



DÍOSPÓIREACHTAÍ PARLAIMINTE
PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

DÁIL ÉIREANN

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

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DÁIL ÉIREANN

Dé Máirt, 19 Iúil 2016

Tuesday, 19 July 2016

Chuaigh an Ceann Comhairle i gceannas ar 2 p.m.

*Paidir.
Prayer.*

Leaders' Questions

Deputy Micheál Martin: The housing crisis has been developing and, indeed, escalating since about 2011. It is interesting that there has been approximately a 400% increase in the number of families sleeping in emergency or temporary accommodation for the homeless since October 2014. That is a rise from 800 families in that situation to 2,177 in 2016.

In 2012, we only had an average of eight new families presenting as homeless in Dublin every month, but that rose to 40 families per month in 2014, and has risen to 70 per month in the first half of this year. Clearly, therefore, the situation is getting worse year after year. For far too long the last government denied the existence of a crisis and only belatedly declared it a national emergency. It published many strategies which were lacking in detail, implementation and execution in terms of their impact on building new houses. For example, fewer than 274 new social houses were constructed in 2015, and only 28 of those were directly built by local authorities.

The Committee on Housing and Homelessness, chaired by Deputy John Curran, did a lot of good cross-party work in coming up with solutions. The Minister has announced his response today. My key question to the Taoiseach concerns the execution, administrative and statutory capacity to deliver the scale of houses required to meet the challenges. Very few council houses were built by councils in 2015 and 2016 to date, yet we are now looking in the plan at up to 47,000 new social houses. One must question the current capacity of the system to deliver that number.

Is it not the case that a separate statutory institution or agency is required with wide-ranging powers to drive home house building and deal with what is, by any yardstick, a national emergency? Anybody who listened in this morning to "Morning Ireland" will have heard that we have had children living in hotels in Dublin in recent years, the impact of which on families, mothers, fathers and children was eloquently and graphically articulated. It is a true blight on our society. Notwithstanding all the strategies in the world that we publish, I am concerned about the capacity to execute delivery of this plan. Is the Taoiseach satisfied that the statutory administrative capacity to deliver it exists?

The Taoiseach: As we speak, the Minister with responsibility for housing is attending with the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform and others at the formal launch of the Government's housing action plan and so the Deputy's question is very pertinent and appropriate.

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We have made no secret that the issue of providing accommodation and proper housing for people, both social and affordable, and dealing with homelessness is a key priority of Government. That is why €5.3 billion is being provided, with 47,000 houses to be provided by 2021. Obviously, execution of the plan is an important point. The consultation with the entire spectrum of interested parties has been thorough. I commended Deputy John Curran and the Oireachtas Joint Committee on Housing and Homelessness on the report they produced. There is an appendix at the back of the plan dealing with each proposal brought forward by the Oireachtas committee, which is right and proper because these formed part of the detailed conversations and discussions that were held by the committee on this matter. The plan contains five pillars. It will be debated in the House this evening and tomorrow, during which time Deputies from all sides and all parties will have an opportunity to comment on it.

It is important to note that in recent years, local authorities have not measured up in the building of social housing to the extent needed. The Minister, Deputy Coveney, has looked at this carefully and has provided local authorities with a €200 million fund for access to sites that are currently inaccessible, either by bridge or road and to allow councils to design their own schemes in respect of certain conditions being applied. He has also provided for expedited capacity for An Bord Pleanála to allow it deal directly with applications that are usually first lodged with the local authorities and then transferred to An Bord Pleanála, such that in a situation where there is no further requirement for information, an answer will be given one way or the other inside 18 weeks. This is a serious attempt, following serious discussions by Government, to deal with this matter.

The first pillar of the plan on housing and homeless deals with homelessness. As the Minister, Deputy Coveney, has pointed out everybody should read the long and detailed first chapter of the plan because of the impact of homelessness. It is not appropriate that families and children in particular would be in inappropriate accommodation, bed and breakfast establishments or hotels. Obviously, the plan is set out in detail and is not only costed but timelined. It will be overseen by the Cabinet sub-committee and monitored carefully by the Minister. It is a case now of seeing if local authorities can measure up to the challenge they have been given with the resources they have been supplied with.

Deputy Micheál Martin: The question is whether the Taoiseach blames the local authorities for the mess of the past five years or their inability to get to grips with it as it continued to grow. I recall being in the House for Leaders' Questions during which the Government denied for a long time that there was a problem. The Focus Ireland statistics in regard to homelessness among children increased in 2012, 2013, 2014 and 2015. It was a market-led approach and we were told the market would correct but it did not. We got the same response to rent allowance for three years. The Government told us there was no way it was going to increase rent allowance. There was an ideological resistance to it. At long last the rent allowance has been increased. Following engagement, discussions, party conferences and so on, it has happened.

I do not think it is fair to blame the local authorities. Yes, they need to be looked at as well but it is a scandal that there are any empty houses in local authority housing stock given the emergency. It is incredible. Deputy Cowen submitted a freedom of information request. There are still 2,700 empty local authority houses throughout the country. In the name of God, does anybody realise that there is an urgency and an emergency out there? There are people coming to our clinics who would take those houses in the morning, but what does the Government do? It puts a limit on 30,000 houses, over and above which a local authority must seek permission. The local authority must go through an eight-stage process, which has reduced to four stages.

Local authority officials are telling me that this has made it worse. The Taoiseach needs to cut through a lot of this. I put it to him that given the emergency with which we are dealing, we need national administrative and statutory capacity to knock heads together and get delivery. That is the only way it is going to happen.

The Taoiseach: The plan will be debated in the Dáil today and tomorrow. It is important to say that local authorities have performed very indifferently in many cases. Some are better than others. However, they were not responsible for the complete collapse of the housing sector. We know what happened to the construction sector in general. Obviously, many builders went out of business while many others emigrated and the economy did not have the capacity to develop these things.

All these issues are being looked at in great detail by the Minister and his officials across Government, not just in one Department. This is also to address the unacceptable number of families in emergency accommodation and involves looking at moderating rental and purchase price inflation, particularly in urban areas. We are aware of this. There was never a denial of the fact that there was a problem. There was always an acceptance and understanding that the construction sector had collapsed from building 90,000 houses down to fewer than 10,000. There is also the issue of addressing the affordability gap for many households wishing to purchase their own homes. The Minister will refer to opportunities to deal with that which will present themselves later. Other issues include the rental sector, void units and empty houses throughout the country that could be purchased. The Minister has addressed all of these issues in considerable detail through the five pillars, and I hope Members will give their views during the discussion today and tomorrow. It is a genuine attempt to sort this out once and for all.

Deputy Gerry Adams: Three weeks ago, there was a motion before the Dáil calling for the establishment of a commission of investigation into the sale of NAMA's Northern loan book, Project Eagle. The Government and Fianna Fáil blocked this motion. The Taoiseach claimed that the allegations relating to the sale of Project Eagle had nothing to do with NAMA as an entity. Yet it emerged last week that the chairperson of NAMA, Mr. Frank Daly, wrote to the Standards in Public Office Commission, SIPO, in March to say that a member of NAMA's advisory board in Northern Ireland might have contravened the Ethics in Public Office Act while serving on the board. The Taoiseach will recall that this board member was alleged to have been charging clients fees for advice relating to NAMA. It is also alleged that he had an unethical working relationship with the head of asset recovery at NAMA which gave him access to sensitive commercial information. It is further alleged that he was lobbying on behalf of fee-paying clients to reduce loan repayments. In return, he would receive cash payments - the so-called fixer fees - and all this is very well documented.

Mr. Daly's letter to SIPO rubbishes the notion put forward by the Taoiseach that the sale of Project Eagle has nothing to do with NAMA. It has everything to do with NAMA and there are serious questions for NAMA to answer in respect of all this. However, the Taoiseach says there is nothing to see. In respect of the SIPO complaint, NAMA needs to explain why it waited until March 2016 to write to SIPO when it was aware of the issues involved in March 2014. All of this is on the public record. Mr. Daly admitted as much to Deputy McDonald at a meeting of the Committee of Public Accounts.

These are serious allegations of financial corruption and insider dealing - criminal offences. This is the people's money that was stolen and yet these allegations are not being investigated in this State. There are ongoing investigations in Northern Ireland. The Northern Ireland As-

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sembly inquiry found the Government's position to be very unhelpful. There are also investigations in the USA. An investigation here, contrary to what the leader of Fianna Fáil has said, would not prejudice any of these ongoing investigations. The Government is proposing a new template for the IBRC commission which could work for an inquiry into NAMA. Will the Taoiseach now commit to establishing such a commission of investigation?

The Taoiseach: We have dealt with this before with Deputy Adams and a number of other Deputies. On the question of value for money, we fully support the ongoing examination by the Comptroller and Auditor General into the disposal by NAMA of the loans of Northern Ireland debtors. The Comptroller and Auditor General, as Deputy Adams is aware, is best positioned to independently review the transaction in this jurisdiction. The Comptroller and Auditor General is required by law under section 226 of the NAMA Act to produce a report every three years assessing the extent to which NAMA has made progress towards achieving its overall targets. NAMA and the Comptroller and Auditor General appeared before the Committee of Public Accounts on 9 July 2015. At that appearance, the Comptroller and Auditor General indicated that his next section 226 report required under law would look in detail at a sample of NAMA disposals and a sample of properties held by it for investment and, furthermore, that a specific review of Project Eagle under section 9 of the Comptroller and Auditor General Act would be undertaken. I am quite sure Deputy Adams supports the integrity and credibility of the Comptroller and Auditor General. That report into Project Eagle, as I understand it, is practically completed. It will be debated by the Committee of Public Accounts, which is the accountable body in respect of NAMA. The Comptroller and Auditor General and the Committee of Public Accounts both hold NAMA accountable here. The Comptroller and Auditor General has indicated that he intends to issue a report under section 11 of the Comptroller and Auditor General Act following this review of Project Eagle. This is consistent entirely with the law and with his powers of investigation to scrutinise and report on operations or regarding any aspect of NAMA's work that may arise through its annual audits or special reports about any aspect of NAMA's work. Mr. Daly was doing his duty of seeing that everything was above board in respect of the law and his responsibilities.

The Department of Finance and NAMA have received a draft of the report and are providing comment to the Comptroller and Auditor General on that draft report. Officials of the Comptroller and Auditor General have also confirmed that, given their independent role, any queries related to the timing, content or any other specific aspects of their reports should be directed to the Office of the Comptroller and Auditor General in the first instance.

I am informed by NAMA, as I said before, that the loan portfolio in question was sold following an open process to the highest bidder for what it was worth. On the question about allegations made against certain individuals in Northern Ireland, NAMA paid no moneys to any party on this loan sale against whom allegations of wrongdoing are now being made. As I said previously, anyone with any evidence of wrongdoing needs to immediately report it to the relevant authorities. I am aware that two individuals were held for questioning as part of the UK National Crime Agency's investigation into the sale of Northern Ireland assets owned by NAMA. I am advised also that the NCA has confirmed to NAMA that no aspect of the agency's activities is under investigation.

Deputy Gerry Adams: I reassure the Taoiseach that of course I support the Comptroller and Auditor General, but his role is restricted and limited. He will seek to establish the monetary value of the transactions; I asked the Taoiseach about a commission of investigation. When Teachta Mick Wallace raised this issue last week, the Taoiseach gave him a different answer

from the one he has given me. This week, he is saying it is okay and that the Comptroller and Auditor General is dealing with it. Last week, he said: “the Minister for Finance has a view that no specific line of inquiry here can stand up and be usefully pursued by a commission of investigation.” This is the same Minister for Finance, Deputy Noonan, whom Frank Daly said he briefed in full on these matters, including on the scandal of the £15 million fixer fee. The Minister has yet to come into the Dáil to explain why he did not halt the sales process at that time.

The Taoiseach will recall that I raised this issue again when he hosted what I thought was a good meeting with the political leaders to discuss the consequences of the Brexit vote on Thursday last, and we discussed the amendments by the Government to the Siteserv investigation. We support those amendments and we support the bespoke commission that the Taoiseach proposes. The Taoiseach will also recall that he resisted an investigation into Siteserv at the time. That did not go away. This NAMA scandal will not go away. I again put it to the Taoiseach that the Siteserv model could work for an investigation into the NAMA scandal. My appeal to the Taoiseach is that he establish this. If he will not, will he get up and tell us why he will not allow an investigation by a commission of the type he is setting up for Siteserv?

The Taoiseach: There are investigations going on in the jurisdiction in the North into allegations that were made here. Deputy Adams makes the point about the Comptroller and Auditor General. Let me repeat for the Deputy that the Comptroller and Auditor General and NAMA appeared before the Committee of Public Accounts on 9 July last year. At that appearance, the Comptroller and Auditor General indicated that his next section 226 report would look in detail at a sample of NAMA disposals and a sample of properties that it held for investment, and, furthermore, that a specific review of Project Eagle would be undertaken under section 9 of the Comptroller and Auditor General (Amendment) Act 1993. The Comptroller and Auditor General is the appropriate independent statutory body here and the Committee of Public Accounts is the committee that holds that responsible and accountable in the eyes of the taxpayer. From that point of view, the draft report has been presented, there are comments on that going back to the Comptroller and Auditor General, and that report will be obviously completed, presented to and discussed by the Committee of Public Accounts, on which Deputy Adams’s party has representation. I am quite sure that there will be a detailed and thorough discussion on the Comptroller and Auditor General’s report into Project Eagle.

Deputy Gerry Adams: A commission of investigation.

Deputy Brendan Howlin: Today is the day on which the Low Pay Commission is required by law to report. I gather from media reports that this report was considered by Government today and will be published this afternoon. The media reports made clear that the Low Pay Commission has recommended an increase of 10 cent per hour to the minimum wage. It is fair to say that this is a disappointing recommendation for the thousands of low-paid workers in the Irish economy. For a full-time worker, this would translate to just about €200 per year, hardly enough to lift a family out of poverty, we will all agree.

The establishment of the Low Pay Commission was a progressive move and the issue I raise here today is no reflection on the membership of the commission. Instead, I will focus on the Government’s role. In the UK, its Low Pay Commission has been tasked with raising the minimum wage to at least 60% of median earnings by 2020. That was the specific target given to it by the British Government. During the general election, that was the policy that my party advocated. We expected to see the minimum wage rise to €11.50 an hour by 2020, an increase of approximately €5,000 a year. The programme for a partnership Government, published by Fine

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Gael published with its Government partners for this term, was less ambitious than what the Labour Party set out during the election, but it still included a commitment that it would support an increase in the minimum wage to €10.50 an hour over the next five years. Unfortunately, it appears the Taoiseach has not done anything to achieve that target set out in the Government programme. Instead of achieving a level of €11.50 within five years, if we continue at the current rate of recommendations today, we will not see that target reached until 2029.

My questions are straightforward. Why has the Taoiseach not changed the terms of reference for the Low Pay Commission to mandate it to deliver an increase in the minimum wage to at least €10.50 an hour within the five years set out in the programme for Government? Will the Taoiseach agree to implement such changes so that the Low Pay Commission will have a mandate before it produces its next report? In light of the recent work that has confirmed the consensus on the living wage to be approximately €11.50 per hour, will the Taoiseach revise the commitment in the programme for Government to reach that level?

The Taoiseach: I thank Deputy Howlin for his question. The Low Pay Commission is an independent entity set up by the previous Government to bring a structure and a realism to claims for increases in the minimum wage. As the Deputy is well aware, the Low Pay Commission was set up because of the nature of the way claims were being put forward prior to that. The former Minister of State, now Senator Gerald Nash, did much work on that with the former Minister, Deputy Bruton, at the time.

The Government was interested in having a low pay commission to bring about independent objectivity. One of the first decisions of the previous Government was to reverse a cut in the minimum wage that had been brought about before, and it increased the wage by 50 cent. This is an independent entity. The Government approved the publication of the report today, 19 July, and the Minister for Jobs, Enterprise and Innovation now has three months to consider the implications of the report before coming back to the Government in September. There is a minority report, as the Deputy is aware. There are nine members on the Low Pay Commission and three of those had a different view. The report must be considered carefully by the Government.

As Deputy Howlin is well aware from his own experience, the Low Pay Commission values its independence and would not want to be in the position of being directed. The €10.50 rate referred to in the programme for Government was an indication of what might be achieved over a five-year Government. Whereas the recommendation is for an extra 10 cent per hour, this is clearly an indication of how seriously the employers and specialists in the area view the implications of the decision from the British referendum on EU membership. They have made their judgment and I consider taking the possible implications of that into account.

The Minister for Jobs, Enterprise and Innovation will consider the report in its entirety and has three months to come back to the Government. She will do so in September. As the Deputy is aware, we favour having a position where work is seen to pay and there is an incentive for people to go to work. That is always a consideration that must be taken into account as well.

Deputy Brendan Howlin: I have a very direct question for the Taoiseach. Does he believe that a raise of 10 cent per hour, or a 1% increase in the minimum wage, is adequate? Does he accept that it will be impossible to meet the programme for Government commitment of a minimum rate of €10.50 per hour in five years if progress is made at that pace? To achieve even the €10.50 per hour rate, as opposed to the €11.50 living wage rate, a fresh mandate is required to be given by the Government, so will the Taoiseach agree to give that mandate?

The Taoiseach: As I stated, the Low Pay Commission was given a mandate to make recommendations based on the economic position as it sees it applying in this case. It made a recommendation of 10 cent per hour, or approximately €3.90 per week. Clearly, if that progress was followed on a yearly basis, one would be waiting a while before reaching €10.50, never mind €11.50.

Deputy Brendan Howlin: It would be 2029.

The Taoiseach: The commission, in its independence and wisdom, has taken into account the possible implications of Brexit. If the position were different economically or known to be very different, it may have made a different recommendation. The Minister for Jobs, Enterprise and Innovation will consider the report in its entirety and come back to the Government. I take the Deputy's point but I also feel the Low Pay Commission made it perfectly clear-----

Deputy Mick Barry: It is well named.

The Taoiseach: -----it is an independent entity and it values its independence. It feels free to make the recommendation, taking all these issues into consideration before producing the report, which has been published today.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: For the more than 100,000 families and households rotting on housing lists for 15 years and longer and the thousands of families suffering the cruelty and hardship of homelessness, I regret to give my opinion that this document is an incredible disappointment. At best, it is yet another mirage and false dawn for those who desperately need solutions to the housing crisis. At worst, I believe it to be a cynical exercise in spooft and dishonesty in that it masks a move to retreat from the provision of local authority housing to the privatisation of housing provision under the guise of a promise of an increase in social housing provision.

If that contention is not true, the Taoiseach will be able to answer a simple question - an answer that is not contained in the report. How many local authority houses will be built between 2016 and 2020, the years of this plan? I am being very specific; my question is about local authority houses. I am not asking about the rental accommodation scheme, RAS, the housing assistance payment, HAP, leasing arrangements, public private partnerships or approved housing bodies. I am asking about council houses. How many will be built? It is not in the report, it was never in Deputy Alan Kelly's report and the Taoiseach never answers that question. I believe what is clearly spelt out in this document is that this is all about more incentives, grants and supports for private developers and vulture funds, in the hope of creating a mirage that the private, for profit sector will deliver the social housing we need when it will not. What we need are council houses.

