish section of the Association of European Parliamentarians with Africa, AWEPA, I know the difference Ireland's direct bilateral untied aid makes with people in the countries of the global south. Consequently, that aspect of the budget did not make sense to me.

Another small point pertains to the increase in the cost of coal and briquettes and the increasing cost of smokeless fuel, which went in there somewhere. As for the comments from the Fiscal Advisory Council to the effect that the budget would have to be considered carefully, I do not understand why we have a Fiscal Advisory Council that does not see the budget beforehand but afterwards. Another issue concerns how Members debate the budget. There were many speeches yesterday in reaction to the general speeches from the Ministers, as there were today. However, all the detail is emerging today, which is what Members really need to address, but many Members have not yet had the opportunity to contribute and the question is whether they will do so. I believe Members must consider how to debate budgets better.

I read the conclusion of the speeches of both Ministers and one comment was that good progress continues to be made. The point was made that our debt is falling, our deficit is narrowing and unemployment is coming down. While they are all fine and that is good progress, good progress for me will be when the inequality gap narrows and when those with low incomes and those with disabilities do better. The speech also stated the Government has brought the country back from the brink but some people are still on the brink. One is told the Government will keep the recovery going but to me, it must be a recovery for all and the reality is that 376,000 people live in consistent poverty, which is double the number in 2008. Moreover, there has been an increase in the number of those experiencing deprivation and being at risk of poverty. When these issues are addressed through equality-proofing of budgets, then I believe Members will see really good budgets.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Liam Twomey): I call the Minister of State, Deputy Kevin Humphreys. I understand he is sharing time with the Minister, Deputy Heather Humphreys, and Deputy Catherine Byrne. Can he give me a breakdown of time?

Minister of State at the Department of Social Protection (Deputy Kevin Humphreys): Five minutes, 11 minutes and four minutes, respectively.

I thank Deputy Maureen O'Sullivan for her contribution. The wide parameters of the budget were given to the Fiscal Advisory Council prior to the budget but not the detail. It was outlined that €1.5 billion would be spent and that was the given in this regard. The Fiscal Advisory Council plays a good role and provides a balanced commentary when that discussion is held.

Many measures in the budget for 2016 will support people back into work and helping people to get into work and into a decently-paid job is the best way out of poverty for them. I have been listening to the debate throughout the day. I spent a considerable length of time in the Chamber today listening to the debate and have listened closely to it while in my office. I was in the Chamber this morning when Deputy Martin stated this was a Government without a plan. I disagree fundamentally with him because if one considers the position five years ago, Ireland did not have a functioning Government. Deputy Martin was a Minister in a Cabinet whose members were rapidly resigning. That Government had Independent support and a Green Party in the coalition that two months earlier had marked clearly its intention to exit the Administration. There was chaos and crisis. Ireland did not have a Government, it had chaos.

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The present Government had a clear plan, which was for a job-led recovery. When the Government stated four years ago that it would bring down the unemployment rate below 10%, it was said it could not be done. The Government was told night after night on various shows that it would head into another bailout. It did not and it has reduced the unemployment rate to 9.4%. My Department runs the *JobsIreland.ie* website and I checked the figures today. Between 28 September and 4 October, 2,353 real jobs, positions and vacancies were on that website for which people could apply and in the year to date, more than 95,000 vacancies have been advertised on the *JobsIreland.ie* website. Consequently, people are returning to work but I agree completely with Deputy O'Sullivan, the Government cannot stop and must keep pushing. Until the half a million jobs that were lost by the last Administration are recovered, we truly will not have a recovery in which all are sharing. We will not succeed in reducing the poverty figures until people get into jobs. Deputy Martin is totally wrong. He appears to throw out these one-liners to the effect there is no plan but there has been a plan, which has been to get people back into work, both for the salary it gives and the dignity it provides. The long-term unemployment rate now has fallen to 5.5%, an amazing figure, over the period in which the Government has been in office.

Deputy Keaveney, a former colleague, told the House about how this is a right-wing Government. He appears to have joined a right-wing party because he forgets it was Fianna Fáil that reduced the hourly minimum wage rate by €1, which somehow was meant to create work or increase competitiveness. On coming to power, this Government increased the minimum wage by €1. Yesterday, my colleague, the Minister of State at the Department of Jobs, Enterprise and Innovation, Deputy Nash, announced a further increase to the minimum wage which will mean that it will have been increased twice during the lifetime of this Administration. Not only has the minimum wage been increased, an independent review mechanism has been put in place to monitor it such that we will no longer be obliged to wait for future Governments to decide whether it should be increased.

Deputy Keaveney's comments come as no surprise. The Deputy is big on rhetoric but small on fact. No other Government in the midst of recession has introduced so much legislation to protect workers. The trade union movement in this country has been calling for decades for the introduction of collective bargaining. Thanks to the Minister of State, Deputy Nash collective bargaining is now in place to support and protect vulnerable workers on low wages. I know that Deputy Maureen O'Sullivan, who does a great deal of work in that area, welcomes this measure.