If I am wrong, the Taoiseach should tell me. Will he give me the specific figures? How many council houses will be built next year and in subsequent years? I suspect the Taoiseach will not be able to give me the answer to the question. In any event, the figure will be well south of the headline figures being blasted all over the media at the moment. Let him prove me wrong and give hope to those who have been waiting for 15 years and longer on a housing list. Let him tell them there is light at the end of the tunnel. However, there is no such light in this document, which is a manifesto to privatise public housing.

The Taoiseach: I would have thought that out of all the discussions, consultations and detail in the report, the Deputy would have found something that might interest him. Obviously,

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he has a different view.

I cannot answer the Deputy's question-----

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: I know the Taoiseach cannot.

The Taoiseach: -----which is why he asked it.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: It is pretty elementary.

The Taoiseach: Let me explain. The Deputy will not be able to answer my question either. Some 47,000 social housing units are to be delivered by 2021, supported by an investment of €5.35 billion. That is real money that is on the table. However, Deputy Boyd Barrett will not be able to answer the question as to the impact of a housing delivery unit being set up in the Department with responsibility for housing. This unit will work with every local authority to improve the opportunity to build council houses. There will be a provision of money for the building of bridges, roads or access points, as the case may be, to get access to sites that are currently inaccessible. Councils will have the opportunity to design their own houses. The planning process will be expedited so that these things can happen.

The overall objective is to deliver 47,000 houses by 2021. It is impossible for any chief executive to say today that X number of council houses will be built by year end. When we take into account these facilities, the housing delivery unit in the Department and the opportunity for local authorities throughout the country to avail of the incentives to open up sites they have not been able to open up before, to expedite planning and to design their own houses, the answer to this question will become clearer as we move along. The overall objective is for 47,000 houses with €5.35 billion on the table to make it happen. Local authorities have been the subject of a lot of pressure and there was a question on this from Deputy Micheál Martin earlier. Some local authorities perform better than others but voids and the regeneration of neglected houses into liveable units are opportunities for social houses to be provided by local authorities.

It is not possible to answer the Deputy's question directly because the answer lies in the incentives and facilities being made available to local authorities and the chief executives of those local authorities to get on with it and prove they can measure up both to the numbers and the timetable that has been set out.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: I did not know this was questions to People Before Profit. I thought it was questions to the Taoiseach. It could not be more telling that, in answer to the most basic and elementary question, the Taoiseach cannot tell the House how many council houses the Government intends to deliver. That confirms that we are just getting a rehashed, slightly upscaled version of the Kelly plan. There are big headline figures but when one scratches beneath the surface, it is all dependent on "incentives" to the private sector in the shape of infrastructural grants and the transfer of public land. Could we cosset them any more than we have already done? Was it not the cosseting and incentivising of these people that led to the last property crash while delivering no social housing? The Taoiseach pursues this mirage but this will be a disastrous failure.

If the Taoiseach cannot answer the question as to how many local authority houses are to be built, which is damning, why did he not accept the recommendations of the Oireachtas Committee on Housing and Homelessness? There is to be no moratorium on repossessions, no request to the EU to break the fiscal rules on investment in social housing and no rent controls. Could

it be any more of a mirage than that? The Government did not even listen to its own all-party Oireachtas committee.

The Taoiseach: The Deputy is entirely wrong and I disagree with him. The figure of 47,000 is real; the figure of €5.35 billion is real. I did not hear the Deputy say how many council houses are going to be built in Dún Laoghaire-Rathdown this year and, of course, he knows all these answers.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: I will give the Taoiseach the answer. The number is 53 while 600 joined the housing list.

The Taoiseach: Does he know how many were built in the past ten years? I did not mention incentives for private operators but I did mention incentives for local authorities, such as a €200 million fund for access to sites that are currently off limits and the opportunity to design their own schemes and expedite planning permissions so that they can get on with building council houses for tenants all over the country.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: The Taoiseach cannot give me the numbers.

The Taoiseach: Councils and local authorities are to be given the opportunity to improve and repair voided units and to take over houses that are not finished and finish them for their own social housing clients.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: We need council houses.

The Taoiseach: Every chief executive of a local authority now has the opportunity to work towards the overall objective of 47,000 units by 2021.

There is a special response to the report of the Oireachtas committee, which was well chaired by Deputy John Curran, in an appendix to the report. Each and every proposal that was made has been responded to by the Minister.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: Most of the recommendations were rejected.

The Taoiseach: Not all of the recommendations were accepted but the real intent of the Government is to provide, over the five pillars referred to, 47,000 social units by 2021 and an improvement in so far as we will be able to spend €5.35 billion in that period. That is the real challenge.

Nice Attacks: Expressions of Sympathy

An Ceann Comhairle: Before proceeding to Questions on Proposed Legislation I will give each leader, beginning with the Taoiseach, one minute for a brief statement on the monstrous attacks in Nice last week.

The Taoiseach: We have been here before - after the *Charlie Hebdo* and kosher supermarket murders in January last year, the November slaughter in Paris and the Brussels bomb attacks. Now we mourn the death of 84 people, and the serious injuries suffered by many more, after the latest in this appalling litany of outrage.

Each of these attacks has been the same in its dreadful consequences, but each has had its own distinctly horrific features. People have been killed for who they were - journalists or Jews. People have been killed as they enjoyed an autumn Friday evening out, as they travelled

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to work or through an international airport and now, just after they had watched spectacular fireworks by the Mediterranean at the end of France's national day.

In each case, they have been killed as they enjoyed - and because they enjoyed - the freedoms offered by our western civilisation. The freedom of expression and the freedom of religion. The freedom to have a drink, to listen to music, for men and women, gay and straight, to be together on a night out. The freedom to travel and to work. The freedom to come together to celebrate the eternal values of France - liberty, equality and fraternity.

Those who were murdered on Thursday night were French and foreign, young and old, male and female. Families were wiped out or shattered forever. The innocent faces of the youngest victims are deeply poignant, but so too is the face of the 73 year old grandmother who was the first person to be killed, and in a bitter irony, she was only one of many Muslims to be killed by someone purporting to act in the name of Islam.

We do not know if the killer acted alone or as part of a conspiracy, even though his attack was claimed by ISIS. His methods were cruder than those used in previous attacks. It does seem clear that he was a deeply disturbed and unstable person - at first glance, similar to those responsible for so many gun attacks in the United States of America, most recently in Orlando.

Ireland stands by France. France is a great nation, the birthplace of republicanism and of universal human rights. These values are more precious than ever in our turbulent and dangerous world and must be protected. I look forward very much to greeting President Hollande in Dublin on Thursday, as will President Higgins, and to conveying to him in person the deep sympathy and outrage felt by the people of Ireland.

We must do all we can to combat evil and to protect our citizens. As the Tánaiste said yesterday, the gardaí keep the country safe and they work based on intelligence.

Although we have no reason to believe that Ireland is in the front line, the gardaí and the Government will continue to take whatever measures are necessary to deal with the terrorist threat. Ireland works very closely with France and other international partners, and within the EU significant progress has been made on a wide range of counter-terrorism legislation and other practical measures of co-operation, though there is also a very long way to go. There is also an intensified focus on combating and rooting out the ideology of hate, an ideology totally inconsistent with true religious belief.

It is a sad reality, however, that no defences can guarantee absolute safety, above all, against an attack so chillingly rage-filled and basic as that of Bastille Day, but we cannot allow ourselves to be cowed or beaten by terrorism, and we will not.

The best response is to continue to live our lives in accordance with the values of our society because in the end, liberty and love will triumph over repression and hate.

Deputy Micheál Martin: On behalf of the Fianna Fáil Party and on my own behalf, I want again to join with Deputies in sending our sincerest sympathy to the families bereaved by this appalling act of terror, which raises the threshold of inhumanity to an incomprehensible level. We send our sympathy to the people of France in what is a deeply trying time for them.

Last Friday, I called to see Ambassador Thébault to convey these sentiments to him personally. During our discussion it became clear that the connections between Ireland and France

run deep and strong. Thursday's horrific act in Nice is the seventh major attack on the French people in recent years.

There is no question where the people of our country stand. We stand in solidarity with France and we stand in solidarity with the great principles of liberty, equality and fraternity which, even after Nice, will always define 14 July. As we look for ways of responding to the events in Nice, the Bataclan and *Charlie Hebdo* and to the other horrific events in many parts of Europe and beyond, we must never forget what we stand for and we must never allow the terrorists to define our standards. There is no justification of any sort for these horrific acts. They are illegitimate in every way and they go directly against the overwhelming views of people on whose behalf the killers claim to act. These are not the acts of a religion, a people or a popular movement. They are the actions of small groups of individuals which we must never waiver in opposing.

This is a tense time in global affairs. There are many calls for extreme reaction. There is a natural urge to find refuge in broad definitions of the enemy. New types of terror require new and robust responses. The democratic will cannot be defenceless in the face of those who seek to destroy it but, equally, we must never forget what it is we defend. There are those who love nothing more than to attack the values of Europe by refusing to acknowledge anything that distinguishes it from places dominated by cruel and dominant governments. Nothing will ever convince them. However, Europe is a continent which is defined by a respect for democracy and human rights beyond any other region in the world. France must not stop being France because of these attacks and Europe must not stop being Europe because that is exactly what the terrorists want. They want us to act like them and they want to inspire an extreme reaction. They want to make things immeasurably worse for the communities from whence they came. It is only by creating a spiral of division and destruction that they can win. We can never allow that.

Deputy Gerry Adams: Ba mhaith liom comhbhrón a dhéanamh le clanna na ndaoine a mharaíodh in Nice sa Fhrainc Déardaoin seo caite. Ar dheis Dé go raibh a n-anamacha dílse. Chuir sé déistin orm nuair a chonaic mé an nuacht. Caithfidh achan duine seasamh go láidir in aghaidh an ionsaithe seo.

On behalf of Sinn Féin, I extend my sincerest and heartfelt sympathy and solidarity to the families and the friends of those killed in the despicable act of hate in Nice on Bastille Day last Thursday. There were 84 people killed, including ten children, and more than 300 people were injured in the harrowing attack. Sinn Féin's spokesperson on foreign affairs, Teachta Seán Crowe, has written to the French ambassador to express our condolences and solidarity with the French people at this extremely difficult time. This morning, myself and leas uachtarán Shinn Féin, Deputy Mary Lou McDonald, signed the book of condolence at the Mansion House. A copy of the Proclamation hangs above the little table holding the book of condolence - our own declaration of liberty, fraternity and equality. The people of France have had to endure too many tragedies in a short period of time and our thoughts and prayers are with all of them once again.

I am also concerned about developments in Turkey over the weekend. Sinn Féin condemns the attempted military coup but we also think it is important that a message is sent from the Dáil that the Turkish Government must act with restraint and within the rule of law. There are justifiable concerns that the fallout from developments there will lead to increased human rights violations with the Turkish President becoming even more authoritarian. We look to An Tao-

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iseach to state clearly these concerns on behalf of the people of this State.

Táimid ag smaoineamh ar na daoine ar fud an domhain a fuair bás, go háirithe ag an uair mhillteanach seo le muintir na Fraince. Ba mhaith liom comhbhrón Shinn Féin a chur in iúl dóibh.

Deputy Brendan Howlin: Bastille Day commemorates a transformative moment in modern history. Each year, the French people remember that true citizenship was not always automatic and that France is now a united country. Last week, the peaceful celebration of national unity and identity was torn apart in the city of Nice. Eighty-four people, including children, died on a day that should have contained only joy. Hundreds more were injured and continue to suffer. Our sympathies are with those who were hurt and those who were injured, and with their families, all their friends and the entire French people at home and away.

We know that the unity of the French nation will stand firm in the face of this act of barbarism. Five days ago, terror briefly replaced joy. Once more, our neighbours were attacked. What our President has referred to as cowardly, cold-blooded attacks have fuelled fears in France and across Europe. These are assaults on our way of life, on our core values. They are aimed at our liberty, our freedom, our democracy, but they will not work because, in the face of such attacks, we stand together in solidarity. France's values are our values. The three days of national mourning in France have now come to an end. France lifts its head and looks once more, hopefully, to a better, brighter future, and Ireland and all the Irish people stand with her. On behalf of the Labour Party I send my condolences and our solidarity to all those so cruelly affected.

Deputy Róisín Shortall: On behalf of the Social Democrats I voice our revulsion at, and condemnation of, the horrific and mindless attack in Nice last Thursday evening. The horror of the attack is all the more poignant in view of the day on which it took place, France's national holiday. We can all visualise what it must have been like for those families out celebrating a very important national day and families on holidays. The attack was executed in such a way as to cause maximum destruction and harm. Eighty-four people died and countless others were seriously injured. We in this country are very conscious of our close ties with the French people. Many of us have been on holidays in Nice and can only just start to visualise what that scene must have been like along the prom in Nice. The Social Democrats join with other parties here in extending the deepest sympathies of the people of Ireland to our colleagues in France for what was an appalling situation.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: On behalf of People Before Profit and the Anti-Austerity Alliance I extend our deepest sympathies and condolences to the families, friends and loved ones of the people who were massacred in Nice and those who were injured, some of whom are still in a critical state. The actions that claimed their lives were utterly despicable, unconscionable and unjustifiable in any terms. While we do not really know whether the attacker was a crazed lone individual influenced by the ideas of the so-called Islamic State or actually directed by it, we can be clear that that sort of hate and ideology offers absolutely nothing to humanity, the Muslim community, or any cause in north Africa, the Middle East or anywhere else in terms of trying to bring peace or justice to troubled parts of the world. It must be condemned in the most unequivocal terms. These tragedies continue and they seem to be multiplying. We need to begin to address how people can be driven to these acts of hatred and violence. While this is not the time to debate those things, we must resist any demonisation of the wider Muslim or north African communities in trying to understand or explain what happened. We also have to

address the deep sense of alienation and injustice that is felt by many people in north Africa, the Middle East and the north African and Muslim communities in France. That is not in any way to provide justification for this horrific attack, rather it recognises that alienation, frustration and a sense of injustice can be the seedbed for the sort of hatred we saw unleashed in Nice. If we do not want to see a repeat of these sorts of attacks, we all have a responsibility to begin to grapple with these issues.

Deputy Mick Wallace: On behalf of Independents 4 Change, I extend our sympathies to the families and friends of all who lost loved ones and those who were injured. It is an unthinkable act on the part of a madman. It hardly bears thinking about. One would be better off not seeing what happened.

I find it sad that just before this madman struck there was an aerial display of French fighter planes. All of the fighter planes in France could not stop him. I do not think all of the nuclear power in France could stop him. One cannot deal with the possibility that a madman driving a large lorry can be stopped from creating havoc if he so chooses.

I was not glad to hear President Hollande say he would strengthen France's role in the Islamic civil wars in Iraq and Syria. I visited France during the European football championships and spoke to many French people about the terrible things that have happened in their country in recent times. I did not meet anybody who thought it would be a good idea to continue to bomb people in Syria and Iraq.

It is all madness. The whole region has been destabilised and I do not think more war will help anything. Could Ireland play a different role, return to a time when we were seen as a neutral country and start to advocate for peace and an end to the mindless destruction of countries and people?

I do not accept that people who behave in a mad way hate our lifestyle, culture and freedom. Rather, they hate the fact that we have wreaked such destruction on certain parts of the planet. There is no excuse for any of the atrocities that have happened across Europe. They are horrendous. I ask that we try to play a positive role by reaching out to all of the countries in Europe and appealing for a more peaceful approach and an end to the militarisation of the planet. It would do the people of every country in Europe and every other country a favour.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: On behalf of rural Independents, I add our voice to the condemnation of this most savage and horrific attack on Bastille Day. Many colleagues attended a reception at the French ambassador's residence to celebrate Bastille Day. I was unable to attend but attended the event last year. It is unbelievable to think that a celebration and joyous occasion could turn into such an atrocity. As others have said, it behoves all of us to do our best to reflect, keep calm and cool and not overreact because a person who sets out to do the maximum damage can and could do so at any time. All the security in the world would not stop it.

3 o'clock

We need to know what affects such people and try to get an understanding of it. Above all, we must stand in support of the French people at this time. We must also offer our sympathies to the ambassador, and as many as possible should sign the book of condolences at the Mansion House in order to show our empathy. We value freedom, fraternity and democracy, and attacks such as the one in Nice do not help democracy. We express our deepest sympathy to everybody involved and wish the injured a speedy recovery.

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Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Finian McGrath): On behalf of the Independent Alliance I offer my deepest sympathy to all the families and victims of the horrific slaughter last week on the streets of Nice. A total of 84 people were murdered and more than 300 were injured. Many families have been devastated. Many of the families who survived will never get over that mass murder. What a nightmare for those families, particularly the mothers, fathers and children.

Nice is a part of France I know well. Like many of my colleagues, I have walked that walk. I walked along it 15 or 16 years ago with my two daughters in a buggy, so I know exactly the kind of situation that prevailed when the nightmare happened. Such murder can never ever be tolerated. It is important today that we focus on the victims. I agree with my colleagues that we must examine broader issues internationally as well, but today I wish to focus on the victims and their families and also to remember the French people.

Let us not forget the Tunisian people either. I saw a television programme the other night where a lot of Tunisian French families were interviewed. They were upset and devastated that one from their country had carried out that horrific act. There are still many good people in the world. Let us remember them and let us not ever tolerate any kind of racism or sectarianism in this country or internationally. Once again, I offer my deepest sympathy to all of the families.

Deputy Eamon Ryan: I watched the video clip on social media of the truck starting its mad, evil slalom down that Nice road. I can only imagine the horror as it careered looking for death. Sadly, on that Friday night, one did not even have to imagine. I followed on so-called social media - perhaps others here did so also - what was happening in the coup in Istanbul and Ankara. I followed it live on Periscope. I saw the incredible bravery of the citizens of those cities as they stood up and fought to preserve their democracy. They stood in front of and on top of the tanks that faced them and tried to blind them. There was one incident that I hate to recall but in a sense it was similar to what happened in Nice. Soldiers in an armoured vehicle went down a road in Ankara and ploughed through their fellow Turkish people. As the hand-held phone turned, one saw a beheaded torso sitting dead on the road.

What a weekend of sadness it was. We also saw a sergeant of the Marines - heroes to American people, the modern day Daniel Boones - obviously traumatised and mentally ill after serving in Iraq, killing three policemen. We also remember them. They died in the former French colony in Baton Rouge. It is as if the bodies keep falling since that day when something happened that we could never have imagined, when someone flew a plane into a trade centre. Now, someone has used a truck in a way we could never have thought of. There is a sense that we should just shout "Stop" - that we need a different constitution, a bigger constitution. We need a different Bastille Day, one with peace and mercy at its core. As others said, all we can do is kneel with the parents of those who died near that Nice strand and remember the words of the Trojan mother Hecuba when she said in response to her child being thrown from the walls of the city, crushed and broken:

Oh to clasp thy tender limbs, a mother's fondest joy!
Oh to breathe thy fragrant breath!
... Why have ye in terror of this child been guilty of murder never matched before?

An Ceann Comhairle: I ask Deputies to stand as a mark of respect for those who have died, and thoughtful of those who remain injured.

Members rose.

Dáil Éireann
Order of Business

An Ceann Comhairle: I call on the rapporteur for the business committee, Deputy Jim Daly, to announce the Order of Business for the week and to move the proposals regarding arrangements for the taking of that business.

Deputy Jim Daly: Today's business shall be No. 11, motion re Standing Orders 141 and 146A, and No. 12, motion re business of select committees, without debate. Government business shall be No. 17, statements on the housing strategy and the Private Members' business shall be No. 77, motion re domiciliary care allowance, in the name of Sinn Féin.

Tomorrow's Government business shall be No. 1, Health (Amendment) Bill 2016, all Stages; No. 13, motion re Standing Order 149; No. 14, motion re terms of reference of commission on investigation (IBRC); No. 21, Energy Bill 2016 - Order for Report, Report and Final Stages; No. 17, statements on the housing strategy (resumed); and No. 18, Proceeds of Crime (Amendment) Bill 2016 - Committee and Remaining Stages. Private Members' business shall be No. 26, the Housing (Sale of Local Authority Housing) Bill 2016, in the name of Fianna Fáil.

Thursday's Government business shall be No. 15, motion re CEPOL; No. 16, motion re Legal Services Regulatory Authority - membership of board; No. 18, Proceeds of Crime (Amendment) Bill 2016 - Committee and Remaining Stages (resumed); No. 19, Misuse of Drugs (Amendment) Bill 2016 - Order for Report, Report and Final Stages; and No. 20, Finance (Certain European Union and Intergovernmental Obligations) Bill 2016, changed from Single Resolution Board (Loan Facility Agreement) Bill 2016 - Order for Report, Report and Final Stages. Second Stage of No. 27, Education (Amendment) Bill 2015, will be debated in the evening slot.

There are three proposals regarding today's business. It is proposed that:

(1) the Dáil shall sit late and adjourn after the debate on No. 17, statements on the housing strategy;

(2) No. 11, motion re Standing Orders 141 and 146A and No. 12, motion re business of select committees, shall be taken without debate and any division demanded on the motions shall be taken immediately; and

(3) No. 17, statements on the housing strategy, will adjourn on the conclusion of the contributions from the main spokespersons. The Minister and the main spokespersons will have 15 minutes each, all other Members will have five minutes, there will be a 15 minute response from Minister or Minister of State and all Members may share time.

There are eight proposals regarding tomorrow's business. It is proposed that:

(1) the Dáil shall sit at 10 a.m.;

(2) No. 1, Health (Amendment) Bill 2016 - Second Stage shall be brought to a conclusion within 90 minutes if not previously concluded and any division demanded will be taken immediately. The Minister or Minister of State and the main spokespersons will have ten minutes each, there will be a ten minute response from the Minister or Minister of State and all Members may share time. Committee and Remaining Stages shall be brought to a conclusion within 30 minutes by one question which shall in relation to amendments include

only those set down or accepted by the Minister for Health;

(3) No. 26, Housing (Sale of Local Authority Housing) Bill 2016, Second Stage, shall be brought to a conclusion, if not previously concluded, at 6.30 p.m.;

(4) No. 13, motion re Standing Order 149, shall conclude within 45 minutes, if not previously concluded, and the Minister and the main spokespersons will have five minutes each, there will be a five minute response from the Minister or Minister of State and all Members may share time;

(5) No. 14, motion re terms of reference of commission of investigation (IBRC), shall conclude within 45 minutes, if not previously concluded, and the Minister and the main spokespersons will have five minutes each, there will be a five minute response from the Minister or Minister of State and all Members may share time;

(6) No. 21, Energy Bill 2016 - Order for Report, Report and Final Stages, will be brought to a conclusion within one hour by one question which shall in relation to amendments include only those set down or accepted by the Minister for Communication, Energy and Natural Resources;

(7) No. 17, statements on the housing strategy, shall be brought to a conclusion at 10 p.m., if not previously concluded; and

(8) No. 18, Proceeds of Crime (Amendment) Bill 2016 - Committee and Remaining Stages, will be brought to a conclusion within one hour, if not previously concluded, by one question which shall in relation to amendments include only those set down or accepted by the Minister for Justice and Equality.

In relation to Thursday's business, there are nine proposals. It is proposed that:

(1) the Dáil shall sit at 10 a.m.;

(2) the Dáil shall sit late and adjourn after the debate on No. 27, the Education (Amendment) Bill 2015;

(3) No. 15, motion re CEPOL, shall conclude within one hour, if not previously concluded, and the Minister and the main spokespersons will have five minutes each, all other Members will have five minutes, there will be a five-minute response from the Minister or Minister of State and all Members may share time;

(4) No. 16, motion re Legal Services Regulation Authority – membership of board, shall be taken immediately after No. 15, motion re CEPOL, to conclude within one hour, if not previously concluded, and the Minister and the main spokespersons will have five minutes each, all other Members will have five minutes, there will be a five-minute response from the Minister or Minister of State and all Members may share time;

(5) No. 18, Proceeds of Crime (Amendment) Bill 2016 - Committee and Remaining Stages, if not previously concluded, will be taken following the conclusion of No. 16;

(6) No. 19, Misuse of Drugs (Amendment) Bill 2016 - Order for Report, Report and Final Stages, will be taken immediately after No. 18, Proceeds of Crime (Amendment) Bill 2016, or if No. 18 has previously concluded, immediately after No. 16 if No. 16 concludes

before midday, or otherwise immediately after voting time, and will be brought to a conclusion within one hour by one question which shall in relation to amendments include only those set down or accepted by the Minister for Health;

(7) No. 20, Finance (Certain European Union and Intergovernmental Obligations) Bill 2016 - changed from Single Resolution Board (Loan Facility Agreement) Bill 2016 - Order for Report, Report and Final Stages, shall be taken following No. 19, Misuse of Drugs (Amendment) Bill 2016, and will be brought to a conclusion within one hour if not previously concluded by one question which shall in relation to amendments include only those set down or accepted by the Minister for Finance;

(8) Question Time shall take place following No. 20, Finance (Certain European Union and Intergovernmental Obligations) Bill 2016; and

(9) the Dáil on its rising on Thursday shall adjourn until 2 p.m. on Tuesday, 27 September 2016.

An Ceann Comhairle: There are three questions to be put to the House. First, are the proposals for dealing with Tuesday's business agreed to? Agreed.

Second, are the proposals for dealing with Wednesday's business agreed to?

Deputy Caoimhghín Ó Caoláin: As regards the proposals for dealing with business for Tuesday, is the Ceann Comhairle incorporating in those the situation concerning select committees?

An Ceann Comhairle: To what extent?

Deputy Caoimhghín Ó Caoláin: I mean is that part of the proposition the Ceann Comhairle is putting to the House? I wanted to comment on that, please.

An Ceann Comhairle: If you want to comment, go ahead.

Deputy Caoimhghín Ó Caoláin: First, this is an extraordinary step. It is not consequent on new politics; it is consequent on the worst of old politics. This House deserves a full explanation as to why it has taken so long for the Seanad Committee on Procedure and Privileges to be constituted. That is an essential step before the Seanad Committee on Selection is able to do its business in nominating Members of the Seanad to joint committees of these Houses.

We are within two days of going into the summer recess, yet we have still not had a single joint committee meeting, nor will we be able to constitute same before Thursday. That is the reality behind this proposition. This House deserves a full explanation as to why that situation presents. Almost six months after the general election, we still do not have a working committee system in these Houses.

An Ceann Comhairle: The Deputy's point is very well made. The motion provides the opportunity for the select committees to undertake the work that needs to be undertaken in the absence, should that continue, of the nominees of the Seanad.

Deputy Caoimhghín Ó Caoláin: It does.

An Ceann Comhairle: However, this House cannot impose its will in any way upon the Members of the Seanad. Members of the other House must make their own decisions in respect

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of the people whom they will nominate to serve on these particular committees. It is neither appropriate nor possible for us to engage in a debate on that particular matter, notwithstanding the validity of the Deputy's point that it is not acceptable that the committees continue not to be fully populated.

Deputy Caoimhghín Ó Caoláin: I appreciate that the Ceann Comhairle is accepting the validity of the point, and the protest, that I am making because I think it is a valid point to make.

An Ceann Comhairle: Yes, and we will communicate that to our colleagues.

Deputy Caoimhghín Ó Caoláin: Respect is the critical word.

An Ceann Comhairle: Yes.

Deputy Caoimhghín Ó Caoláin: It not only behoves voices in the Seanad to explain this. It also requires those party leaders who have an insight into why this situation has been allowed to develop as it has to take the opportunity to explain to Members of this House why it has been allowed to get to this absolutely outrageous situation.

An Ceann Comhairle: Deputy Ó Caoláin's point is made. Are the proposals for dealing with Wednesday's business agreed to? Agreed. Are the proposals for dealing with Thursday's business agreed to? Agreed.

On the Order of Business, I already have ten Members offering. There will be one minute and one question per Member, starting with Deputy Micheál Martin.

Deputy Micheál Martin: As regards the Action Plan for Jobs and the legislative commitments therein, serious doubts have emerged in recent weeks over eBay's operation in Dundalk. It is urgent to have clarification on the company's presence in County Louth. There is a lot of anxiety among eBay workers who are nervous about their future. There are obvious implications for them if anything were to happen to the eBay facility there. As the Taoiseach knows, more than 200 people are employed by eBay in Dundalk and the company is a major contributor to the local economy. Will the Taoiseach confirm that every effort is being made by the Government, and particularly by the IDA, to ensure the retention of these jobs in the Dundalk area?

The landlord and tenant law reform Bill has been promised for some time. Will the Taoiseach indicate when it will come before the House?

The Taoiseach: I am well aware of the anxiety expressed by eBay workers and a number of public representatives have contacted me about it. The IDA has been diligent about this and has been talking to the eBay company and personnel there. The Minister for Jobs, Enterprise and Innovation, Deputy Mitchell O'Connor, might want to give an update on that situation.

Minister for Jobs, Enterprise and Innovation (Deputy Mary Mitchell O'Connor): Yes. I understand that there is anxiety among the eBay workers. I have had a discussion with the CEO of the IDA, Mr. Martin Shanahan, on this and other matters. The IDA will continue to work with FDI companies to support them in creating jobs in Ireland, and especially in regional and rural Ireland.

The IDA will not and cannot discuss publicly the circumstances of individual companies due to commercially sensitive reasons.

Deputy Gerry Adams: I thank the Minister for her statement, although it might give little solace to the workers who now feel under threat in eBay in Dundalk, which is in my constituency.

I want to raise another issue. Six months ago, the Minister for Finance established a task force in his Department to review policy in the insurance sector. Last week, however, in a parliamentary response to an Teachta Pearse Doherty, the Minister revealed that the review group into the rising cost of car insurance will only meet for the first time this week and will not meet again until September. There is no timeframe within which the review is to be compiled. When I raised this matter with the Taoiseach four weeks ago he said it would be raised at the Cabinet sub-committee.

I appeal to the Minister to set a timeframe for dealing with this issue with the urgency it requires. There is a lot of dissatisfaction as premiums have increased by 67% in the past three years. I support the demand for a task force similar to the Motor Insurance Advisory Board, established in the 1990s, to be set up. The MIAB's recommendations led to a 40% drop in premiums. I appeal to the Taoiseach and the Minister for Finance to deal with this matter with more urgency than we have seen thus far.

Minister for Finance (Deputy Michael Noonan): A number of issues of great concern have arisen around the insurance industry in recent times. The first, in sequence, was the collapse of Setanta Insurance, a Maltese-registered company, which gave rise to many people being off cover. The task force addressed the issue arising from Setanta Insurance first of all. The report was presented to Government today and it will be published. The recommendations of that report was the first phase of the work of the task force. It is now moving on to an in-depth examination of the difficulties in motor insurance, which work it will complete with all due expedition, allowing for the fact that as August is a holiday period not everybody relevant will be available during that month.

Deputy Brendan Howlin: I have raised twice with the Taoiseach and once with the Tánaiste the consensus in the House on the establishment of a north inner city task force. The view across the House was that the task force should be up and running before the House goes into recess. Now that a date has been set for the recess, when will the membership of the north inner city task force and its terms of reference be known to us and will we have an opportunity to comment upon it before the Dáil goes into recess? There has been much talk about publicity and media focus moving on. In that regard, the view was that we were not going to allow this to happen in relation to the north inner city and that we were going to do something exemplary for the area. I know the Taoiseach has had a lot of discussions on this matter, the fruits of which, along with the terms of reference of the task force and its membership, should now be made known to the House.

The Taoiseach: We approved it this morning at Cabinet, including the terms of reference and the appointment of an appropriate person to carry out an analysis of the exiting facilities that apply in the north inner city. I will forward the details to Deputy Howlin. I expect to deal with this matter tomorrow in the north inner city.

Deputy Brendan Howlin: Will we have an opportunity to discuss this issue before the Dáil goes into recess?

The Taoiseach: I am not sure if a discussion on it will take place before the Dáil goes into

recess but I will circulate the detail to the Deputy.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: The county councils, through a memorandum of understanding, are transferring water charging functions in relation to non-domestic water to Irish Water. This means supply to all types of businesses, including farms, shops and so on, will be affected. In the context of the so-called “ceasefire” in relation to water charges, why are businesspeople being asked to pay for water? Why is this train moving on? This is a retrograde step. It is unfortunate and I do not think-----

An Ceann Comhairle: Is the Deputy asking about legislation?

Deputy Mattie McGrath: I am asking about the Water Services (Amendment) Bill. As I said, what the county councils are doing is a retrograde step. Why are we moving in the artillery from the side given the moratorium on water charges while the report of the expert commission is awaited? Are businesspeople the patsies who are going to pay all the expenses? My concern is that charges on private contributors will increase exorbitantly.

The Taoiseach: Committee and Remaining Stages of the Water Services (Amendment) Bill 2016 will be taken in the Seanad tomorrow.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: The Taoiseach’s response is not an answer my question.

The Taoiseach: The Deputy’s question was about the legislation.

Deputy Róisín Shortall: I and other Members of the House have raised on a number of occasions in the past few weeks the agreement put in place by the Minister, Deputy Coveney, with the waste companies to defer the introduction of the pay-by-weight scheme. It is clear that one of the companies, Greyhound, is in defiance of that agreement in terms of its requiring people to opt out of the new pay-by-weight scheme. People who decide to opt out are being required to make an upfront one month’s payment to Greyhound. This goes against the agreement reached. We have been told that this situation is being monitored by the Minister, Deputy Coveney, yet no action has been taken by him.

Greyhound customers have up to 1 August 2016, which is 12 days away, to opt out. The Taoiseach assured us that this would not happen, that an agreement was in place and companies would be required to adhere to that agreement. Patently, that is not happening. Will the Taoiseach give an assurance today that he will request the Minister, Deputy Coveney, to take action immediately to put an end to this and to tell Greyhound to stop what it is doing?

The Taoiseach: I am aware that there are discussions taking place. I will bring the matter raised by Deputy Shortall to the notice of the Minister, Deputy Coveney, later this evening, following which I will respond to the Deputy’s query.

Deputy Gino Kenny: In light of Ireland’s commitment at the UN General Assembly in 2012 to ratify the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, when will the necessary legislation be introduced? Given the convention has been already ratified by 156 countries, it is time we ratified it.

The Taoiseach: The heads of the disability equality Bill were cleared in February. It is currently proceeding through the development stages. I will seek an update on the Bill, which I will communicate to Deputy Kenny.

Deputy Willie O’Dea: The Taoiseach’s colleague, the Minister for Finance, Deputy Noonan, said earlier that the next phase of the insurance task force would be completed with all due expedition. This is a critical issue. People are waiting to see what action is going to be taken to reduce premiums. Will the Taoiseach give a more specific indication as to when the work will be completed? For example, will it be completed this year?

The programme for Government includes a commitment to introduce a system of personalised budgets for people with disabilities to enable them to buy services for themselves, which will give them greater freedom. When will that come into play?

The Taoiseach: It already applies in a small number of cases. This is a priority issue for the Minister of State, Deputy Finian McGrath. I will advise Deputy O’Dea on the progress being made. Obviously, personalised budgets will not apply in every case. As the Deputy will understand, some people are in a better position than others to avail of personalised budgeting. As I said, I will advise him of progress made.

Deputy Willie O’Dea: The Taoiseach did not answer my question on when the second phase of the work of the task force on insurance will be completed.

The Taoiseach: It will be completed either late this year or early next year.

An Ceann Comhairle: There are seven other Deputies offering. If Members are brief, we will be able to get everybody in.

Deputy Danny Healy-Rae: Is the Taoiseach aware that the local authority in Kerry is de-zoning lands around the towns of Killarney and Tralee, which will have a devastating impact of on house building in Kerry? I know of 30 people working in Liebherr who cannot find a house to buy or a site on which to build a house. Will the Taoiseach direct that this process be delayed? It is wrong that any local authority would be de-zoning lands in the context of current housing need. I respect the right of people and private developers to build their own houses. If lands are de-zoned, we may end up in the situation of there being no land available in Killarney on which to build houses. I would be grateful if the Taoiseach would direct that this process be delayed.

The Taoiseach: This is a matter for the local authority, the members of which I am sure have discussed the issue of land de-zoning and the land banks available to it for industrial, commercial and house construction use. It is a function of the local authorities to discuss this issue. I am sure the authority concerned has made its decision in the full knowledge of why it is necessary.

Deputy Danny Healy-Rae: This issue arises out of the national spatial strategy, which is being directed by the Government under the Taoiseach’s watch.

An Ceann Comhairle: Deputy Healy-Rae might consider raising the matter as a Topical Issue.

The Taoiseach: There were decisions made by the Minister of the day because of the over-zoning of land in a number of areas, as Deputy Healy-Rae is well aware.

Deputy Shane Cassells: Given the commitment in the programme for Government to address the evolving educational curriculum, I welcome the announcement yesterday by the Minister for Education and Skills that computer programming and coding will be introduced into

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the primary school curriculum. Rather than kick this to the NCCA for prolonged consultation, will the Minister, Deputy Bruton, engage with the local education centres countrywide, including the local education centre in Navan which is spearheading this proposal and has already piloted the project, on the possibility of rolling out this change to the September 2016 curriculum because my fear is that the technology will move faster than the NCCA report?

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Richard Bruton): I am open to looking at any initiative that could be piloted. When one is talking about introducing it on a broad basis, one is talking not only about a pilot but introducing the teaching support and designing the curriculum so an element of time is essential to make sure it works in a proper way. The notion of piloting something in the short run would certainly be of interest and I would be happy to talk to the Deputy.

Deputy Michael Collins: Last week, there was an announcement of funding for roads. Again, the N71, which is the main west Cork road, and the R586 were excluded from any funding. I ask the Taoiseach to intervene in this issue. It is not a case that it is not happening on a yearly basis or we are not getting funding. It is now a case of not getting funding from decade to decade on the main routes from Innishannon, Bandon and Clonakilty into west Cork and our roads are getting seriously run down.

An Ceann Comhairle: I think that is a Topical Issue rather than an item for the Order of Business.

Deputy Michael Collins: It is about strategic infrastructure. I would appreciate the Taoiseach's views on the matter.

The Taoiseach: The Macroom by-pass is in the programme. I am not sure of the details regarding what Deputy Michael Collins is talking about. I am not sure whether he is talking about national or non-national roads in respect of west Cork.

Deputy Michael Collins: National roads.

An Ceann Comhairle: The Deputy should put down a Topical Issue and we will try to facilitate it.