Most people are aware of what is contained in budget 2016. The Department of Social Protection has focused its attention on supporting people in returning to work and on people in employment. I am delighted that we were able to announce a 75% reinstatement of the Christmas bonus, which Deputy Maureen O'Sullivan has also welcomed. Fianna Fáil has forgotten that it abolished the Christmas bonus.

I support the 2016 budgetary measures.

Minister for Arts, Heritage and the Gaeltacht (Deputy Heather Humphreys): As has been said in this House throughout the afternoon, this budget is about not only spreading the recovery but securing it.

As Minister for Arts, Heritage and the Gaeltacht, I am acutely aware of the impact of the economic crisis on the sectors under my remit. Budgets across my Department were hit very

hard following the economic collapse, reflecting the burden shouldered by people right across this country. I am very pleased, therefore, to have secured a 12% increase in my Department's budget for 2016. Thanks to the economic recovery, we are now in a position to invest again in our arts, culture and heritage, which will benefit communities nationwide.

My Department's biggest priority for next year is the Ireland 2016 centenary programme. The sum of €48 million has been allocated for this initiative, which will ensure that the commemorations are a wide-ranging, nationwide, year-long series of events. We have developed the centenary programme across seven key strands including, State ceremonial, historical reflection, community participation, An Teanga Bheo - the living language, youth and imagination, cultural expression and global and diaspora. The majority of funding for Ireland 2016 - approximately €30 million - will be spent on a series of flagship capital projects, which include: the GPO interpretative and exhibition centre, which promises to be one of the most exciting new visitor experiences in the city centre; the new visitor centre at Teach an Phiarsaigh in Ros Muc; the new Tenement Museum at 14 Henrietta Street in Dublin, which will depict what life was like for the ordinary people of Dublin at the turn of the last century; refurbishment works at Richmond Barracks, with which I know Deputy Catherine Byrne is very familiar; the redevelopment of the Kevin Barry rooms at the National Concert Hall; and expansion and improvement works at the National Archives. There is also provision for the development of a 1916 commemorative centre at the national monument at 14-17 Moore Street and for a number of other important commemorative projects, including at Glasnevin Cemetery and the Athenaeum in Enniscorthy. These projects, which we have called the permanent reminders, will add to our cultural offering and will leave a lasting legacy from the commemorations.

The centenary programme is designed to reach into every community across the country. As I recently announced with the Taoiseach, in addition to the formal State programme and other set-piece events, some 1,800 other events will be held nationwide. Our cultural institutions are running special programmes and exhibitions to help us reflect on the past and we have developed an extensive schools programme with the Department of Education and Skills, which I hope will catch the imagination of our children and encourage them to explore their past and ambitiously imagine their future.

Budget 2016 contains a number of initiatives targeted at supporting artists and the arts community. Core funding for the Arts Council will increase by €2.5 million when compared to the 2015 budget. A once-off €2 million funding injection for our cultural institutions, which I secured late last year, has also been retained for 2016. The cultural institutions will also benefit from specific funding under the Ireland 2016 programme. I am delighted that we are also in a position to give Culture Ireland an additional €3 million next year for its ambitious programme, I Am Ireland, which forms part of the international element of Ireland 2016. This will provide direct support for Irish artists wishing to bring their work abroad. This €3 million allocation also includes additional support for the Abbey Theatre. I am also pleased to confirm that despite unwarranted speculation earlier this year, there will be no changes to the artists' tax exemption.

When I travel around the country and visit various cultural venues, I am always struck by how hard the arts community has worked over the last six or seven years to weather the crisis. Many arts centres are badly in need of investment in terms of their physical infrastructure. It is very positive, therefore, that thanks to the economic recovery, I am now in a position to introduce a new €3 million grant scheme for works at arts and cultural centre across the country. This scheme is expected to run for the next six years. In other words, €3 million per annum will be provided over the next six years. I am aware that there is a need for further investment in the

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arts but this is the best arts budget in years. As well as the various initiatives I have outlined, the €48 million being provided for the commemorations will fund a huge range of artistic and cultural initiatives. Arts and culture are at the centre of the commemorations. This budget should be seen as the first major step in restoring funding for the arts in a sustainable way.

The film and TV sector is a very important element of our creative industries, supporting thousands of jobs throughout the country. Section 481, the film tax incentive, is a crucial part of our policy approach to the sector. Last year, the Minister for Finance, Deputy Noonan, announced enhancements to the scheme, which were broadly welcomed by the sector. He committed to keeping the scheme under review, and I was very happy, therefore, when he announced that the cap on eligible expenditure is being raised to €70 million. This is a 40% increase on its current level. This will help to attract further big budget productions to these shores. It is important to remember that when major production companies come here, they hire local crews and create local jobs. I note that the Minister, Deputy Noonan, again indicated in his budget speech yesterday that he will continue to keep the scheme under review, and I look forward to working with him in this regard.

The €2 million increase in my Department's heritage programme is also welcome. I am a passionate supporter of heritage and I appreciate the huge difference that heritage groups make in local communities across this country. Our built heritage is a vital part of our cultural story and I hope to be in a position to announce details of direct support for built heritage shortly. This year's budget allocation will also allow for the continued operation and management of our six national parks and 78 nature reserves and continued compensation, relocation and restorative measures required under the EU habitats and birds directives.