Deputy Bernard J. Durkan: The mortgages special court Bill, the Courts (Mortgage Arrears) Bill, is promised legislation but is unlikely to become effective until later in the year. In the interim, might it be possible to set out a series of guidelines with the co-operation of the Central Bank within which it might be possible to allow borrowers and lenders to come to some agreement about outstanding mortgages, some of which have been paid over the years and some of which have not been paid, to prevent all of them being treated the same way?

The Taoiseach: There are special sittings of the special courts to deal with a number of these. The proposals under that Bill are still proceeding. I can advise the Deputy of the progress made.

Deputy Eamon Ryan: We have been working on the Energy Bill, which is on Report Stage tomorrow, and have had a good debate. We were looking to make amendments further to the ones we made on Committee Stage. In doing so, we came to the realisation that there is no consolidated version of the Bill. It is a 1999 Act that has been amended umpteen times. It is impossible to know what one is legislating. We are legislating blind and I imagine that if there

are legal challenges or other issues in this area, any court would have difficulty in working out what the actual legislation is. In respect of indecipherable legislation, what plans does the Government have to provide drafting and other resources so that the legislation can be consolidated so we are not legislating blind and the public is aware of what the law actually says?

The Taoiseach: This issue applies to a number of pieces of legislation. Deputy Eamon Ryan is right. If things were perfect, all of these provisions would be codified and updated. I will discuss the matter with the Minister and the Office of the Parliamentary Counsel to see what is the scope for consolidation and updating of the energy legislation. The Deputy's point is valid in that there have been so many sections and amendments over the years, it is difficult to track them accurately.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: Did I hear the Taoiseach correctly when he said he has agreed terms of reference for the task force for the north inner city? He led us to believe at every stage that there would be a form of consultation with the local community in respect of those terms of reference. He has clearly reneged on that. Can he tell us what he will be doing in the north inner city tomorrow, where he will be going and whether he is proposing to launch these terms of reference?

On a second issue-----

An Ceann Comhairle: The Deputy can only raise one issue.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: If the Ceann Comhairle does not mind me observing, others raised two.

An Ceann Comhairle: No, they did not. They raised one issue.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: They raised two.

An Ceann Comhairle: No, they did not.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: My hearing is good.

An Ceann Comhairle: Well, mine is reasonably good. They did not. The Deputy can raise the issue but we will not deal with it.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: I will raise it nonetheless. I have previously raised the case of Mary Boyle, a young child who disappeared in County Donegal some 40 years ago, with the Taoiseach. Public disquiet about this matter is growing. There is a suggestion of political interference in the investigation of that child's disappearance. The Taoiseach knows that her twin sister, Ann Doherty, and people around her are most dissatisfied with the level of co-operation and support they have received in respect of this case. Will the Taoiseach again meet with Ann Doherty and exert whatever influence he has in moving these matters forward and certainly in respect of others elected to this House in respect of co-operating if there is any suggestion of political cover up and interference?

The Taoiseach: I had a very good meeting with the Doherty family. Arising from that, I sent an official report to the Garda inspector dealing with the report into the gardai themselves. I understand that since then, the special investigative unit is looking afresh at this case. Mary Boyle disappeared 40 years ago. Her remains were never found and it would be a source of great consolation to her family were the case to be concluded.

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I hope to make an announcement about a further visit to the inner city as I have been down there on a few occasions in the past few weeks. I will advise Deputy McDonald of the information I have in respect of developments, as I said to Deputy Howlin earlier.

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Marcella Corcoran Kennedy): Deputy McDonald took up all the time so I think I am entitled to ask a question. When will the Criminal Law (Sexual Offences) Bill resume progression through the Houses of the Oireachtas? It was almost finished during the last term. It is very important legislation and I want it to resume as soon as possible.

The Taoiseach: It has been published. We are waiting to be able to deal with it on Second Stage.

Standing Orders: Motion

Minister of State at the Department of the Taoiseach (Deputy Regina Doherty): I move:

That, in accordance with the recommendation of the sub-Committee on Dáil Reform under Standing Order 107(1)(a), the Standing Orders of Dáil Éireann relative to Public Business be amended, with effect from 1st September, 2016, as follows:

(a) by the adoption of the following Standing Order in substitution for Standing Order 141:

‘141. (1) Should a private member’s Bill pass its second reading, it shall be referred to the relevant Select Committee appointed pursuant to Standing Order 84A.

(2) Select Committees to which private members’ Bills are referred shall undertake detailed scrutiny of the provisions of such Bills, having regard to guidelines agreed by the Working Group of Committee Chairmen, and shall report thereon to the Dáil prior to Committee Stage consideration: Provided that the Committee may decide in relation to a particular Bill that detailed scrutiny is not necessary.’; and

(b) by the adoption of the following new Standing Order:

‘146A. Prior to its presentation or introduction to the Dáil, the general scheme or draft heads of a Bill shall (save in exceptional circumstances and by permission of the Business Committee [*see also S.O. 148*]), be given by a member of the Government or Minister of State to the Committee empowered under Standing Order 84A to consider Bills published by the member of the Government. The general scheme or draft heads of the Bill shall be considered by the Committee, having regard to guidelines agreed by the Working Group of Committee Chairmen: Provided that the Committee may decide in relation to a particular Bill that such consideration is not necessary, and in such cases, need not consider the general scheme or draft heads.’”

Question put and agreed to.

Select Committees: Motion

Minister of State at the Department of the Taoiseach (Deputy Regina Doherty): I move:

That, pending the appointment of Select Committees by Seanad Éireann, Select Committees appointed pursuant to Standing Order 84A may consider all matters set out in Standing Order 84A and otherwise in their Orders of Establishment and shall have the relevant powers as defined in Standing Order 85 for those purposes.”

Question put and agreed to.

Message from Seanad

An Ceann Comhairle: Seanad Éireann has passed the Electoral (Amendment) (No. 2) Bill 2016 without amendment.

Topical Issue Matters

An Ceann Comhairle: I wish to advise the House of the following matters in respect of which notice has been given under Standing Order 21 and the name of the Member in each case: (1) Deputy Barry Cowen - concerns with outsourcing of transport division jobs at Bord na Móna putting jobs at risk and imposing pay cuts; (2) Deputy Louise O'Reilly - implementation of the national neurorehabilitation strategy; (3) Deputies Aindrias Moynihan and Brendan Griffin - prioritising the N22 Macroom bypass and the need to prioritise the N22 Ballyvourney to Macroom road on the 2016-21 capital investment plan; (4) Deputy Declan Breathnach - the need to provide assurances that the current INTERREG programme and current PEACE programme will be honoured by the EU; (5) Deputy Alan Farrell - reconsideration of the Boundary Commission's terms of reference; (6) Deputy Imelda Munster - the difficulties with respite services in St. Mary's, Drumcar; (7) Deputies Thomas Pringle and Pearse Doherty - funding for special education needs, SEN, grants for children with disabilities attending mainstream pre-schools education and adequate provision and retention of SEN supports; (8) Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív - seirbhís aeir chuig na hOileáin Árann tar éis 30 Meán Fómhair 2019; (9) Deputy Mattie McGrath - the failure to extend the 42 tonne derogation and competitiveness in the Irish road haulage industry; (10) Deputy Niamh Smyth - review of the post-primary school transport scheme in Cavan-Monaghan; (11) Deputy Eugene Murphy - reimbursement for patients who use the Fampyra drug as part of their treatment for multiple sclerosis; (12) Deputy Lisa Chambers - the publication of the Defence Forces climate survey; (13) Deputy Mary Butler - provision of supports for children with autism in the south east; (14) Deputy Pat Deering - school bus services in south County Carlow; (15) Deputy Dara Calleary - the impact of job losses as a result of the closure of Charles River Laboratories at Glenamoy, County Mayo; (16) Deputy Clare Daly - the eviction of families from Lynams Hotel on O'Connell Street; (17) Deputy Brendan Smith - approval of funding towards essential repairs at a primary school in County Monaghan; (18) Deputy Mick Wallace - the implication of the destruction of the refugee camp in Calais; (19) Deputies John Lahart and Margaret Murphy O'Mahony - the need for the Minister for Health to make a statement on the RTE Investigations Unit programme on the neglect of vulnerable people in the care of the HSE and the care of adults with intellectual disabilities; (20) Deputies Mick Barry and Joan Collins - waste companies breaking the “price freeze” announced by the Minister for housing, planning and local government; (21) Deputy James Lawless - the backlog of arbitration hearings and the effect on the unfinished Naas town shopping centre; (22) Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett - the need for a commission of investigation into the Stardust tragedy; (23) Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire - advancement of the development of the N28; (24) Deputy Charlie McConalogue - discussions on the EU financial package; and (25)

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Deputy Ruth Coppinger - concerns surrounding a site at Anne Street in Wexford over a 20 year period from 1983 and allegations of irregularities.

The matters raised by Deputies Barry Cowen, Mick Barry and Joan Collins, Louise O'Reilly and Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire have been selected for discussion.

Ceisteanna - Questions

Cabinet Committees

1. **Deputy Brendan Howlin** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet sub-committee on justice reform was last convened. [19812/16]

2. **Deputy Gerry Adams** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet committee on justice reform last met. [22524/16]

The Taoiseach: I propose to take Questions Nos. 1 and 2 together. The Government re-established the Cabinet committee on justice reform in May 2016 to provide political oversight of the delivery of the commitments in the programme for a partnership Government to reform the policing, justice and legal systems and related issues. The Cabinet committee last met on 6 July 2016.

Deputy Brendan Howlin: Can the Taoiseach set out the membership of the committee? In respect of the committee's terms of reference, the former committee looked in particular at the two reform proposals from the Garda Síochána Inspectorate which were not only very comprehensive but very critical of the current structure of An Garda Síochána. They looked at the way the force was deployed, the way resources were deployed, its mechanism for following through on investigations and its information relating to the time for investigation of every particular type of crime in each division. Will the inspectorate reports remain the basis for the reform agenda to be delivered by the Cabinet sub-committee?

My next question concerns the plan of the Garda Commissioner. Is that the plan that is being implemented? Is it being implemented in tandem with the Inspectorate reform, or how are the two being co-ordinated? In terms of investment, would the Taoiseach agree with me that one of the most critical issues for An Garda Síochána has been the lack of proper IT infrastructure? That is why the previous administration allocated more than €200 million to upgrade IT. Will the Taoiseach set out for the House where we are on the roll-out of that significant upgrade of PULSE and the timeline for its delivery across the country?

In terms of what might be described as local political interference, with individual Garda stations that were closed but that are in the constituencies of members or supporters of the Government are now, as part of the new Government agreement, to be reopened, on what basis are objective decisions being taken about the deployment of An Garda Síochána and the structure of Garda stations across the country?

Deputy Gerry Adams: Eight men have been murdered as part of a criminal gang feud in Dublin, and the impact of this on the whole community, especially in the north inner city, has been enormous. Many residents - families and their children - are living in fear. The Taoiseach

met with some of them recently and he quite rightly praised and commended their resilience and steadfastness. Since then, as well as the fear arising from the gang feud and the ongoing drugs trade in that area, there is also a concern that once the media focus moves off onto other issues the commitments and promises of support from the Government will not be delivered. The Taoiseach will know that what the people want and need is an integrated plan for the social, economic, educational and community development of their community. They are looking for funding, projects, jobs, counsellors, homes, teachers for children, Garda youth diversion projects, addiction services and so on.

The Taoiseach asked recently for the terms of reference of the community coalition in Dublin's north inner city and, with their permission, Deputy Mary Lou McDonald provided him with this. He agreed to meet with representatives of the coalition and bring back proposals to them about the task force and its terms of reference and so on. I do not want to presume or make judgment on what the Taoiseach said earlier but, if I heard him properly, he said he was going to the constituency tomorrow and appears to have agreed the terms of reference. Will he give us some sense of the terms of reference and recommit to consulting in good faith with the people he met, given the seriousness of the issues involved? It is all about empowering people. These people have empowered themselves. The Taoiseach said in an earlier discussion here that there appeared to be a gap between what has happened in here and what is happening down there. I challenged the Taoiseach on this. I said it is not that there appears to be a gap; there is a gap. The Taoiseach made a firm commitment about consultation and going back to consult with the folks he met previously. I ask him to give us as much information as he can on that.

I request an update on the implementation of the recommendations contained in the Garda Inspectorate report, *Changing Policing in Ireland*, and I also request that he address the concern about a whole range of Garda appointments that were made. I do not want to go through them all, as I do not want to take up other people's time. A whole range of promotions were made which could and should have been made by the policing authority, but there was a rush to do this at the request of the Garda Commissioner before the authority was authorised to do it. Is the Taoiseach concerned about this? It strikes me as being something that does not bode well for what we are trying to do in terms of a new beginning to policing, or at least the effort to reform the gardaí so that it is a service that its men and women deserve and that those whom they mind deserve also.

The Taoiseach: A number of questions were asked. Deputy Howlin raised the membership of the Cabinet committee on justice reform, comprised of myself, as chair, the Tánaiste and Minister for Justice and Equality, the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform, the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport and the Attorney General. As others are needed they will attend. The terms of reference are to provide political oversight of the delivery of commitments in the programme for a partnership Government, to reform the policing, justice and legal systems and related issues.

Deputy Howlin mentioned the Inspectorate report. In November 2014, the Garda Inspectorate published a comprehensive report on crime investigation, and significant work is continuing to implement the recommendations. That includes a review of crime counting rules by the CSO, the establishment of a data quality team in An Garda Síochána, significant reorganisation and amalgamation of Garda national units, and the establishment of a criminal justice steering group to provide greater co-ordination between all bodies operating within the criminal justice system. The Garda has established a new incident recording process and a working group has examined the need for increased investment in Garda ICT as part of the upcoming capital pro-

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gramme. The Garda has established a victim support office in every local Garda division and, in addition, the previous Government put in place measures to ensure and enhance ongoing public confidence in policing in Ireland while continuing to support the men and women of An Garda Síochána in their day-to-day duties of keeping communities in the country safe. On the Garda Inspectorate report on management and structures, the Tánaiste put in place a process to seek the views of the Garda Commissioner, to whom the bulk of recommendations are directed, and other bodies to whom recommendations are directed.

The Deputy also mentioned modern technology. As he is aware, €330 million, including €205 million under the capital programme, is being invested in the Garda ICT infrastructure between 2016 and 2021. This major investment will allow the gardaí to deploy the latest cutting-edge technologies in the fight against crime and will facilitate progress on an important set of reforms arising from the Garda Inspectorate's report on crime investigation. A considerable amount of the new Garda ICT solutions have been delivered over the past five years. These include the deployment of a secure national digital radio system, the deployment and support of Garda and community CCTV systems, an automated number plate registration, ANPR, system, and the addition of many new functions to the PULSE system, which is further supported by a dedicated Garda data entry service in Davitt House in Castlebar.

The substantial additional investment under the capital programme out to 2021 will facilitate progress on a range of other important reforms that arise from the Inspectorate report on crime investigation. Examples of some of the new systems to be developed include new computer-aided despatch to ensure responsive and co-ordinated deployment of gardaí in the community, mobile technology to give gardaí secure mobile access to critical information when and where they need it, investigation management systems to ensure enhanced management of crime investigations, and an upgrade of the ANPR to enhance policing of road safety and compliance. Obviously, there is an interest in supplying increased numbers of CCTV systems as well.

In respect of Deputy Adams' question on gangland crime, the Tánaiste and Minister for Justice and Equality has been in close and extensive engagement with the Garda Commissioner and senior officers on the measures to tackle the appalling crime situation in certain areas where gangs operate and significant progress has been made in the investigations which are under way. Both the Tánaiste and Minister for Justice and Equality and I have assured the Garda that whatever resources are necessary will be made available to it. On the basis of that assurance, the Garda, day in and day out, is incurring substantial additional expenditure, including overtime expenditure.

On 8 June, the Government approved substantial additional funding to be provided to the Garda. An additional allocation of €55 million is being made available this year for the purpose of tackling organised crime. These additional moneys are made available based on information from Garda management regarding the level of funding required to maintain the necessary policing response to the current situation. This will allow for concentrated policing targeting gang-related crime and the continued intensive and strategic targeting of burglaries and related crime through the support for Operation Thor, which has been successful, and continued support for measures against terrorism.

Underpinning all of that has been the reopening of Templemore and the decision to increase the Garda strength to 15,000 by way of recruitment. While in the short term substantial funds continue to be made available for overtime working measures to accelerate the planned programme of recruitment, they are being worked on now so that additional new gardaí can be

provided as quickly as possible.

I note that the Criminal Assets Bureau is one of the few areas of public expenditure that was largely ring-fenced from reductions in public service staffing during the economic crisis. Its staffing complement now of approximately 70 is similar to what it was in the late 2000s.

In respect of Garda measures to deal with gangland crime, the new special crime task force has been put in place. This will operate in co-operation with other agencies, such as the Revenue Commissioners and the Department of Social Protection. The task force will use-----

Deputy Gerry Adams: A Cheann Comhairle, gabh mo leithscéal-----

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: The Taoiseach did not answer the question.

The Taoiseach: -----the expertise of Garda divisional asset profilers, all of whom have received specific specialised training, as well as the expertise of the Garda Síochána analyst service, and the purpose of the task force will be to focus relentlessly on persons involved in gangland activities.

I would say also to Deputy Adams that the decision was made to strengthen Garda resources this year, including steps to establish a dedicated armed support unit in the Dublin area. The Dublin armed support unit is in the process of being set up and trained. However, it must be clearly understood that, pending the full establishment of the new unit, arrangements have been put in place so that the necessary armed support is being provided on an overtime basis. The Tánaiste and Minister for Justice and Equality is being kept up to date on this work on the establishment of the unit, including all of the necessary training, and preparatory arrangements are being put in place as a matter of priority.

Deputy Gerry Adams: On a point of order-----

Acting Chairman (Deputy Eugene Murphy): I am implementing the rules. The time is up. If Deputy Adams wants to make a point of order, I will allow him.

Deputy Gerry Adams: Tá mé fíor-bhuíoch den Chathaoirleach. Winning and sustaining the confidence of communities which are victimised by gangs is really important.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Eugene Murphy): That is not a point of order.

Deputy Gerry Adams: I asked the Taoiseach a specific question about consulting with the people in the Dublin north inner city who he met and who he promised to go back to meet.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Eugene Murphy): That is not a point of order.

Deputy Gerry Adams: The Taoiseach did not answer the question.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Eugene Murphy): The time is up for this question.

Deputy Gerry Adams: The Taoiseach deliberately did not answer it.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: The Taoiseach ran the clock down and did not answer.

The Taoiseach: I will send the details to Deputy Adams. I will meet the group.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Eugene Murphy): If Deputy Adams has an issue, I ask him

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to go to the Ceann Comhairle. I am taking the next question which is from Deputy Micheál Martin.

European Council Meetings

3. **Deputy Micheál Martin** asked the Taoiseach the detail of his contributions and comments at the June 2016 European Council meeting regarding Scotland and the responses he received. [19833/16]

The Taoiseach: My objective at the European Council meeting on 28 June, and the informal meeting of 27 Heads of State or Government the following day, was to present Ireland's views and concerns in relation to the impact and effects of the referendum in the UK, and to ensure, once again, that there is an understanding among EU partners of our particular national position, including as regards Northern Ireland and North-South relations. I am satisfied that is the case.

We work closely with the devolved administrations in the context of the institutions established by the Good Friday Agreement, including the British-Irish Council and the North-South Ministerial Council. In preparing for the European Council meeting, I had a wide range of discussions, including with the Northern Ireland First Minister and Deputy First Minister and with the Scottish First Minister, Ms Sturgeon, whom I had also met at the British-Irish Council in Glasgow on 17 June.

Ireland and Scotland enjoy excellent and close relations, as, indeed, we do with the UK as a whole. The recent visit by President Higgins underlined once more the strength of the ties between the peoples of Scotland and Ireland. The First Minister, Ms Sturgeon, was anxious that European leaders would be aware of her concerns about the future situation and status of Scotland following a UK departure from the Union. I undertook to mention those concerns during the European Council meeting, which I did. This was in the context of a wide-ranging discussion on the referendum outcome and its consequences, on which I reported in detail to the House on 5 July. I look forward to ongoing contact with the First Minister and her administration at political, diplomatic and official levels. We will have an opportunity to meet again at the extraordinary meeting of the British-Irish Council on Friday of this week in Cardiff.

It is self-evident that the outcome of the referendum on EU membership has generated significant debate in all parts of the United Kingdom and beyond. Many aspects of the next steps in this process require clarification that will only emerge now that the new British Prime Minister, Mrs. Theresa May, has been appointed. In my discussions with Mrs. May last week, we discussed a range of issues of mutual interest, not least the importance of continuing to work together to build on the excellent relationship that now exists between Ireland and Britain, including our joint support of the peace process and the wider development of co-operation between these two islands. We agreed to stay in touch and to meet each other in the coming weeks.

Deputy Micheál Martin: I thank the Taoiseach for his reply. With a new Government in place in London, there is emerging a basic shape of the approach that may be taken by the United Kingdom Government to negotiations with the European Union. Mr. Davis, the new British Secretary of State responsible for Brexit, has suggested that he is fine with simply seeking a trade pact and that he may delay the triggering of Article 50 until next year. That would have significant implications for Ireland, and particularly Mr. Davis's narrow view of the negotiation

parameters with Britain. It could involve the return of a customs border here, if his thinking gains any further momentum.

Mr. Davis also seemed somewhat confused as to the status of what he termed “southern Ireland”, when asked about this country on Sunday. He seemed to be unaware of our constitutional status, to put it mildly. Could the Taoiseach, at the earliest opportunity, ensure that a member of Government holds an early meeting with Mr. Davis to update him on our perspectives on it?

More specifically concerning Scotland, it is clear that we need to stay closely in contact with the Scottish Government on an ongoing basis. I welcome the fact that the Government has decided to implement a suggestion I made to increase staffing in our European embassies and delegations - the Taoiseach made that clear at the leaders’ meeting last week - but the Taoiseach needs to make a similar commitment to increasing the staff levels at our Edinburgh consulate, which was set up quite a number of years ago and which has played a valuable role in developing relationships between Ireland and the Scottish Government and, indeed, the Scottish Parliament.

The Taoiseach was correct in raising the matter at the European Council meeting because it is the elephant in the room in some respects as well. It is relevant in terms of what may happen down the road in Scotland, if it was ever to secede from the United Kingdom. That is something that may take some time to happen.

The Taoiseach mentioned in his reply the British-Irish Council and the broader sets of relationships. I note the key issues, apart from Mr. David Davis saying it is about trade. For us, it is obviously the retention of and, ideally and optimally, the UK’s access to the Single Market to avoid tariffs between Ireland and Britain, but also the common travel area. The retention of the Single Market on the island of Ireland is critical, as is the avoidance of a hard border. I suggested an all-island dialogue on Brexit which would involve community groups, non-governmental organisations, the economic stakeholders, unions, business, etc.

4 o’clock

Apart from the political constitutional elements, I am looking at a civil dialogue involving civil organisations. The Taoiseach is broadly committed to that. It would allow people from the civic and social side in Northern Ireland to make a contribution to such a national dialogue on the implications of Brexit and the optimal outcome for the island of Ireland that could be achieved in the context of negotiations between the Republic of Ireland, within the European Union and with the United Kingdom.

To be frank, that leaves aside the constitutional and political issues under the umbrella of the Good Friday Agreement, which should be dealt with separately. I made it clear in my remarks at the weekend that there is no evidence now there has been any shift in terms of public opinion *vis-à-vis* a united Ireland, as per the Good Friday Agreement. All the evidence up to the Brexit referendum was to the contrary and that public opinion was not moving in the direction of a united Ireland in previous polls. It is important not to use Brexit as a kind of basis for an immediate Border poll or anything like that. I just want to make it clear that my position on that has been very consistent and understood. Much work must be done on that question.

On the Brexit issue itself, there is a very clear need for substantive dialogue, including with Scotland and others. I do not believe the full implications of this have been readily understood. As a former Minister, I went on trade missions to Scotland and we engaged with their universi-

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ties. They are particularly strong on research and the application of research to business ideas and industry. It seems that many partnerships that have developed between Irish companies and companies in the UK or Northern Ireland could be in jeopardy as a result of Horizon 2020 funding being cut from partners in England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. When in Brussels recently, the first person I met at the airport was a young person involved with a Northern Irish company who was very concerned about the partnership that had been developed. Where do such people now stand in terms of funding?

The Taoiseach got some criticism on the Scottish issue. We need voices on the UK side to surface as they will suddenly realise the implications of this for them if some proper negotiating platform, broader than just a trade agreement, is embarked upon. That needs to happen organically within the UK on issues like research, education, the Erasmus programme and so on, all of which could be cut off from young British people as a result of the decision to leave the European Union. There are a panoply of issues beyond trade and many people in the UK would be anxious to have some continuing engagement with them in any new agreement arising between the European Union and the United Kingdom.

Will the Taoiseach indicate if he will take practical steps on the dialogue issue, including inviting in civil and social groups? When can we expect a national conference or a plenary session of such stakeholders to take place and enable us to start the process?

The Taoiseach: I will see to it that Mr. Davis is contacted at an early stage to have the full range of our constitutional position fully outlined for him. I will ask the relevant Minister to deal with that fairly quickly.

When I was in Edinburgh at the last British-Irish Council, we spoke about the possibilities of increased business and trade between Ireland and Scotland before the decision. The Deputy is aware that Scotland has opened an office in Dublin. We will look at the question of beefing up the capacity in Edinburgh. I was very impressed with their approach when I met people in Glasgow about the possibilities for Irish business. The British-Irish Council meets in a special session in Cardiff this week on Friday to speak about the Brexit position, the Single Market and the CTA. They will all be points of discussion.

I would like to think there will be an opportunity for everybody to have their say on this. It may well be necessary to do it separately from the formalities of the Good Friday Agreement structure. As I stated before, although there is no mandate from here to negotiate for Northern Ireland, it is very important that we have a responsibility as co-guarantor of the agreement to understand the challenges that Northern Ireland businesses and entrepreneurs feel they face arising from Brexit. The Deputy is quite right in that many of these issues have not even been thought of in terms of how there will be an impact from the decision of the electorate to leave the European Union.

When I was in Donegal yesterday, the point I was making was that when the Good Friday Agreement was drafted, people were long-sighted enough to put into the agreement a clause whereby a time might arrive - we are now 20 years on - when a secretary of state could invoke the clause on the basis of sufficient support for a Border poll. That does not apply now because there is not sufficient support. I make the point that in years to come, it may well be that with Britain having left the European Union and Northern Ireland having voted to stay in the European Union but remaining a member of the United Kingdom, there may be general negotiations and discussions. The Deputy made the point, quite rightly, about Scotland wanting to join the

European Union if it leaves the UK. We should be able to make the arrangement on a long-term basis if it arises in future that a secretary of state triggers that clause, which will by then have been in the Good Friday Agreement for many years. That is if Northern Ireland would want to extract itself from the United Kingdom to join a country that continued as a member of the European Union. The only point I was making was that the discussions should be long-sighted and visionary enough to cater for that kind of issue if it happened. I am not saying it will happen and I do not see any evidence of a Border poll now. Some time in the future, they should not have to go through the process of a long drawn-out application to join the Republic, if that was the wish, but to be a member of the European Union as well. These are the kinds of issues that should be encompassed in this.

I agree with the Deputy because under the Horizon 2020 programme we have 500 partnerships with Britain in universities, research, scientific analysis and so on. This is very worrying as the Commission has informed some of those people that funding might not be likely to continue. There are also many thousands of Irish students going to college in colleges of technology and universities in Britain, so the issue of what happens with them must be discussed.

There is also the question of electricity supply. Northern Ireland depends on the Republic of Ireland. We have interconnections with gas. These are important elements. If Britain is to leave and no longer be subject to the regulations in so far as climate change is concerned or the other implications of EU directives, these will all need to be discussed. We will also need to discuss what applies in terms of the law currently. If there is a single island electricity market underpinned by legislation in Dublin or Westminster, when Britain leaves we presume the legislation will continue to be enforced. In the longer term, part of the European Union philosophy is not to have any energy islands and we should be connected to mainland Europe. Currently that connection comes through Britain with undersea and land connections. These are all part of the dialogue we must have.

I would like to think we could put the best possible proposition together to have that kind of discussion from political parties, non-governmental organisations, business people, trade unions and everybody else who wants to have a say. We are working to devise what might be an appropriate operation to allow that to happen. I hope we can do that in September but I will consult the leaders opposite for their views on it.

Deputy Brendan Howlin: On a point of order and the way questions are grouped, this was a question about discussions between the Taoiseach and the Scottish First Minister which interacted with a raft of further questions. Given these are really significant issues on which we would all like to contribute, could we look at how questions are grouped?

Acting Chairman (Deputy Eugene Murphy): I take the Deputy's point and will pass it on to the Ceann Comhairle.

Cabinet Committee Meetings

4. **Deputy Ruth Coppinger** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet sub-committee on social policy and public service reform last met. [20695/16]

Acting Chairman (Deputy Eugene Murphy): Ceist Uimh. 4 is in the name of Deputy Ruth Coppinger.

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Deputy Ruth Coppinger: Thank you, Acting Chairman.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Eugene Murphy): The Taoiseach is to go first and then the Deputy can speak.

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: My apologies. I thought the Acting Chairman was calling me first and giving me priority.

The Taoiseach: I will give Deputy Coppinger my reply. The Cabinet sub-committee on social policy and public service reform last met on 4 July.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Eugene Murphy): Deputy Coppinger, the floor is now yours.

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: I thank the Taoiseach. His reply was worth waiting for.

There was purpose to the question. In light of the fantastic economic figures released last week, I thought we might be adjusting completely our social and public sector policies. I am sure the Taoiseach read the article in the *Financial Times* last week. It opened by stating:

The Irish have written some notable works of fiction - James Joyce and Flann O'Brien produced imperishable classics. Now there is a new addition to the national [canon] - the official narrative of the country's economy. According to data released on Tuesday, it grew by 26.3 per cent last year.

Arising from this and the previous Government's policy of creating a tax haven in the country and other such incentives for multinationals to locate here, we are now disguising the real economic figures and making ourselves an international laughing stock. I do not know how the Taoiseach was greeted in Europe last week but the idea that there has been a 26% growth in the economy - I do not know if even Soviet Russia in the 1930s exceeded these figures - means we have all now heard the phrase leprechaun economics being bandied around internationally.

Has the Taoiseach reconsidered this country's policy of having the lowest rate of corporation tax in Europe, particularly when we have the most acute housing emergency? The Government has just released a plan which, unfortunately and sadly for those on housing lists, will continue to see people waiting up to 15 years to be housed and puts housing in the lap of the private sector. Meanwhile in the real world, while these figures were making us a laughing stock, according to Social Justice Ireland the number of people living in poverty in Ireland has increased by more than 110,000. Today, more than 750,000 people in the State live in poverty and 18% of adults with incomes below the poverty line are in employment.

The Taoiseach had a mantra during the election about making work pay. In actual fact, work does not pay for a huge number of people in the country. I am sure the Taoiseach has also noted the Low Pay Commission's derisory and insulting awarding of a 10 cent an hour increase to the minimum wage. Many have commented that it would have been better if no increase had been awarded because a 10 cent increase just adds insult to injury.

Will the Taoiseach reconsider his sacred policy of multinational domination of the economy? The policy allows them to have brass plate operations here and to source so much of their operations here they are distorting economic figures. It is now impossible to determine the rate of growth.

I will finish by mentioning the pursuit of Apple. Will the Taoiseach now drop his opposi-

tion to the European Commission's pursuit of Apple for back taxes in this country? These are estimated to amount to €17 billion. Imagine the houses we could build if we had €17 billion to hand. Will the Taoiseach consider bringing into effect the headline rate of corporation tax, which would increase our fiscal space of €2 billion this year alone? Those are the kinds of things we need to do to solve the housing crisis and not the kind of thing released earlier on today, which offers little hope to people.

The Taoiseach: I do not accept the premise of Deputy Coppinger's response at all. She states that we created a tax haven in the country. We did no such thing. Not only that, we have been very much upfront with the OECD in terms of the presentation of our corporate tax position. We abolished the double Irish concept. We got rid of the stateless concept. We were the first country to have a fully compliant regime in terms of the OECD requirements for countries. We have introduced the first fully OECD compliant knowledge development box with a tax rate of 6.25%. We defend strongly our corporate tax rate of 12.5% and will continue to do so. I note that other countries intend to reduce their corporate tax rate as well.

The Deputy mentioned last week's CSO figures. We dealt with them. Obviously, they do not reflect the average growth in the economy. The figures were impacted by the scale of aircraft leasing in the country, contracted manufacturing in other countries where firms are based here in Ireland, the transfer of public limited companies, plcs, to Ireland and the transfer of significant amounts of intellectual property rights to the country. These are all issues which impact on our economy, but clearly the figures produced last week do not impact in terms of job creation and job numbers.

The Cabinet sub-committee on social policy and public service reform has been dealing with quite a number of issues. It is important to reflect on the benefits of a rising economy on social injustice, unfairness and inequality and to demonstrate that Government does care about the quality of people's lives. My visits to the north inner city are a case in point. Within 100 yards of the IFSC, I witnessed people who deal in misery for money on the streets. Garda resources and facilities are needed to deal with these things and clean up these places. We also need to help those who have been waylaid.

In recent years, we have protected the primary weekly social welfare rates. We have put in place a proactive approach to helping those who are unemployed through the provision of Intreo offices. We held a referendum on children's rights. We strengthened child protection through the National Vetting Bureau. We published the Education (Admission to Schools) Bill, which is going through the legislative process now. We launched the new junior cycle reforms. We increased the time spent on literacy and numeracy skills in all primary schools and introduced a comprehensive action plan on bullying. We ended the practice of sending 16 year olds to St. Patrick's Institution. We published the national positive ageing strategy and the national dementia strategy. We established the Child and Family Agency. We increased provision for special needs assistants to 12,600 until the end of 2016, which is an increase of 2,300. We put in place the Irish refugee protection programme to take in 4,000 persons to the country. We approved amendments to the Misuse of Drugs Act to give the Garda greater power to deal with the problem of illicit trade in street medicines. We introduced a two-week period of paternity leave and associated social welfare payments. Priorities for this year include the new model of in-school speech and language therapy and the implementation of the national plan for equality of access to higher education. They also include expanding the preschool provision under the early childhood care and education, ECCE, programme, which will see the number of children benefiting rise from approximately 67,000 to 127,000 in the programme next year. We pub-

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lished the Government's action plan for education inclusion.

I will give an example to Deputy Coppinger. We have been dealing with the issue of re-source teachers for years. This is a sore point with people and rightly so because it means an awful lot to those for whom it should mean most - the students. The model was developed by the National Council for Special Education, NCSE, with Mr. Eamon Stack. It was discussed by the Cabinet sub-committee twice under the last Government. It was piloted in 47 schemes and the feedback has been positive. We are going to roll it out nationally in a way that does not create any losers in the short term and at a once-off cost of €72 million. The situation in regard to some learning support schemes was wasteful and inequitable. In one example, if school A has 250 students with ten needing learning support while school B has 250 students with 75 needing learning support, both would get the same level of learning support under the current system and that is inequitable, wasteful and harmful to those who do not get the necessary support. We are changing all that with a model designed for Ireland by the NCSE which will eliminate that type of situation and will mean the accompanying stress and pressure will not be put on parents and children. All these matters are important and reflect inequality, unfairness and social disadvantage so we must focus where we can on using the resources of a rising economy to deal with them.

As I said to Deputy Adams on a previous occasion, there needs to be an output from this type of investment in order that we can help people. Last week I met reformed alcoholics, reformed drug addicts and women who had suffered the most horrendous physical violence in their relationships and who have tried hard over the years to make a comeback and live their lives again. We must and will continue to work in that area.

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: That was a cook's tour of everything. The Taoiseach was going off mike but I think he mentioned domestic violence. He said he had met victims of domestic violence but he has cut all the funding for the agencies that deal with violence against women and domestic violence. It was a strange example to pick.

The Taoiseach mentioned special needs, but in my area, which has massive schools of 900 pupils and more, mainly because not enough schools were built, there is huge concern at the way the Government is planning to change the allocation of resources for children. Meetings have been called in Castleknock on this subject. People should get special needs allocations because they need it, regardless of income. Taking from Peter to pay Paul does not create equality and the Government is planning, for its own ends, to take from one school to give to another.

I gave the Taoiseach an example from the multinational sector and asked him a specific question about Apple. Does he not now agree that he should drop his opposition to the European Commission's pursuit of Apple? It would allow the €17 billion in question to come into this country to be used for the housing crisis and for people on the ground who need it.

The Taoiseach: We have been upfront and clear as regards all multinationals wishing to invest here. The Deputy will be aware that the European Commission is following up on quite a number of countries and quite a number of firms, but the Irish position with regard to the Revenue Commissioners has been very clear over the years. We have been clear about the transparency and accountability of our corporate tax rate system, which applies in all areas of the country without discrimination. Other countries have different measures and higher and lower rates, depending on the sector, but ours have always been a cornerstone of our foreign direct investment policy and will continue to be so. The European Commission will make its

own findings in its own time.

Priority Questions

Acting Chairman (Deputy Eugene Murphy): I remind Members that Priority Questions involve a procedure that lasts six and a half minutes and I will stick to that strictly. There are 30 seconds for a Member to introduce a question and two minutes for the ministerial reply. There are four minutes overall for supplementary questions and replies, with a one-minute limit on each supplementary question and reply. If we allow it to run over, somebody may not get to ask their question.

Road Safety

33. **Deputy Imelda Munster** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport his plans to address the issue of cars which have been written off in other jurisdictions being brought here, given the grave safety concerns for road users, especially with the lengthy delay in bringing forward legislation to deal with this matter; the measures he intends to take to deal with this problem; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [22794/16]

Deputy Imelda Munster: What measures does the Minister intend to take, including interim measures, to deal with the problem of cars which have been written off in other jurisdictions but are being brought into Ireland, given the grave safety concerns for road users, especially with the lengthy delay in bringing forward legislation to deal with the matter?

Deputy Shane Ross: On a point of order, has the first question lapsed?

Acting Chairman (Deputy Eugene Murphy): No. If Deputy Troy comes in we will take the question. Is that agreed? Agreed.

Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Shane Ross): The Road Safety Strategy 2013-20 includes a review of the existing legislation to control the re-introduction of written-off vehicles which are no longer suitable for use on public roads and to control the repair and re-use of vehicles written off for financial purposes. The Road Safety Authority, RSA, carried out a public consultation on the issue, following which draft provisions were developed for consideration. Due to the complexity of the issues involved, the Department, working together with the RSA, agreed that legislation could only be progressed following legal advice and careful examination of how robust and effective any measures would be. I am of the view that enabling legislation to provide for the regulation of written-off vehicles is an issue which requires action in the current Road Traffic Bill. This Bill has passed all Stages in the Seanad and is due to be introduced in the Dáil. The Deputy will be aware of the “Prime Time” programme which covered this issue in the past eight or nine weeks and which gave a fairly shocking exposure of what is going on in this area.

The Government agreed on 13 July with my proposal to legislate for the regulation of written-off vehicles by placing certain statutory obligations, accompanied by appropriate and proportionate sanctions, on both vehicle insurers and the importers of such vehicles. The statutory regime envisaged will build upon existing voluntary administrative arrangements in place between the Department and the insurance industry.

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It should be noted that there is already relevant legislation in place in both road traffic and consumer protection law dealing with such vehicles. It is currently an offence to drive a dangerously defective vehicle in a public place under road traffic legislation, while under the Consumer Protection Act 2007 car dealers are obliged to give full disclosure of the history of a second-hand vehicle to potential buyers. Also, under the Sale of Goods and Supply of Services Act 1980, a vehicle being sold should be free from any defect which would render it a danger to the public.

The prosecution of alleged offences under consumer protection legislation relating to the sale of second-hand vehicles is a matter for the Competition and Consumer Protection Commission, which is under the remit of the Department of Jobs, Enterprise and Innovation.

Deputy Imelda Munster: It was reported last week that 794 write-offs from Britain, a vast number, were imported into the State in June of this year alone. That equates to 10.7% of all cars imported, or 30 cars a day. It has increase from a figure of 530 in the same month in 2015.

The Road Traffic Bill 2014 intended to address that matter; however, the part of the Bill pertaining to write-offs was removed. The Minister stated that legal matters of concern had arisen, but when discussing the 2014 Bill the Minister's predecessor said that 40% of write-offs each year make their way back into service. I am sure the Minister will accept that this is a serious road safety issue. The term "write-off" refers to cars involved in crashes that are so seriously damaged that they either need major repairs done for them to be classed as roadworthy or should never appear back on the road. The Minister recognises that the legislation is badly needed, and I understand legal advice on this issue is pending, but what measures will he put in place in the interim? How long will it be before the Road Traffic Bill is brought back to the House? The Minister said-----

Acting Chairman (Deputy Eugene Murphy): Thank you, Deputy. You will have an opportunity to come back in.

Deputy Shane Ross: I thank the Deputy. She will see from my reply that I share her sense of urgency. This matter was not covered by the Road Traffic Bill when it was dealt with in the Seanad originally. The drafting and legal problems to which I referred and the complexities that were discovered in the solution pertaining to the Road Safety Authority were immediately addressed. The amendments are being drafted and they will be in the legislation when it comes before this House for Committee Stage very early in the autumn. It just missed the cut this time, partly because we wanted to put these two new amendments into the legislation.

The Deputy can expect this problem to be addressed with a sense of urgency very early in the next session, I hope, when we come back from the recess. We acknowledge that problem, and for much too long it has not been attacked, but I think the Deputy will find it is being addressed urgently now. The issues involved are complex but the Road Traffic Bill will contain penalties and sanctions and will put on a statutory basis something that has been voluntary to insurers in the past.

Deputy Imelda Munster: I know the Minister was hoping to have the Bill brought back to this House this week before the summer recess, but does he have any plans in the interim? There are thousands of these cars on the road. We are going into the summer season and there is no regulation or even a register for write-offs. Does the Minister have plans in the interim period to address that? Was there consultation of any sort or do we await the Bill? The Minister

said he hoped the Bill would come before the House in the early autumn but, given the length of time we have been waiting, is he imposing a sense of urgency on the Bill? Is he pressing for it to be brought back to the House at the earliest possible opportunity? If not, we run the risk of deaths or serious accidents on our roads because of the increase in the volume of write-offs being imported into the State.

Deputy Shane Ross: I ask the Deputy to accept my bona fides in this matter. The moment I discovered the urgency of this problem, which was due to what I saw on “Prime Time”, I addressed it. I asked my Department to have legislation drafted and to hurry it up. That was done. It was not going to be ready at any stage by the end of July but it will be slotted into a Bill that is ready to come to the House in a short timeframe. That shows a sense of urgency for something that has been wallowing in the rafters for many years. With the agreement and the enthusiasm of the Government, I will insist that this Bill come before the House at an early stage after the recess.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Eugene Murphy): We will go back now to Deputy Troy’s question, No. 32, as agreed in the House. I know the Deputy was held up on other business.

Tourism Industry

32. **Deputy Robert Troy** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport if his Department has a strategy in place for dealing with the consequences of Brexit for overseas tourism to Ireland; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [22789/16]

Deputy Robert Troy: I thank the House for facilitating me. This question arises out of the recent result of the British referendum on Brexit and its potential consequences in terms of the number of tourists visiting Ireland. What has the Minister done, in conjunction with his Department, to establish a comprehensive strategy to ensure there will not be a negative impact on our tourist numbers?

(Deputy Shane Ross): Great Britain has consistently been Ireland’s most important source market for visits to Ireland, with just over 3.5 million visits in 2015. This represented 41% of our total overseas visits. CSO figures for the period January to May 2016 show further strong performance from this market, with growth in visit numbers of over 15.7% when compared with the same period of 2015.

Tourism Ireland, the agency responsible for marketing the island of Ireland as a visitor destination in overseas markets, has an extensive marketing programme in place for the second half of 2016 which is under way in 23 markets, including Great Britain. In the longer term, the programme for Government commits to implementing the policy objectives in the tourism policy statement, People, Place and Policy – Growing Tourism to 2025, and achieving the targets for Irish tourism contained therein. The UK vote does not change that.

While the Great Britain market contributed 41% of overseas visits in 2015, the share of overseas visitor revenue from British visitors is approximately 23%. There is a commitment in the tourism policy statement to prioritising tourism marketing efforts towards those markets providing higher revenue returns.

In the short term, there are no changes to how people can travel between Ireland and the

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UK, and the Government will be doing its utmost in future discussions to maintain the common travel area. In terms of the relative reduction in the value of sterling and the implications for the cost of a holiday here, this has similar implications for all eurozone countries, many of which compete with us for these tourists.

The Great Britain market will remain of significant importance to Irish tourism in the future, and I believe that Ireland's excellent tourism offering will ensure that we continue to perform strongly. Tourism Ireland is closely monitoring the situation and is due to meet with tourism industry representatives again later this week to plan ahead in this new market environment. In the longer term, we will work closely with other Departments and our agencies and respond to any changes as necessary. I remain confident, however, that our ambitious overall long-term targets for Irish tourism will be achieved.

Deputy Robert Troy: The one point on which I agree with the Minister is that it is too early to predict the effects of Brexit on our country regarding the common travel area and other matters. However, we need a strategy to deal with that, and it appears from the Minister's reply that the Department does not have a strategy other than to plough on with the *status quo*. We are overly reliant on the UK market. The Minister stated that 41% of tourists who visited Ireland last year were from the UK and Northern Ireland. That figure increased by a further 15.7% in the first six months of this year. I acknowledge that we have great amenities and much to offer tourists coming here, but that in itself will not bring them here, and the budget for marketing our country was cut significantly in the past four years. Is there a strategy in place to deal with this issue or does the Minister intend to simply continue with what has been done for the past number of years, which was to concentrate efforts on the UK, Europe and then the United States, to the detriment of other areas such as Asia, where there is huge potential?

Deputy Shane Ross: Tourism Ireland decided to hold a review the moment the result of the Brexit referendum was known. That was a review to discuss and decide how to target new and developing tourist markets. The terms of reference for this review are being finalised now. It must be remembered that the referendum was only a couple of weeks ago, and it would be crazy to have a knee-jerk reaction.

The new strategy will focus on marketing and on the training and upskilling required for those working in the tourism industry in the State in order to meet the needs of visitors from these markets. It is very important to acknowledge two big uncertainties at the moment - the unknowns that must be addressed. These are the issues of sterling and the common travel area, CTA. It is very important to Ireland that the CTA be defended, whatever the result of the Brexit negotiations. Sterling is an absolute imponderable and it would be impossible to suggest that we might know where that will be in six months, five years or six years. That would be foolish. The Deputy may be absolutely assured that Tourism Ireland reacted immediately in reviewing this policy and we will have a result on that fairly shortly.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Eugene Murphy): The Deputy may have a quick final supplementary question.

Deputy Robert Troy: I welcome the fact that there is a new strategy. That is important. Will the Minister clarify what consultation will be held with the various stakeholders, including the Irish Hotels Federation, Dublin Airport Authority, and the airlines on which we rely to bring tourists into the State? The Minister is correct that nobody knows what is going to happen with the CTA, possibly for two years. However, in the meantime we cannot just wait to see

what will happen; we have to be actively targeting new markets such as the Asia-Pacific region. There is a real opportunity to attract more visitors from that area. Will the Minister, under the new strategy, make the necessary funding available to ensure Ireland can be marketed to these areas? Over the last three or four years there has been a cut of approximately 17% to the tourism marketing funding. Will that cut be reversed under the new strategy?

Acting Chairman (Deputy Eugene Murphy): We are over the time that was allocated for this discussion. However, I will allow the Minister 30 seconds for a quick response.

Deputy Shane Ross: Tourism Ireland and my Department are determined to get the message out that it is business as usual in the new situation. I am not suggesting that we should be complacent, but the Deputy should remember that it is not all bad news. We will obviously be looking for new markets but the exchange rate only affects our relationship in this way with Britain at the moment. Those British people who may decide not to come here are going to look at the Continent and find the exchange rate is exactly the same in Europe, where the euro is the common currency. The crisis in tourism may not be as bad as it sounds or as bad as we feared.

Deputy Robert Troy: They are not coming here for the sun.

Deputy Shane Ross: It must be remembered that although Great Britain accounts for 41% of the tourists who visit here, it only accounts for 23% of revenue spent here.

Transport Infrastructure Provision

34. **Deputy Robert Troy** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport his plans for dealing with increasing traffic congestion in Dublin city and on key arterial routes in the greater Dublin area. [22790/16]

Deputy Robert Troy: Anybody who has travelled into the capital city in recent years will be somewhat perplexed about how congested the city has become. Over that period of time there has been a notable decrease in spending on public transport and public transport improvements by the Department of Transport, Tourism and Sport, albeit by the current Minister's predecessors. Will the Minister indicate what plan he has in place to tackle the traffic congestion in the capital city?

(Deputy Shane Ross): This question is similar to one asked by Deputy Troy previously, but then I believe it was specific to the M50, which is only part of the traffic congestion problem. I am grateful to Deputy Troy for addressing the matter in a wider form.

Increasing capacity in our public transport system and improving the quality of public transport services is key to addressing congestion in the greater Dublin area. More than €200 million has been allocated for investment in public and sustainable transport infrastructure in the greater Dublin area in 2016 under the capital plan.

The capital investment works currently being undertaken by the National Transport Authority, NTA, in the greater Dublin area include the Luas cross city project, which is on schedule to open at the end of 2017; the Phoenix Park tunnel, which I expect to open for services later this year; the city centre re-signalling project; and investment in the bus fleet and bus priority measures. These will greatly enhance the capacity of the public transport system in the greater Dublin area when completed.

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Additionally, funding is being allocated to a wide range of projects in the greater Dublin area aimed at developing sustainable transport modes such as cycling, walking and public transport. Investment is also being made in integration measures designed to encourage the use of public transport, such as real-time passenger information, the Leap card, the national journey planner and on-board Wi-Fi.

The NTA's transport strategy for the greater Dublin area for 2016 to 2035 sets out a comprehensive vision for public transport in the greater Dublin area over the next two decades. The NTA is now drawing up an integrated implementation plan to outline how it will go about delivering the strategy's objectives over the first six-year period within the strategy's overall 20-year horizon.

While investment in the public transport system is critical to addressing congestion, ultimately, a public transport response on its own cannot ensure that there is a sustainable match between transport demand and transport supply. Neither can traffic management measures or additional roads investment achieve this in isolation. Congestion can only be managed by combining all of these responses.

Ultimately, urban mobility is inextricable from land use planning. In this regard, my Department is engaging closely in the development of the new national planning framework to ensure that the new framework will support greater integration of land use and transport planning throughout the country.

Deputy Robert Troy: There seems to be a total absence of a comprehensive vision and strategic plan to cope with the future transport demand in the core Dublin area. The Minister has acknowledged the Luas cross city project and the Phoenix Park tunnel, but these projects are on a piecemeal basis. There is no clear strategy. The capital plan that was published last September is very unambitious with regard to what will be delivered. Meanwhile, we have the construction of cycle lanes. The number of cars coming into the city is decreasing and the reduction is not being compensated for by ensuring the provision of public car parks on the outer roads. Parking is still happening on side streets coming in to the city, which is a crazy situation. If we want to get people into the capital city and moving freely around by way of public transport, cycling or walking, where are they to leave their cars when they commute? The provision of public car parks on the outskirts of town should be examined and a comprehensive strategy should be planned regarding how to improve the number of bus and DART journeys. The DART underground has been shelved but we need to be looking and planning for the future and not on a piecemeal basis.

Deputy Shane Ross: It is very easy for Deputy Troy to say that while sitting there with a blank chequebook. The restrictions are not in terms of strategy or vision; they are because of the shortage of money for many years, as the Deputy is aware. The strategy is quite clear and I would have thought it was very obvious. There is very definitely a strategy behind this, which is the strategy of taking cars off the road, not just because of congestion but because of emissions also.

With regard to some of Deputy Troy's comments, the DART underground project is not completely buried. There is a strategy for north Dublin, which is the metro north. There is a strategy to take cars off the road through the encouragement of cycling throughout Dublin and the State. There is a strategy with regard to the cross city Luas, which is bang on time and on target. As the Deputy is also aware, cycleways are increasing the numbers of people who cycle

at an extremely satisfactory rate. It is wrong to say there is no strategy. It is a multifaceted approach - it is not an airy-fairy approach - within the restrictions that exist.

Deputy Robert Troy: The Minister wants to get cars off the road, but it must be acknowledged that, as a nation, we rely predominantly on cars over public transport. If we want to get people and cars off the road we have to put in place an efficient, effective alternative, which is not currently available. Travel times for people who commute to Dublin have become progressively worse. We talk about replacing cars and taking them off the road but we do not have an effective, efficient alternative. We need the necessary plans, because not everybody is going to drop his or her car for a bicycle. Not everybody is going to drop his or her car for a bus that is not going to come on time or for a light rail network that is not in place at the moment.

Deputy Shane Ross: I can understand what Deputy Troy is saying but I reject what he says about there being no strategy at all. Within the constraints there are some very heavy projects and commitments. Not all of them can be delivered immediately because of financial constraints, but there are some very imaginative projects that will be.

I do not know if the Deputy wants to scrap the metro north - maybe he wants to hurry it up - but he is going to have to tell me what he will pay for it with. It will come into existence at the earliest possible date. We have said consistently that if the growth rates improve, if the economy improves, if there is money in the Exchequer, one of the things the money will be spent on is to progress some of these projects. That is absolutely vital. They cannot be conjured out of thin air when the Exchequer does not have the resources. We are doing an enormous amount on the projects I have mentioned within the limited resources we have.

Road Tolls

35. **Deputy Imelda Munster** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport to consider a review of the toll charge imposed on the M1 at Drogheda and in particular the slip road tolls where persons have to pay a toll on entry and exit to the town and the detrimental effect it is having on local businesses, small hauliers and tourism and investment, in addition to adding to the congestion in an already congested town; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [22795/16]

Deputy Imelda Munster: Will the Minister conduct a review of the toll charge imposed on the M1 in Drogheda and particularly the imposition of a toll on slip roads entering and exiting the town? Will he review the adverse effect this has on local business and tourism, townspeople and small hauliers, and the everyday practicality of getting from one side of the town to the other?

Deputy Shane Ross: I thank the Deputy for her question. I am not familiar with the exact situation she is referring to, but I have learnt a fair amount about it in the past 24 hours and I am grateful to the Deputy for pointing the situation out.

As Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport, I have responsibility for overall policy and funding of the national roads programme. The planning, design and operation of individual roads is a matter for Transport Infrastructure Ireland, TII, under the Roads Acts 1993 to 2015 in conjunction with the local authorities concerned. Furthermore, the statutory power to levy tolls on national roads, to make toll by-laws and to enter into agreements relating to tolls on na-

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tional roads is vested in TII under Part V of the Roads Act 1993 as amended. The contractual arrangements relating to M1 tolls are, therefore, matters for TII. There is no provision under the legislation whereby I, as Minister, could review the toll charges on the M1.

I understand that TII entered into a 30-year contract in 2004 with the public private partnership company Celtic Roads Group to construct a bypass of Dundalk and operate and maintain this section of road together with 42 km of the existing motorway. As part of this contract the PPP company is entitled to charge tolls in line with the approved toll scheme. The approved toll scheme provides for tolls on the main motorway and the Donore interchange ramps. My understanding is that the Donore ramp toll plazas were installed to mitigate possible “rat running,” with the adverse impacts that would have on local communities. In response to concerns expressed at the time about the possible impact on businesses in Drogheda, the approved toll scheme stipulates that where a vehicle exits the motorway, having paid a toll, and re-enters within three hours, no further charge is payable.

Deputy Imelda Munster: Is the Minister aware that Drogheda is the only town in Ireland to be tolled? There is a toll tax on entering and exiting the town. To say that it is having an adverse effect on local businesses, tourism, parents leaving their kids to school, small hauliers and day-to-day business about the town is no exaggeration. As an example of the ludicrous situation, a person who wants to go from Woodies, in the retail park on the north side of the town, to Argos, in the retail park on the south side, must pay that toll or be forced to drive through the centre of town. The slip road tolls were supposed to have been put in to avoid rat-running but they have had the opposite effect. They have added to the serious congestion in Drogheda and at times they have ground Drogheda to a halt. Will the Minister conduct a review? Will he arrange a meeting with TII? Will he state explicitly the adverse effects this is having on the town, which is the only town in Ireland to be subject to this toll, and agree that the negative effects are far-reaching? Why would an investor who compares Drogheda with another town, in view of the fact that there is a toll charge to enter or exit the town, put Drogheda above the other town?

Deputy Shane Ross: I am impressed with what the Deputy says, but I think this may be a double-edged sword. As so often happens in this House, the Deputy is asking me to do things I am not empowered to do. I will meet the TII very shortly. I cannot remember the date; it is either in the next week or two or in August. If the Deputy gives me a briefing on this I will give it to the TII at that meeting. I am interested in what the Deputy says and will listen to what the TII has to say and go from there. I will put it directly to the people there who have the power to make decisions on something like this.

Deputy Imelda Munster: I thank the Minister for his response, but I cannot state clearly enough the adverse effect this is having on the town. The removal of these slip road tolls would not only give the town a boost but would encourage more business. It is a crazy situation and it is the only town in Ireland to be tolled. It is hard to see how that slip road toll is cost-effective, because it means that many people drive through the town, adding to the congestion, to avoid a couple of kilometres on the motorway when travelling from the north to the south of Drogheda. To be charged a toll to enter and exit a town would only compound congestion in Drogheda. Would the Minister invite a delegation from TII and come to Drogheda with it to witness the adverse effect on the town?