The Department will continue to prioritise the support of the Irish language and the sustainable development of our island communities in 2016. Funding allocations for the islands and for the 20-year strategy for the Irish language have been increased for 2016 and the development of a cultural centre at Teach an Phiarsaigh, Ros Muc, County Galway, as part of the Ireland 2016 programme, will be completed.

The Government's approach to budget 2016 has been to manage the economy responsibly, while securing the recovery. I take the opportunity this evening to highlight some of the other key measures in this year's budget which will have a real and positive impact on people's everyday lives. Measures such as the cut in the universal social charge, the extension of the free preschool year and the extension of free GP care to the under 12s will make a big difference for middle income families across the country.

A number of targeted measures have been introduced for the farming community. I particularly welcome the introduction of a new €550 income tax credit. This is a hugely significant move and begins the process of tax equalisation for self-employed and PAYE workers.

I would also like to highlight one particular issue on which I worked very hard before my appointment as Minister. Commercial motor tax rates have been a major obstacle for the road haulage industry, in particular the huge disparity between rates here and in the North. Following my election to the Dáil in 2011, I worked very closely with the Irish Road Haulage Association, along with my colleague, Deputy Áine Collins, to highlight its concerns and the Minister, Deputy Michael Noonan, listened. He announced yesterday that he was simplifying commercial motor tax rates and, crucially, he is capping the maximum one at €900. That will save some drivers as much as €4,000 per year. It is a game changer. I thank the Minister, Deputy Noonan,

for his open approach. It is particularly relevant to my constituency of Cavan-Monaghan where we do not have any rail service and we rely totally on the haulage sector to help deliver goods out of the county and bring goods into it. That is an important measure.

Job creation will continue to be the number one priority for this Government. That will lead to additional employment, less tax and more money to invest in services and sectors such as the arts and heritage.

2016 promises to be very exciting for this country as we commemorate the events that led to the foundation of this State. As our economy continues to improve, we must ensure the benefits are spread across this country. Budget 2016 is a very good first step in achieving that aim.

Deputy Catherine Byrne: On the eve of Garda Anthony Golden's funeral, I extend my sympathy to his wife, his children and his extended family. As the mother of a member of An Garda Síochána, I know the challenges the men and women of An Garda Síochána face every day. My son made the choice to join the Garda; he was not forced to join. He made that choice believing, just like Garda Golden, that the duties he performed would protect communities and families and allow them to live in safety. I am glad the Minister announced the recruitment of an additional 600 gardaí.

The Traveller community lost beautiful young families over the weekend. The heartbreak of losing a family member is very difficult but there are few words when one sees a family completely wiped out. Perhaps at this time we can offer only prayers to comfort those who have lost and will grieve for years to come on the loss of their wonderful and lovely children.

I thank my family, the community I live in and the constituency for playing their part in bringing this country back to recovery. It was not only what the Government did, but what was done by the people.

I listened to Fianna Fáil and Sinn Féin members speak on a television programme last night. They said they would do things better. Unfortunately for Fianna Fáil, it did not do anything better. It left this country on its knees. It left young couples and families living in houses and apartments that are falling down around them, with very little opportunity of them ever moving out of them. As for Sinn Féin, if anyone is interested in getting an education or even have aspirations of becoming a doctor, a nurse or a garda, Sinn Féin wants to tax them out of existence. If a parent has a son or daughter to whom they want to leave their house and it is valued between €300,000 and €350,000, it will cost that son or daughter an extra €3,750 more in tax.

This budget will build the recovery and bring about stability, equality, opportunity, education and skills. In Fine Gael, we believe in work for everyone. We need people to go back to work. We need to provide those jobs. We have an ageing population. Many citizens have long-term illness and disabilities. That is the reason we need people at work.

I welcome the different measures, namely, the changes in the universal social charge, the minimum wage increase, the €85 million for children's measures, the extension of the free school year and the provision of two weeks parental pay. I welcome also the extension of GP cards to children aged under 12, the extra €5 in child benefit, the respite care grant of €1,700, the recruitment of an extra 2,260 teachers and an extra 600 gardaí, the home renovation grant and the provision of housing.

We have a long way to travel to make sure we can house people. I agree with Deputy

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Maureen O'Sullivan who, like myself, lives in an area where housing need is critical and is at crashing point at this stage. It is wrong to see young families having to live in a hotel room and not being able to go to bed at night in their own little space, even to read a book or do their homework. We need to continue to do what we are doing, but do it faster. I plead with Dublin City Council and Dublin South County Council in my constituency to do as much as they can to make sure buildings can be put in place as soon as possible, and difficult planning applications overcome.

There is another opportunity we have not examined, that is, the family home. As I walk around my constituency canvassing and doing leaflet drops, I meet many parents, grandparents, aunts and uncles who live in two and three bedroom houses that they can no longer manage; some of them do not want to manage them. There is an opportunity to build more senior citizen accommodation to allow people move into smaller accommodation and give family homes to families who need them. If we examine that issue more carefully, we might be able to help some of those parents, grandparents, aunts and uncles, if they were able to keep some of their benefits, to bring some of the people who are homeless in their families back under their roof, if only for a short time, until we can manage to build the houses we need. This Government is committed to providing €3.6 billion over the next few years to build housing. We need to do it now, and quickly. Above all, we need to do it for young families living in one room: families comprising two adults and four children are living in a bedroom in a hotel. That is totally unacceptable.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Liam Twomey): Deputy Calleary is sharing time with Deputy John Browne. They will have ten minutes each.

Deputy Dara Calleary: Yes, I am sharing time with Deputy Browne.

I welcome the opportunity to speak on yesterday's budget. It says a lot about the budget that there are only four of us, including the Acting Chairman, in the Chamber to debate or, I should say, to listen to statements on the budget; I would not say it is a debate. The context of this process and the way we do budgets has to change. We all knew the budget before yesterday. It was leaked and had more leaks than the *Titanic*. We need to review the way we do budgets. The lack of interest and lack of a presence here is typical of it.

The Minister, Deputy Heather Humphreys, spoke about the huge investment being placed in the 1916 commemoration programme next year and that is welcome. I acknowledge the discipline she has brought to that programme since she was appointed Minister together with her staff and the 1916 commemoration team. The best thing we can do to mark the centenary of 1916 is to live up to the ideals of the Proclamation, to the ideals for which the men and women of 1916 gave their lives. If we measure yesterday's budget against that Proclamation it absolutely fails. If the men and women of 1916 were given a choice of having fancy parades and interpretative centres done up and the mother and all with 1,800 events around the country or having a proper package put in place for people who are homeless, they would prefer a proper package was put in place for people who are homeless. How many people does it take to die on the streets outside this House for Ministers to stop having turf wars about who gets the credit for the package or about who does what? The budget announced yesterday set out the Government's priorities for 2016, the importance of that year, but the fact that the Minister for Finance and the Minister for the Environment, Community and Local Government could not agree a package on housing is disgraceful. It was a betrayal of the very ideals of that Proclamation that we will mark next year.

There are many areas to cover and I welcome some measures. I note in the Minister of State's Department an increase is being provided in the national training fund, which I presume will go into the apprentice programme. That is long overdue. There is no sense in us having a big capital investment programme and all the announcements that are being made by the Government unless we have a proper career path for people who want to get into construction but not only into that sector. I have said repeatedly in this House in recent years that we need to fall in love with apprenticeships again. We need to extend the range of apprenticeships. How is it that with us still having 18% unemployment - when all the schemes are added in - that there is a shortage of chefs? How is it that we are about to have severe shortages in all the key skills required in construction as the economy begins to grow again? That is the reason this investment is so important. I think the number is 2,500 places.

Deputy Damien English: No, 5,000 places.

Deputy Dara Calleary: My apologies. That is still not enough. We need to ensure that the entire system is focused on apprenticeships. If we look to the European model of apprenticeships, they are not only for the trades. There are many areas in which we could get involved. An issue that was not addressed yesterday is that we are still penalising those under the age of 25 with respect to social welfare. There was no reverse of that particular crucifixion that was brought in to apply to those under the age of 25 in terms of their ability to get a job. The jobs that the Ministers keeps saying are there are not there. That is one of the biggest failures of yesterday's budget. There is nothing in it to reduce and to reshape the regional imbalance that is occurring. Dublin represents some 45% of our gross domestic product, GDP, one of the highest percentages for a capital city. For several years nothing has been done to rebalance this figure and give the regions a chance. In 2014, only 38% of IDA Ireland inward investment was outside Dublin and Cork. No increase was given yesterday in the budget for local enterprise offices, the central plank of local enterprise creation. There was no extra investment for job creation organisations which have spent their time ramping up their operations, opening up new opportunities and giving themselves more space. However, we will not reward their ambition by increasing their central government funding.

From looking at the figures and compared to the likely 2015 outcomes, next year's budget for the Department of Jobs, Enterprise and Innovation seems to have been cut by €45 million. This highlights the whole farce of the budgetary process. At midnight last Friday, the Government released a €1.5 billion estimate, effectively the size of this budget, but no coverage was given to it and there were no live statements in the Dáil. There was no analysis of it, but it will fund many important projects and choices between now and the end of the year. It will be delivered in a haphazard way because of the way the budgetary process works. It is extraordinary that in that context the Government would cut the budget of the Department of Jobs, Enterprise and Innovation by €45 million. It demonstrates the complacency creeping into the Government around employment when we still have 118,600 people in long-term unemployment, a broad jobless rate of 18% and 89,000 people on labour activation schemes. While extra allowances were given yesterday, no extra supports were. We still have a major jobs crisis and challenge, but the Government has decided the Department should have a budget cut. Up to 149,000 third level graduates have left the country since the crisis began. What opportunities are we giving to them to come home? What extra incentives are being offered to those who want to return to their home counties?