Deputy Shane Ross: I am not going to invite a delegation to see the town at this stage, but, as I said, I will put the case the Deputy has made, see what the TII has to say about it, and inform the Deputy of the result, because I think that is important. If the tolls were simply to be

removed from the interchange, it might be expected to create a diversion from the M1 at this junction, attracting other traffic that wishes to avoid the mainline toll. Reducing mainline traffic would reduce mainline toll revenue as well as eliminating the revenue currently being collected at the junction. Traffic through Drogheda town centre would be little changed, but traffic on local routes such as the R152 through Duleek and the R132 through Julianstown would be increased by thousands of vehicles a day.

Road Tolls

36. **Deputy Brendan Ryan** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport the status of the announcement by eFlow that it is withdrawing its tag service on toll booths at a number of toll booths, including at the M1 near Drogheda, the M7/M8 south of Portlaoise and the N25 at Waterford; if he is concerned that this may cause a significant increase in delays for motorists at toll bridges here; if he has been briefed by eFlow on its decision not to renew its contract with a company (details supplied), the operator of a number of Irish motorways; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [22530/16]

Deputy Brendan Ryan: I represent Dublin-Fingal, with which the Minister is familiar from the traffic report every morning, as many of my constituents who are not served by public transport or rail links converge on Whitehall and arteries into Dublin city centre from the M1. Our traffic planning is fragile and I would appreciate an update from the Minister on the announcement by eFlow that it is withdrawing its tag service from several tolling booths, including the M1 but also the M7/M8 and the N25.

Deputy Shane Ross: I thank the Deputy for his question. As Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport, I have responsibility for overall policy and funding for the national roads programme. The planning, design and operation of individual road projects is a matter for TII under the Roads Acts 1993 to 2015 in conjunction with the local authorities concerned.

Furthermore, the statutory power to levy tolls on national roads, to make toll by-laws and to enter into agreements relating to tolls on national roads is vested in TII under Part V of the Roads Act 1993 as amended.

The contractual arrangements relating to tag interoperability are therefore entirely matters for TII and are commercially sensitive.

5 o'clock

TII has briefed my department on the position and it is the case that, with effect from 31 August, eFlow tags will no longer be accepted at toll points on the M1 near Drogheda, the M7 and M8 near Portlaoise and the M25 Waterford bypass. I have been informed by TII that the toll collection agreements previously in place expired earlier this year and that while a new agreement has been concluded with other toll operators, unfortunately eFlow has not been able to reach an agreement with the company which would cover these three toll points. It is not, therefore, the case of eFlow withdrawing its tags.

I understand that eFlow is in the process of contacting all types of customers to advise them of the change and will provide assistance to customers who wish to switch to another tag provider. There is no cost associated with switching tag providers for customers, but all tag

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providers charge an account management fee.

Deputy Brendan Ryan: As the Minister is aware, our motorway network is part of the vital transport infrastructure in our State and I commend the work of previous Governments to develop the network which improved interconnectivity throughout our country. I ask the Minister, notwithstanding the fact that his responsibilities may not cover this area, to intervene in this matter and work to bring about a resolution. The change is due to come into effect on 1 September, just as children go back to school and traffic returns to its busiest levels after the summer. There is time for the Minister to intercede and resolve the matter.

I refer to the M1, as it is the motorway with which I am most familiar. It links Dublin and Belfast, the two largest cities on the island. It bypasses and serves some of the largest towns in Ireland, such as Dundalk, Drogheda and Swords, as well as the fastest growing town in Ireland, Balbriggan. Any impact on traffic on the M1 has the potential to affect thousands of commuters in all of these towns, including those travelling on express bus services provided by Dublin Bus and other providers which use the Dublin Port tunnel.

The Minister has been given a lot of notice of the change. I accept his response, but if the matter is not resolved the situation could escalate or spread. A major benefit to our motorway network is the electronic payment mechanisms which are accepted and used. We do not want to inconvenience busy people who use our motorways on a regular basis and require them to pay at barriers or in shops.

There are many infrastructural needs in the country, but let us not go backwards. I ask the Minister to nip this issue in the bud and resolve or influence it in any way he can in order that commuters are not inconvenienced. I acknowledge the response of the Minister to a previous question, in which he stated that he will meet TII, and look forward to his positive intervention.

Deputy Shane Ross: I will not intervene directly at this stage because it would not be appropriate. The affairs of a private company are involved and a Minister would be very reluctant to become involved, especially when, as far as I can see, this is a commercial dispute about charges.

As I said to Deputy Munster, when I meet TII I will raise the issue again. I will ask what it thinks, if anything, can be done about it because it has an arrangement with eFlow and, therefore, has some influence. I do not have the exact date, but as I said the meeting will take place in the next three or four weeks. We must remember that while customers will be inconvenienced, they have the option to switch or pay at the tolls.

Deputy Brendan Ryan: I thank the Minister for his response. I speak as a representative of Dublin Fingal and a supporter of metro north. It is no surprise that there is a regular traffic snarl on a major artery into Dublin city that is not served by rail link. The Red Cow roundabout used to be the headline traffic disaster in Dublin until the Luas came along. The Navan Road was also a blackspot until commuter rail links improved.

We need metro north to be accelerated. The port tunnel is not a solution to the commuting deficit in north County Dublin. When a dispute which has the potential to impact on commuting times occurs, it has an extra impact. Can the Minister sort out this dispute and move on to the next project, namely, the delivery of metro north as soon as possible?

Deputy Shane Ross: I am conscious that eFlow has approximately 300,000 tag account

customers. I understand it has already notified customers of the change. As I said, it is currently implementing a communications plan to contact all customers, including those who use CRG toll roads by phone, e-mail, SMS and letter. It will also be running a broader communications plan in the national and local media and radio, print and digital media to communicate the upcoming changes and advise customers what to do.

While some communications activities have started, most will commence during early August. I hope that in the meantime the parties involved in this dispute will be able to come to an amicable agreement. It appears that many of the other companies involved in tagging have been able to come to an agreement and have not arrived at the same unhappy outcome. The Deputy can be assured that when I meet TII I will raise the issue and see whether it can do anything without directly intervening.

Deputy Eugene Murphy: I want to note the co-operation of Deputies and the Minister. There has been a fair balance between everybody, which I appreciate because it ensures that everybody's question receives the appropriate time.

Other Questions

Road Network

37. **Deputy Robert Troy** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport to address concerns of extremely low maintenance spending on national, regional and local roads by his Department; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [22480/16]

Deputy Robert Troy: I refer to concerns about the extremely low levels of spending on maintaining national, regional and local roads. It is something the Minister's Department has acknowledged in a briefing paper. Things are now at a crisis point. Roads the length and breadth of the country are deteriorating at an alarming rate. What does the Minister intend to do to ensure there is greater investment in road infrastructure?

Deputy Shane Ross: I do not disagree with the sentiments of Deputy Troy that the roads are in dire need of additional funds. It is something we are addressing as a matter of urgency.

As Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport, I have responsibility for overall policy and funding in regard to the national roads programme. The construction, improvement and maintenance of individual national roads is a matter for TII, under the Roads Act, in conjunction with the local authorities concerned. Within its capital budget, the assessment and prioritisation of individual national road projects is a matter for TII in accordance with section 19 of the Roads Act.

The improvement and maintenance of regional and local roads is the statutory responsibility of local authorities, in accordance with the provisions of section 13 of the Roads Act 1993, as amended. Works on these roads are funded from the local authority's own resources, supplemented by State road grants. The initial selection and prioritisation of works to be funded is also a matter for each authority.

Ireland has just under 100,000 km of road in its network and the maintenance and improvement of national, regional and local roads places a substantial financial burden on local authorities and the Exchequer. As a result of the national financial position, there have been very large

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reductions in the funding available for road expenditure over the past number of years.

The capital plan, published in September 2015, outlined proposed transport investment priorities to 2022. It provides €6 billion for investment in the roads network in the period to 2022, with €4.4 billion earmarked for the maintenance and strengthening of the existing extensive network throughout the country and €1.6 billion for new projects, including PPP already underway. The transport element of the capital plan is based on a gradual buildup over the plan period in capital funding for the road network from the current relatively low base towards the levels needed to support maintenance and improvement works.

While I fully recognise the importance of maintenance and renewal work on the roads, as Minister I have to work within the capital and current budgets available to my Department. In view of the continuing constraints on State funding, my Department has emphasised to local authorities the importance of prioritising expenditure on roads when allocating their resource income.

Deputy Robert Troy: The Minister is correct; it is the statutory responsibility of local authorities to maintain roads. I do not know whether the Minister was a member of a local authority in the past, but from my experience when local authorities are allocated money it is well spent and roads are kept in a good condition. Over the past four years, 47% less than what was required was allocated to various roads. To put the reduction in context, in 2015, €400 million that was paid in motor tax was spent on the establishment of Irish Water, and a payment of €439 million in road tax is due to go to Irish Water in 2016. It is no wonder people are annoyed at the condition of the roads. It is not just me: my colleague Deputy Michael McGrath has also tabled a question on road projects. I met with a delegation of councillors from Monaghan who were infuriated with the condition of the roads. It is not good enough to say it is the statutory responsibility of the local authorities. They will carry out their work in an appropriate manner if they are given the necessary resources to do so.

Deputy Shane Ross: I am afraid it is a reality in which we are now working. I remind the Deputy that public funding for Ireland's national roads fell significantly during the recession. From a peak of €1.75 billion in 2007, capital and current expenditure on national roads reduced to €433 million in 2015. The start of year capital and current expenditure allocation for 2016 is €402 million. The steep decline in expenditure on roads during that period spans several Administrations and several years. It is inevitable at this stage that we are in a situation which is critical, admittedly, in certain places but it is not just the result of spendthrift or generous spending on roads at certain times in the past decade; it is also the result of the fact that as the Deputy is aware, we have an extraordinarily high number of roads, 100,000 km, which is amazing and is way above the EU average. The roads present a burden not just in terms of maintenance but also in terms of capital expenditure, which is not endured by any other nation in Europe.

Deputy Robert Troy: In Ireland we benefit from a high percentage of car ownership, which is not the case in any other European country. That means we have a higher percentage of people who pay road tax. The very least those who pay motor tax on their cars can expect is to travel on safe roads. The sorry situation now is that many roads are unsafe because we have not invested enough in road restoration. The figures the Minister outlined from 2007 to 2015 include new constructions. We have not had new roads constructed in recent years but we have had a siphoning off of money raised from road tax for the establishment of what in the words of the Minister is a super quango, namely, Irish Water. It is not surprising that motorists are infuriated by the condition of the roads. I ask the Minister to ensure that the bulk of the motor

tax people pay is ring-fenced to ensure we have the necessary resources to maintain the infrastructure that has been put in place over many years.

Deputy Shane Ross: I assure the Deputy that I will do everything I can in the coming months to ensure that we have a capital budget for the motorways and other roads that is as large as possible, because I am aware of the problem every day of my life. What is called the steady State expenditure, which is such a high proportion of the money we have spent on roads, explains a lot of the problem to which the Deputy refers. The fact that we have to spend so much money just on the maintenance of the roads because the network is so extensive is indicative of the problems, which are going to remain with us for a long period. As the Deputy is aware, there are plans in the capital plan for some fairly dramatic movement upwards and spending on roads from 2019 onwards. I am very optimistic that when that period comes we will see a great improvement in the roads and that the spending on some of the areas that are high profile and have been lacking will be extended.

Road Improvement Schemes

38. **Deputy Michael McGrath** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport if he will consider projects at Clarke's Hill and Coach Hill, Rochestown, County Cork, for inclusion in the next round of grants under the specific improvement scheme; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [22245/16]

Deputy Michael McGrath: The question I raise relates to the specific improvement scheme under the Department and whether funding will be made available in the next round of the specific improvement scheme for two road projects in Rochestown, County Cork, one of which is Clarke's Hill and the other is Coach Hill. Perhaps the Minister could first respond on the scheme generally and whether funding will be provided for the reinstatement of the scheme which fell victim to the economic crisis and the downturn.

Deputy Shane Ross: The improvement and maintenance of regional and local roads is a statutory function of local authorities in accordance with the provisions of section 13 of the Roads Act 1993. Works on such roads are a matter for the relevant local authority to be funded from its own resources supplemented by State road grants.

The initial selection and prioritisation of projects to be funded from these moneys is a matter for each local authority. Under the strategic grant scheme introduced in 2000 to facilitate housing and other development my Department did provide grant assistance to Cork County Council in relation to road improvements at Clarke's Hill. This grant commitment concluded in 2015.

Given the cutbacks in State funding for regional and local roads since the financial crisis, it has been necessary to curtail the grant programme for major new regional and local road schemes and for major realignment schemes in order to protect the funding available for the maintenance of the existing network. In this context my Department is not operating an annual application process under these schemes and does not have applications in relation to projects at Clarke's Hill or Coach Hill in Cork.

The Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform, together with the Minister for housing, planning, community and local government, has announced the establishment of a local in-

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infrastructure housing activation fund of €150 million, to be matched by €50 million in local authority funding, to relieve critical access and support infrastructural blockages and enable the delivery of large-scale housing on key development sites, with the potential to open up lands and deliver a significant level of new housing in Dublin and other urban areas. Once details of the arrangements relating to the fund are finalised and a call for proposals issues later this year, it is open to local authorities, including Cork County Council, to consider submitting a bid proposal to access such funding for suitable projects.

Deputy Michael McGrath: I would not expect the Minister to be aware of the location and the specifics of the scheme concerned but the Clarke's Hill road improvement scheme was partially completed, which included a longer stretch of road around Garryduff, Moneygourney, Rochestown and Douglas. Clarke's Hill itself was not completed and is the final remaining section of that road improvement scheme. I accept that the local authority must supplement its own internal funding with funding from the Department but the question is whether there will be a specific improvement scheme going forward.

The Minister said the Department was not operating an annual grant scheme. Are allocations therefore made on an *ad hoc* and case-by-case basis? The infrastructure fund to which the Minister referred is not relevant in this case: this is not about opening up development land. The roads are already serving densely populated residential areas in Rochestown and the road infrastructure on the two roads to which I refer is woefully inadequate. Perhaps the Minister could give an indication of how the Department expects councils to complete schemes such as the one to which I refer if there is not an annual application process under what was regarded as the specific road improvement scheme.

Deputy Shane Ross: First, I will outline my understanding of the scheme. Grant funding was provided under the scheme for road improvement works on the Clarke's Hill-Moneygourney Road. Funding totalling approximately €3 million was provided between 2001 and 2005 and the works were undertaken in phases, with the most recent phase covering a section from Foxwood, where the previous contract ended, and Maryborough Hill, including construction of a roundabout on the main alignment of the junction of Fort Hill and The Borough. It is understood that further works will be required to complete the road upgrade in the area. However, the extent of the cutbacks in grant funding meant that the position regarding these grant categories had to be reviewed in 2013. Because of the cuts, expenditure on maintenance renewal was falling well short of what was required to adequately maintain the regional and local road network. For this reason, the then Minister informed the Government in February 2013 that, given the impact of the expenditure cuts on maintenance and renewal of roads, the decision had to be made to prioritise the protection of the existing network and to curtail road improvement grants with effect from 2014. In this context the Minister indicated that while the effects of under-funding in maintenance might not show up for a period of years, they eventually do, and at that stage roads can deteriorate quite rapidly and can be very expensive to repair.

Deputy Michael McGrath: The point is that the Clarke's Hill scheme is an incomplete project. I understand that this funding stream was frozen as part of the economic crisis. The question is whether an application by the council for funding under this scheme can be considered if the scheme no longer exists. Does it exist? Perhaps the Minister could clarify that. The second project to which I refer, Coach Hill, is separate but it dovetails with the Clarke's Hill road scheme in that they meet up at a particular junction. No work was done on Coach Hill, but the Clarke's Hill project did receive State funding, which was badly needed. It is a fabulous scheme where the work has been completed, but it is incomplete. If the Minister could signal

even that an application by the local authority, which is Cork County Council in this case, could be considered by the Department for the 2017 allocation, then I could advise it of such and it could make plans accordingly.

Deputy Shane Ross: I hope I can help the Deputy in this matter. The Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform, together with the Minister for the Environment, Community and Local Government, has announced the establishment, as referred to by the Deputy, of the local infrastructure housing activation fund of €150 million, to be matched by €50 million in local authority funding to relieve critical access and supporting infrastructural blockages and enable the delivery of large-scale housing on key development sites, with the potential to open up lands and deliver a significant level of new housing in Dublin and other urban areas. Once details of the arrangements relating to the fund are finalised and a call for proposals issues later this year, it is open to local authorities, including Cork County Council, to consider submitting a bid proposal to access such funding for suitable projects.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Eugene Murphy): The next question is in the name of Deputy Boyd Barrett. I see him looking around frantically. Has he lost his phone?

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: No. It was my pen.

Deputy Kevin O’Keeffe: Question No. 39 is next.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: It is somebody else’s turn.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Eugene Murphy): My deepest apologies; it is. Deputy Munster is next, then Deputy Boyd Barrett.

Deputy Kevin O’Keeffe: On a point of order, could the Acting Chairman include Question No. 53 with Question No. 39? It is a similar question.

Deputy Shane Ross: Are we taking them separately?

Deputy Kevin O’Keeffe: They should be grouped.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Eugene Murphy): Question No. 39 or Question No. 53?

Deputy Kevin O’Keeffe: It is a similar question-----

Deputy Shane Ross: I think grouping is gone, is it not?

Deputy Robert Troy: If it is, it is only in the last few days.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: It is up to the Minister to group them.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Eugene Murphy): I will not group them. If the Deputy has an issue with it, he should go to the Ceann Comhairle. I will stick to what I am supposed to do.

Deputy Kevin O’Keeffe: Is the Acting Chairman encouraging repetition?

Acting Chairman (Deputy Eugene Murphy): I will proceed and let everybody’s question be taken-----

Deputy Kevin O’Keeffe: You are out of order.

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Acting Chairman (Deputy Eugene Murphy): Nice try. I hope we will get to the Deputy's question.

Sports Capital Programme

39. **Deputy Imelda Munster** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport if he has made a decision as to whether sports capital grants will be made available for 2016; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [22490/16]

Deputy Imelda Munster: Have the Minister and his colleague, the Minister of State, Deputy Patrick O'Donovan, made a decision as to whether to release the sports capital grants for 2016, and will the Minister make a statement on the matter?

Minister of State at the Department of Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Patrick O'Donovan): I thank the Deputy for raising this issue. I know Deputy O'Keefe has submitted practically the same question. Deputies will be aware that the sports capital programme is the Government's primary vehicle to support the development of sports facilities and the purchase of sports equipment. They will also be aware that there was no round of the sports capital programme in 2009, 2010 or 2011. There were, however, rounds of the programme in 2012, 2014 and 2015. Almost 1,600 applications were received under the 2015 round of the programme, evidence of its ongoing importance. No decision has been taken on the timing of the next rounds of the sports capital programme. Work is, however, ongoing on simplifying the online process to make it easier for applicants.