I listened to Deputy Catherine Byrne and, like all Fine Gael backbenchers today, her speech was about having a go at Fianna Fáil and Sinn Féin for having no vision, etc. I remind her

that the ones who made the most sacrifices were the people who have taken pay cuts, job cuts, service cuts and taxation increases in the past eight years to get to the point where we have a budget that gives a little bit back. To use the Labour Party's phrase, "Every little helps". On this occasion, it has actually lived up to it for the first time in five years.

I also remind Deputy Catherine Byrne and all Fine Gael sages on the economy that the political heavy lifting was done by the the late Brian Lenihan and the former Taoiseach, Mr. Brian Cowen, who put €21 billion worth of cuts and extra taxation on the table, all of which measures were opposed by Members opposite at the time who promised they would be either reversed or rescinded. That has not happened. It is unbelievable Government backbenchers can forget that anything happened prior to 2011, as if it had nothing to do with them, or that all of those decisions made between 2008 and 2011 did not contribute to the country's economic growth.

There are significant opportunities and we must ensure we do not return to a situation like that in 2001 and 2002 when the economy grew but we did not have the capacity to provide opportunities. That is why I welcome the apprenticeship programme and why we need to ramp it up further. We need to ensure the silos that in the past affected proper apprentice and training programmes between the Department of Education and Skills, the Department of Jobs, Enterprise and Innovation and various other Departments and agencies are knocked down and do not get in the way of people availing of the opportunities that are coming.

It would be churlish for the Government to pat itself on the back, thinking it is all done and dusted. There is still a long hard road to travel. There was nothing in the budget for those on the variable rate mortgages, despite a promise made by the Minister of Finance, Deputy Michael Noonan, last May. Nothing has been given in so many areas of social care. People with dementia got nothing yesterday, about which the Alzheimer Society of Ireland was critical today. Choices were made that ignored people in distress and severe circumstances. The Government will have to answer for these choices, not in the next few weeks but certainly in the next few months.

As we move into 2016 and the commemoration of the 1916 Rising, is this a budget that befits that commemoration? If the commemoration is to be show time, with parties on the street, yes, it is a budget that will suit that kind of atmosphere. If it is a commemoration that will actually live up to the ideals of the Proclamation, restate and recast the country as the kind envisaged by those who gave their lives, it fails miserably. I hope this commemoration does a lot better.

Deputy John Browne: I welcome the changes in the budget to transport tax rates. For some time we have been lobbying for changes to be made to motor tax rates on larger trucks. At least the reduction of the motor tax on larger trucks to €900 will give transport operators a level playing field with their competitors in the United Kingdom and other countries. We received strong representations from hauliers in Wexford, including Ryan Haulage Limited, and from Ms Verona Murphy, president of the Irish Road Haulage Association. They are happy with the changes.

It is welcome that the respite care grant has been restored to its former amount. It was a mean cut at the time. At least the Minister has recognised the importance of this grant. The Acting Chairman, Deputy Liam Twomey, being a doctor, will also recognise the importance of carers being able to take a break.

Other measures announced in the budget fall short of what is required to ensure low-income and vulnerable families are protected from poverty and social exclusion. Several years ago I remember that the then Opposition spoke about the then finance Minister, Charlie McCreevy's famous 11 cuts. If one counts up all the cuts the Government has made over several years, it comes to between 35 and 40. The Government has a long way to go to rescind all of the cuts which have taken place in different areas. It reduced the fuel allowance, abolished the bereavement grant and the telephone allowance; it reduced the income threshold for medical cards for those over 70 years, with entitlements to the household benefits package, including the electricity allowance. The Minister for Children and Youth Affairs, when spokesperson on health, said he would abolish prescription charges, but he actually increased them threefold when he was Minister for Health. We have the property tax and the water tax. When added together, they reduce weekly incomes, particularly those of old age pensioners. An old age pensioner recently showed me how all of these cuts came to a €28 a week reduction in his income. The two Ministers involved need to re-examine this and provide for a proper increase.

While I welcome the €3 increase for old age pensioners, many old age pensioners feel it should have been at least €5, while some groups were seeking a €10 increase. Increases should have been given to those on disability allowances and in receipt of invalidity benefits. This is the group that has suffered seriously in recent times. With the Minister of State, Deputy Paul Kehoe, I recently visited a community workshop in Enniscorthy for what I would term our annual accounting of our stewardship. We met 60 service users. It was heartening to see those with disabilities making a case for increases in rent allowance, weekly allowance payments and provision against the lack of transport in rural areas. A person with a disability has greater costs than others. I have always contended that an extra allowance should be available for a person with a disability who is trying to rent a house. I have made that case to the Minister and community welfare officers. These people feel they have been left behind. Some 600,000 people in Ireland have disabilities. They feel they are not included in the thoughts and views of the Minister or considered in the financial payments he outlined this year and in previous years. This Government is not the only Government to do this. A number of Governments have neglected those with disabilities. I have to declare an interest in that I have a daughter who requires a wheelchair. However, I know people on basic incomes who find it difficult to provide funds and support to a member of their family who has a disability. This area needs to be treated differently to other social welfare areas. The Disability Federation of Ireland recently submitted a document to the Minister outlining its views on what should be available to people with disabilities. Perhaps the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform, Deputy Brendan Howlin, and the Minister for Finance, Deputy Michael Noonan, will look at that document and phase in what these people really need over the next three or four years. If not them, perhaps the next Government after the election, whether it is in November, February, March or some other time would do it. This is an area that needs priority treatment and care.

Deputy Dara Calleary mentioned the housing crisis. I am sure the Acting Chairman, Deputy Liam Twomey, is aware of the housing crisis situation in Wexford. It is hard to believe that in August, there were 158 families in Wexford who were homeless. People talk about homelessness in Dublin, Cork, Limerick and all the major cities, but there has also been a homelessness problem in rural Ireland in recent years. Some 4,000 people are on the housing list in Wexford, which is an increase of 25% in one year. Private contractors in the construction industry are not going to build houses in rural Ireland at present because they will not command a price that will cover the cost of building the houses. We need to return to having local authorities building houses in conjunction with voluntary organisations. In County Wexford, there will

be eight houses each built in Wexford town and Gorey this year. No council or local authority house will be built in New Ross or Enniscorthy. I pay tribute to NABCO, a voluntary housing organisation, which came into Enniscorthy and bought approximately 40 houses from NAMA and distributed them to people on the council housing list.

This brings me to NAMA. When I hear the Minister saying NAMA will build 20,000 houses by 2020, I think that if it is going to do it, it will have to get rid of the bureaucracy and red tape which currently exists. The 40 houses the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform, Deputy Brendan Howlin, will be opening on Friday were originally sold to the council. There was so much bureaucracy and red tape in dealing with NAMA, the council pulled out and NABCO eventually purchased the houses. The process took three and a half years. These houses were finished. No work was needed on them and yet it took three and a half years to deal with NAMA. If the Government is depending on NAMA to build houses, many people will remain homeless by 2020. We need to re-establish the housing sections in each local authority and let the local authorities do what they were good at, which was building houses.

As the Acting Chairman will know, in Wexford town, Enniscorthy, Gorey and New Ross, hundreds of houses were built by local authorities between 2002 and 2010. Approximately 400 houses were built in my town of Enniscorthy during that period. The local authorities had expertise, engineering staff and people able to acquire the builders to build the houses. Unfortunately, a change was made. A previous Government, of which I was a member, made the decision to move from local authorities building houses to voluntary housing. This policy has not worked. It is necessary to have a mix of local authority housing and voluntary housing.

It is hard to believe that we have so many homeless people in Wexford and these are only the homeless people we know. Every Deputy in this House knows that a tenant may have a house through the rental accommodation scheme or one that is being rented directly from the client of a bank. The bank seizes the house and the tenant becomes homeless and has to go back to his or her family. In many cases, a wife, husband and two or three children are living in one room in the old family home because that is all the space available to them. We do not hear much about these people, but they exist. For the life of me, I cannot understand why a bank would take back a house, insist the tenant leave and lock up the house and leave it vacant for months until it is sold. There are numerous houses in County Wexford which the banks have repossessed. They are locked up but they have not been sold. The Government should seriously examine the possibility of dealing with these banks to see if the houses, which are available, can be rented or some other deal done to ensure they are available for those who are on the housing list or are homeless.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Liam Twomey): I thank Deputy Browne.

Deputy John Browne: The other area that I would like to mention briefly is agriculture. There are areas of agriculture that need-----

Acting Chairman (Deputy Liam Twomey): Sorry, Deputy, but your time has concluded.

Deputy John Browne: -----fire brigade attention. The final point I wish to make concerns commercial rates. There is a need to deal with commercial rates for small businesses. The only one who can do that is the Minister for the Environment, Community and Local Government, in conjunction with the local authority. He should deal with the local authorities and insist on a reduction in rates for small businesses.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Liam Twomey): I call the Minister of State, Deputy Damien English. He is sharing time with the Minister of State, Deputy Simon Harris, and Deputy Bernard Durkan. How will the time be divided?

Deputy Damien English: As best we can. We will do magic, but I would say it will be seven minutes, five minutes and five minutes.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Liam Twomey): I will look after the 20 minutes so.

Deputy Damien English: The Acting Chairman may have to give us a few extra minutes in case we run over.

Deputy Dara Calleary: Their brains are fried from doing budgets.

Minister of State at the Department of Jobs, Enterprise and Innovation (Deputy Damien English): This jobs budget is designed to support the recovery and hard-pressed families and to continue the future proofing of the economy. It is neither the hair shirt budget that some economists have called for nor is it the silk shirt that some in the Opposition seem to think we can afford. Rather, it is a prudent budget that will create jobs. It will remove barriers to work and make work pay, grow the economy and keep the recovery going while reducing the current account deficit.

Business groups in Ireland have welcomed this budget. Danny McCoy of IBEC said:

The budget is right for the economy at this time and signals a new phase of economic development. The crisis is behind us and we are planning ahead. The Government has taken on board the concerns of business, reduced tax and encouraged private investment.

ISME, the Small Firms Association, SFA, and the American Chamber of Commerce have also welcomed the budget. The SFA Chairman, A.J. Noonan, stated, “This budget is a strong endorsement by Government of the importance of entrepreneurship and small business in Ireland.” However, this is not just a budget for business and jobs. It is also a budget for our young families. My constituency of Meath West has one of the highest concentrations of young families in the country, with a youth dependency ratio of over 38%. One only has to walk around the streets of Navan, Trim or Enfield to see just how young our communities are. Our young population means we can look forward to a more hopeful future, but families cannot live on hope alone. They need help now and this budget does just that.

Cutting USC, raising child benefit and extending the free preschool scheme to accommodate all three year olds to five and a half year olds will benefit young families in Meath West and throughout the country. These families endured a lot of the pain in the recession and, therefore, it is only right that they get some of the gain from the national recovery. Talk to any parent on the doorsteps in Meath West, the commuter belt area or right across the country and it is clear that education and the future of our children is their major focus. This budget will recruit an additional 2,260 teachers and reduce class sizes. It will deliver a better education to our children and invest in career guidance. This will help our children choose the courses and skills they need to get a good job and build a better future. With this budget, young school leavers will now have a lot more choice in their career paths.

We are investing an additional €10.5 million effectively to double the number of apprenticeship schemes available in Ireland. These 25 new apprenticeship schemes will cover areas such

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as ICT, transport and logistics, financial services and tourism and hospitality and the bulk of these schemes will be delivered in 2016.

We must refocus the third level system to create a more enterprise responsive educational system. We must provide the skills that students and industry require. We are doing that. Future-proofing the economy is all about building skills at all levels, including our pool of research skills. Ireland's future economic growth and prosperity will depend on our continued investment in science, technology and innovation. This investment is all about developing a competitive knowledge-based economy and society, driving innovation in enterprise, building human capital and maximising the return on research and development investment for economic and social progress.

Investment in research and development is crucial for creating and maintaining high-value jobs. In addition to the investment announced yesterday, my Department will be allocating an additional €29 million specifically for investment in research and innovation to spend before the end of this year. In addition to this, the overall 2016 capital investment will allow Enterprise Ireland to: support 100 innovative, high-potential start-up companies in 2016 employing 2,000 people; issue six competitive start fund calls with a target of financially supporting 85 innovative entrepreneurs; fund over 100 in-company research and development projects for companies that are valued in excess €100,000; continue the development of Knowledge Transfer Ireland and the wider national technology transfer system to create 30 new spin-out companies.

For Science Foundation Ireland, SFI, the 2016 allocation will allow SFI, among the other funds and projects it is involved in, to continue to fund the 12 SFI research centres, which represents an investment of €355 million from the Government and €190 million from over 200 industry partners, and train some 3,000 researchers for key positions in industry. Science Foundation Ireland will also undertake a recruitment campaign in partnership with the Irish universities to attract world-class researchers. Furthermore, there will be events such as Science Week in early November, when there will be over 800 events to encourage the public's interest in the STEM subjects so we can continue to have young people interested in these key areas for the economy in the years ahead.

I am pleased that Ireland's participation in the European Space Agency, ESA, will continue to support a growing number of Irish companies in the rapidly expanding European and global space markets. In this sector we will see a doubling of sales to over €80 million, a rise in total employment to over 2,300 and an expansion in the number of companies actively engaged with ESA to over 75. There is also continued funding for the regional Action Plan for Jobs, which will cover all regions, help spread the recovery and continue the trend where 70% of new jobs are created in the regions, despite what others might try to claim.

We are competing in an ever more competitive global environment. I am therefore pleased to report that work is almost complete on a new strategy for science, technology and innovation. It will be based on excellence, impact and talent. It is now time for fresh strategic ideas to make research work to maximum effect for the country. The vision for the new strategy will be underpinned by five key goals: an internationally competitive research system; excellent research with relevance and impact for the economy and for society; a renowned pool of talent in both academia and industry; a joined-up research ecosystem, responsive to emerging opportunities; a strong innovative enterprise base, growing employment, sales and exports. We must ensure that we have a world leading state-of-the-art research and innovation ecosystem in Ireland. I am confident that the forthcoming strategy will provide us with the roadmap to deliver on this

ambition.

This budget charts a responsible, prudent path to fiscal stability, economic growth and opportunity. It marks a new stage in Ireland's road to full recovery and a more sustainable future. It will support that recovery and will continue to future-proof the economy. I commend the budget to the House and to the country.

Minister of State at the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform (Deputy Simon Harris): I am pleased to have an opportunity to speak on budget 2016. Indeed, I look forward to having an opportunity to debate many of the measures in detail during the passage of the Finance Bill.

I thank Deputy Calleary for his attendance to represent the Opposition. If Sinn Féin Members were present, I would have questions to ask about their alternative budget. I have been asking those questions often in the media and I hope at some time to get an opportunity to put them in this House, although the questions tend to flow in one direction. The Sinn Féin Party made an alternative budget submission. In its submission, that party, which tells us it wishes to see an all-island and all-Ireland economy, proposed a marginal tax rate in this jurisdiction, the Republic of Ireland, that would be nearly 20% higher than the marginal tax rate up the road in Belfast. Will it explain to the Irish people, if not to the Dáil, why it thinks it is appropriate that people here would have to pay significantly higher taxes than people in Belfast and why it thinks that it would not have a detrimental effect on the mobility of labour and keeping a talented workforce in this country if our citizens are taxed 20% more than they would be taxed in Northern Ireland or the United Kingdom?

Second, Sinn Féin might also explain why it thinks it is fine to be in government in Northern Ireland, where business taxes such as capital gains tax would be approximately 20%, when it proposes increasing capital gains tax in this jurisdiction? In politics, particularly the closer we get to elections, one cannot speak out of both sides of one's mouth. One must ensure the numbers add up and that one has some type of consistent policy. While I do not agree with many policies of the Opposition, and it does not agree with many of our policies, there must be consistency. That consistency is lacking in Sinn Féin's policies north and south of the Border, not just on welfare, schools and public sector jobs but also on the crucial issue of tax and money in the pockets of hard-pressed families.

Many citizens heard yesterday's budget with a great sense of relief. There is no whooping, hollering or popping of champagne corks. The last number of years have been extraordinarily difficult for them, but yesterday's budget marked a scenario in which there was no need for any new taxes, other than an increase in the price of a packet of cigarettes, and there was an opportunity to invest in crucial services such as education, health and putting more gardaí on our streets.

I will comment on a few elements of the budget. The first is the area of child care. As a House and a nation we must decide that this is an area we intend to get right. If one considers the Celtic tiger economy years objectively, and this is not a partisan comment, we have never got this matter right. We have seen increases in direct payments to families, which is important, but we must also have child care structures. Yesterday's budget puts those structures in place by extending the free preschool year effectively to two years, by putting in place funding to develop after-school structures, so that children can be safely cared for in quality environments after school to enable working families to continue to work, and by increasing the amount

of subvention for child care to lower income families and families in training and education. These are important measures that are coupled with the introduction of paternity leave, which is two weeks paid paternity leave from next September, so the role of fathers can be recognised in child care and rearing a family. Much more must be done in this area but the Irish people can now see the beginning of a structure and system in which we can increase investment over the next number of years, if we stick with the economic plan at hand.

I am particularly pleased that the self-employed have been recognised in this budget. I addressed the Carlow Chamber of Commerce this morning at a post-budget briefing. I met a man who said, "I was recognised in the budget yesterday. The self-employed were mentioned in the budget." It is true that we have not closed the gap fully between the self-employed and the PAYE worker with regard to tax credits, but we have started to close it. We have made a clear commitment that we will close the gap over the next number of years should we be honoured to continue to maintain the public's finances on its behalf.

With regard to the USC reduction, I have heard a great deal of nonsense, frankly, about the difference between whether one should put in place tax cuts or reduce income tax. One can do both. There is no need to take my word for it, one need only look at the Exchequer figures and returns for this year. In the last budget we reduced USC. We took people out of USC, reduced a number of USC rates, reduced the marginal tax rate and increased the entry point to the marginal tax rate. What happened? We took in more tax. With those taxes we could not only pay down the deficit, which is important, but we could also invest extra money in health, education and the Christmas bonus for our pensioners, people with disabilities, carers and the long-term unemployed. Extra taxes, if used in the correct way, can stimulate the economy.

We must stop having an argument about tax that is just concerned with redistribution. Redistribution is important, and we have a very progressive tax system, but tax can also be used as a tool for growth in the economy. That has been shown with the 9% VAT rate, which I am delighted has been retained. Now we can show it with the USC reductions by removing people from the USC and by reducing the burden of the USC on people's incomes.

Incidentally, these are not wealthy people. The classification that some people in this House use for wealthy people is bonkers and does not tally with the real world. Some Members of the Opposition would have one believe that a nurse married to a garda or a small business owner married to a teacher is wealthy. They are not. They are the squeezed middle. We want those people to play their part in the economic recovery. We want them to be able to pay their mortgage, put their children through college and to be able to work more hours without the Government taking more than half of their income in tax. We must reduce the burden for those people, and we set about doing that yesterday. The Taoiseach made it clear today that if we stick with the plan, it will be possible to abolish the USC by 2020. However, we can only abolish it if we reach full employment and if we achieve a scenario where there are so many people working, more than ever previously in the history of the State, we will be able to continue to fund the State without being reliant on the USC, which was introduced as a temporary emergency measure by the previous Government during the economic crash.

I welcome the investment in education. My colleague, the Minister of State at the Department of Education and Skills, Deputy English, has outlined a number of the good measures. I particularly welcome the 600 extra resource teachers to look after children with special needs and to ensure they can fully participate in, and benefit from, the education system.

Debate adjourned.

Message from Select Committee

Acting Chairman (Deputy Liam Twomey): The Select Committee on Justice, Defence and Equality has completed its consideration of the Choice of Court (Hague Convention) Bill 2015 and the Criminal Justice (Mutual Assistance) (Amendment) Bill 2014 [Seanad] and has made no amendments thereto.

Written Answers follow Adjournment.

The Dáil adjourned at 9 p.m. until 2 p.m. on Tuesday, 20 October 2015.