I know that there has been something of a mini-hysteria about this recently. I point to the fact that in the programme for a partnership Government there is a commitment for an annualised sports capital programme, and the Minister, Deputy Ross, and I are committed to the content of the programme for Government in that context. I met recently with officials from the Department in Killarney in this regard, and the Minister, Deputy Ross, and I are actively pursuing this issue. As soon as a decision is made on the 2016 programme, which I hope will be soon, I will be in communication with Deputies.

Deputy Imelda Munster: The Minister of State said that the programme for Government was committed to an annual programme. "Annual" means yearly. We are now in 2016, we are heading into the summer recess this week and there is a state of confusion among sporting clubs right across the State as to whether the funding is available. The Minister of State said that there were 1,600 applicants last year, which will give him an understanding of the level of interest in the sports grant application process. He will also recognise how valuable these sports grants are to sporting clubs right across the State, particularly to sporting clubs and groups in disadvantaged areas. I am sure he will also agree that these grants help to promote health and well-being and community spirit. I wonder is it a case of stalling until it is too late in the year to announce it? When I asked about this at the transport committee meeting, the Minister, Deputy Ross, said that it was a political decision between him and the Minister of State. Given that the programme for Government states that the Government will consider this annually, when will the Minister of State say whether he will announce it for this year? If he has no intention of doing so, will he say so, in order that sports clubs do not go blind watching to see whether the funding will be available? They should be given enough time to get their applications in order and submitted. A bit of clarity would not go astray. We are into July.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Eugene Murphy): With the agreement of the House, I will give Deputy O’Keeffe a minute. I have a little discretion. If he wishes to make his case, we will give the extra minute for it so that Deputy Munster does not lose out.

Deputy Kevin O’Keeffe: I will make a brief follow-up in support of the previous speaker. The severe delay in the allocation of sports capital funding is now a major concern for various sports clubs and organisations that have been waiting for investment to progress with plans and proposals to upgrade or develop facilities for some time. It is critical that the Government build on the many years of investment in this area. As the Minister has indicated, he relaunched the scheme in 2012. Many clubs, on the basis of having submitted an application on the first day, have now progressed plans to move on further. The Minister of State also created the air of uncertainty. He said he would take a special interest in this. Judging from his response to a previous parliamentary question, I am sure his colleagues below in Killarney received a rush of expressions of interest. Even that has created an air of uncertainty. From a political point of view, it has to be acknowledged that money has been allocated to the Department. If it is not spent this year, does the Minister of State propose to spend it on other sports capital projects through various other channels?

Deputy Patrick O’Donovan: To take the last point first, I would be very slow to withdraw any grant that has been allocated to a sporting club because, as Deputy O’Keeffe knows, many sporting clubs have difficulties regarding planning permissions and the matching of funding. I certainly would not accept the suggestion that we withdraw money that has already been allocated.

The only state of confusion seems to be among certain members of the Opposition. I could not make it clearer that no decision has been made on this issue and that both the Minister, Deputy Ross, and I are committed to it. I point to the years 2012 onwards in that regard. The timeframe in which any allocation or announcement would be made allows the potential for something to happen in 2016. The only confusion and uncertainty out there is, I think, generated by people who almost hope in a way that we might not be able to do it. Our aspiration is that we will be able to do it. The clubs are certainly looking for it, and individual sporting organisations have over the last number of months been engaging with the Department on an online basis anyway. Ongoing assistance is available from the Department for people who are preparing applications and they should continue in that vein.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Eugene Murphy): I will still allow Deputy Munster her minute; she is entitled to it, as it was her question initially.

Deputy Imelda Munster: What a silly response to say that the only confusion is with the Opposition. There is confusion with sporting clubs and groups which have been waiting anxiously for the Minister to announce funding. Will the Minister release the grants or not? If he is going to do so, what is the delay in coming forward with an announcement, or is it the case that he has absolutely no intention of doing so and instead is trying to draw out the year and then announce the grants for 2017? Sporting groups and clubs across the State will be extremely disappointed if the Minister has not released the grants. That would be mean-spirited and short-sighted. It was included in the programme for Government as an annual scheme, so this will be the Minister’s first broken promise.

Deputy Kevin O’Keeffe: I wish to clarify one point. I did not say the Minister was withdrawing money from clubs that have received it, but there is an allocation of sports capital

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funding from the Department. If it is not going to be spent this year through the sports funding scheme, does the Minister propose to make money available through other mechanisms within his remit directly to the governing bodies or other sports organisations?

It is all very fine to say that clubs can put together development plans. However, as the Minister knows, if someone applies for a home loan, the bank may grant a mortgage but the house must be purchased within a certain timeframe. Nowadays these plans are compiled by professional individuals, including consultants, which cost money. There is a timeframe concerning the validity of such development plans, so every month that goes by it is costing these clubs money.

Deputy Patrick O'Donovan: I remind Deputy O'Keeffe that in the worst days of the economic crash, in 2009, 2010 and 2011, the last government was able to reintroduce the sports capital programme. We did so because we realised that this is a labour activation measure in many rural and urban communities. It really makes a difference to clubs. Nobody on this side of the House needs to be told about the programme's value because we are well aware of it.

Deputy Munster said she was waiting for an answer, but this is the third time I have said that no decision has been made. I do not know which part of the term "no decision has been made" cannot be understood. We are only in July and there are still five months of the year left to run. The programme for Government is clear. The Minister, Deputy Ross, and myself have a commitment to ensure that the elements in the programme for Government concerning the Department of Transport, Tourism and Sport are adhered to and will be delivered. The Deputy might be disappointed later on in the year.

As regards previous allocations made under this programme from 2012 to 2015, the Deputy will find that the timeframe was not too different from what we hope to achieve.

Harbour Authorities

40. **Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport if, in his deliberations on the future governance of Dún Laoghaire Harbour, he will be taking into account the series of questions that were raised with his predecessor with regard to anomalies in payments to the chief executive and a board member of the Dún Laoghaire Harbour Company; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [22477/16]

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: For the five years of the last Dáil I asked a litany of questions about what I consider to be serious concerns about the corporate governance of Dún Laoghaire Harbour. Payments of expenses to directors turned out to be irregular and where the money was supposed to be refunded, it was not. Extra payments were made to the CEO and the saga of questions goes on.

I am not sure if the Minister is aware of it, but the latest accounts of Dún Laoghaire Harbour Company show a €6.5 million loss, an increase from a €1 million loss last year. Will the Minister take into account these serious financial and corporate questions concerning the future of the Dún Laoghaire Harbour Company?

Deputy Shane Ross: I thank Deputy Boyd Barrett for raising this issue. I am not sure how helpful I can be to him, but I will be as helpful as I possibly can. I understand that the Deputy

has previously raised these issues with my predecessors in relation to payments to the CEO of the port company and concerning payments made to a director of the company.

Every commercial State body must disclose the CEO's annual salary in the published annual report and accounts of the body and Dún Laoghaire Harbour Company complies with this requirement. In relation to the amount of the CEO's salary queried by the Deputy, I am advised that, for better or for worse, it was in line with Government policy at that time.

On the payment of other expenses to the CEO in 2011, one of my predecessors made his view known that the payment should not have been made. I understand that the company has acknowledged this and confirmed that it will not happen again.

The payment of expenses to directors is a matter for Dún Laoghaire Harbour Company in accordance with the code of practice for the governance of State bodies. As was advised in previous replies, the matter of payments to the director is the subject of legal action and it would be wrong for me to comment any further on that.

As the Deputy is aware, the Harbours Act 2015 provides the legislative basis for one of the key recommendations in national ports policy, namely, that governance of five ports of regional significance should vest in more appropriate local authority-led governance structures. Dún Laoghaire Harbour Company, as a port of regional significance, is designated under the policy for transfer to Dún Laoghaire-Rathdown County Council. The process of transferring governance and the future operational structures of the port are primarily matters for agreement between the local authority and the port.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: The Minister needs to look into the issue of whether there are court proceedings. My understanding is that there is none. The Minister is being told a porky. He should simply ask the company if there is a court date and if an actual court hearing is due. He will find out there is not, so they are not telling the truth. That is my understanding and the matter needs to be checked.

Earlier this year, the statutory auditors for Dún Laoghaire Harbour Company, Deloitte, resigned. This year, Pamela Kearney, the auditor on the board, resigned. As I have told the Minister, losses for the company, whose accounts came out in May, have increased from €1 million to €6.5 million.

Next week, on 27 July, the trustees of the pension scheme have been asked to meet the Pensions Board to address serious concerns raised by the worker pension trustees about the company's behaviour concerning the pension scheme. The questions continue over serious problems and irregularities with the financial and corporate governance of this harbour company. This company, which the Minister himself once called a quango, has to be dissolved. Its operating loss this year was €500,000. The combined salaries and fees of the CEO and directors add up to that loss. This quango has to be dissolved.

Deputy Shane Ross: I hear what Deputy Boyd Barrett is saying. I am not in a position either to contradict or confirm what he said about the legal action. My information is that there is a legal action going on, while the Deputy says there is not. I will resolve that in the next two or three days by checking up on what the Deputy is saying. I am not suggesting in any way that either party is acting in bad faith, but there is obviously a misunderstanding or certainly a conflict of evidence about this issue.

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On the other matter, as the Deputy knows, the transfer is due to happen. The manner of the transfer will be finally decided, if it is not resolved between the local authorities and the company, in the last analysis by the Minister. If there is a dispute as to the model chosen, it will be a ministerial function to make that decision. I will certainly bear in mind what the Deputy has said if I am called upon to make that decision at any stage.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: As I said, the operating loss, not to mind the huge increase in losses, is equivalent to the excessive salaries, fees and expenses that are being paid to an executive that has essentially run this company into the ground. That in itself, on a financial basis, is the reason for its dissolution and the need for it to be put under council control. In that way, we can have some real oversight and accountability concerning what goes on there. I urge the Minister to do that. When I asked him before, he offered an arrangement to meet some of the other stakeholders. Much of what the Minister is hearing is coming from the harbour company itself or from senior council officials. In the next few weeks, if at all possible, I would like to bring some of the other harbour stakeholders to meet with the Minister to discuss the other side of the story in terms of what is going on in Dún Laoghaire Harbour Company because it is not a good story, Minister.

Deputy Shane Ross: I share the Deputy's view that if there is an operating loss of the size he mentioned and the chief executives and directors are getting huge sums of money that is wrong. I do not feel comfortable with that and never would. I accept that on the last occasion we discussed this issue I said I would meet with anybody the Deputy wished to bring in and I would be delighted to do so. However, as the Deputy will be aware, my powers in this particular matter are limited. In other words, the Deputy should not expect too much from the meeting but I will certainly listen to what he has to say and where I can make decisions I will bear that in mind.

Driver Licensing Exchange Agreements

41. **Deputy Eugene Murphy** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport the protocol in place in relation to the recognition here of British driving licences in respect of British citizens living and working here and if they will have to be replaced with European Union driving licences in light of the British electorate vote to leave the EU; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [19224/16]

Deputy Eugene Murphy: Has a protocol been put in place in regard to the continued recognition here of British driving licences in respect of British citizens living and working here or will these licences have to be replaced with European Union driving licences in light of the British's electorates decision to leave the European Union?

Deputy Shane Ross: I thank Deputy Murphy for his question. He is pretty fast out of the traps.

Following the referendum in the UK on leaving the European Union, the UK remains an EU member state for the time being. It is the understanding of the Government of Ireland that the UK intends at some point to invoke Article 50 of the European treaties, following which there is a two-year period during which future relations between the UK and EU will be negotiated. The issue of driver licence recognition is one of a great many matters which will have to be resolved between the UK and the EU during the negotiations. As in all other matters relating

to the departure of the UK from the EU, it would be premature to speculate on any possible outcome to negotiations which have yet to begin.

Whatever the outcome of the negotiations with regard to the recognition of UK licences within the EU, Irish driving licence holders will be able to drive in the UK and UK licence holders will be able to drive here for up to one year as visitors under International Road Traffic Conventions which apply in both Ireland and the UK independently of EU provisions. Similarly, depending on the outcome of the negotiations, Irish authorities may be able to make bilateral arrangements, similar to those applying to other non-EU states, for the exchange of UK driving licences for Irish ones.

I am sorry that I cannot be more specific in my response to Deputy Murphy on this matter. It is a little early for these decisions to have been made, although I understand the Deputy is already receiving queries on the issue.

Deputy Eugene Murphy: I thank the Minister for being here to answer my question. I understand to a point why he cannot be more specific in his response. We heard several times today in the House, including from the Taoiseach and other Ministers, that the exit of Britain from the EU, which will happen if Article 50 is invoked, will lead to the creation of many problems here, particularly in relation to driving licences in the context of the return of the Border. I ask the Minister to formulate a policy in this area as soon possible. It is important that we act early in the situation.

While I agree with the Minister that we do not know what will happen in the context of the negotiations on Britain's exit from the EU, we need to prepare for it. The issue I have raised is one of many now arising out of the British electorate's decision to exit the EU, which we must respect. We must react as quickly as we can to deal with situations such as the one I have raised today in relation to driving licences.

I do not propose to come back in with another supplementary question following on from the Minister's response. I appreciate his response and ask that he keep me informed of any developments over the coming months.

Deputy Shane Ross: I will do that. There are two distinct matters at issue: driving in other jurisdictions on a temporary visitor basis and exchanging driving licences on taking up residence in another jurisdiction. On the issue of driving in another jurisdiction on a temporary visitor basis the right to drive in another jurisdiction on a national licence is based on international road traffic conventions. These allow people to drive in signatory countries for up to a year as visitors. Ireland and the UK are parties to such conventions. This will remain the case regardless of what EU-UK arrangements may emerge. Irish driving licence holders will therefore be able to drive in the UK and UK licence holders will be able to drive here as visitors post Brexit. This is important for both business and tourism.

On the exchange of driving licences currently, as EU member states, Ireland and the UK operate driver licensing to the same standards and under EU law licences may be exchanged. This means that an Irish driving licence holder taking up residence in the UK may exchange his or her licence for a UK equivalent and the UK driving licence holder taking up residence in Ireland may exchange his or her licence for the Irish equivalent.

Am I correct that the Deputy does not propose to ask another supplementary question?

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Deputy Eugene Murphy: Yes.

Deputy Shane Ross: My Department is vigorously addressing the difficulties which we face as a result of Brexit. I will ensure that the issue raised by Deputy Murphy is among those addressed by it.

Deputy Eugene Murphy: I thank the Minister.

Rural Transport Services

42. **Deputy Catherine Connolly** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport the input his Department had into to the Galway transport strategy; to provide details of any reports provided by his Department to the Galway transport unit; the remit of the consultants involved together with any reports and-or findings presented by them; the plans in place for a light rail system for County Galway; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [21981/16]

Deputy Catherine Connolly: What input did the Department of Transport, Tourism and Sport have in the Galway transport strategy; what reports, written or otherwise, are available and was light rail considered?

Deputy Shane Ross: I thank Deputy Connolly for the question.

My Department had no input into the preparation of the Galway transport strategy. While we would be supportive of the objectives contained in the strategy to promote more sustainable forms of transport for Galway, the development of the strategy is a matter for the local authorities concerned and we have no direct role in the matter. However, the Deputy may recall from my response to a previous question on 14 June that the National Transport Authority, NTA, which is one of the agencies under my aegis, assisted Galway City Council and Galway County Council in the development of their transport strategy for the city. The NTA administers the regional cities programme for investment in public transport infrastructure in the regional cities of Galway, Cork, Limerick and Waterford. It also has responsibility for securing the provision of public transport passenger services throughout the country and so it has a keen interest in the development of transport strategies in the regional cities.

The Galway transport strategy sets out a series of actions and measures covering infrastructural, operational and policy elements to be implemented in Galway over the next 20 years and sets out a framework to deliver the projects in a phased manner. I am told the draft strategy was on public display until 11 July for public consultation and that that process is now complete. The draft strategy, appendices and strategic environmental assessment-Natura impact report were available on the Galway City and County Council websites as part of the public consultation process. I understand that it is proposed to incorporate the transport strategy into the draft Galway City Development Plan 2017-2023 and this is also a matter for the city council.

I am informed that the issue of light rail had been considered in the preparation of the draft strategy but it was concluded that there is insufficient demand to justify the significant additional cost of developing a light rail system, so bus transport will provide the backbone of the public transport network under the strategy.

Deputy Catherine Connolly: I thank the Minister for his reply. However, I am disappointed. This is my third follow up in relation to this matter. I will continue to follow up on it.

During a meeting with the National Transport Authority, which comes under the remit of the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport, a delegation, of which I was a member, was told that the NTA was preparing a report. I have tried to find that report - I would have thought there would be a written report outlining the reasons light rail was not an appropriate solution - but I cannot find it anywhere. The Minister is also unable to provide me with it today.

I come from a beautiful city, which was recently voted the European Capital of Culture. However, we have a trinity of problems, namely, the hospital, the lack of housing and public transport. Of the public transport options, light rail is the cheapest and will help us to comply with our obligations under the climate strategy and the legislation we passed committing us to low carbon emissions. Instead of that this Government is allowing Galway City Council to go ahead with a 16.5 km road that will cost €30 million per kilometre, at a conservative estimate of €500 million for a cul-de-sac, as happened in respect of the previous outer bypass. It is a golden opportunity for the Government to lead and for the new Minister and the new politics to look at a green type of transport and a solution that is sustainable and that will show the way in Ireland and Europe. Many small cities in France have light rail systems. Where are the reports from the NTA?

Deputy Shane Ross: I will address the issue of light rail first. I know that Deputy Connolly has been a very keen crusader for light rail in Galway for a long time. The issue of light rail was considered in the preparation of the draft strategy. However, it established that there is insufficient demand to justify the significant additional cost of developing a light rail system and the public transport network set out in the strategy will remain bus-based.

Under the regional cities programme, the Department provides funding to the NTA for the development of bus lanes; green routes, to which the Deputy referred, other bus priority measures and safety measures for pedestrians and cyclists in the regional cities of Cork, Galway, Limerick and Waterford. The NTA manages this programme on behalf of the Department. In the period from 2011 to 2015, around €60 million was provided by the NTA to the local authorities and transport operators in the four regional cities for bus priority and other public transport measures, of which over €10 million was in respect of projects in Galway. Overall funding for this programme in 2016 is €13.5 million, of which Galway has an allocation of €2.14 million.

Deputy Catherine Connolly: I got that reply in June and read it. The Minister is reading it out to me again. Where is the written report from the NTA that sets out for me where it found that light rail was not justified? That is my question.

Deputy Shane Ross: I will ask my Department to furnish it to the Deputy.

Airport Development Projects

43. **Deputy Mick Wallace** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport if a comprehensive impact assessment has been carried out in respect of the effect that the proposed runway at Dublin Airport will have on 2020 emissions reduction targets; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [21987/16]

Deputy Clare Daly: This question must be seen in the context of the claims by the Dublin Airport Authority, daa, that the development of the second runway will have very positive benefits in terms of the economy and job creation. I have no doubt that this is true but it is a

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very one-sided analysis if there is no full impact assessment regarding emissions and the environmental costs associated with the development. What studies have been done in that regard?

Deputy Shane Ross: I thank Deputy Clare Daly for substituting for Deputy Wallace. I am not sure who is the more formidable adversary in this House this time, but I will give her the same answer I would have given Deputy Wallace. The Deputy will be aware that the daa holds statutory responsibility for the management, operation and development of Dublin Airport. In line with this responsibility, it is a matter for the daa to ensure that the necessary infrastructure is in place to facilitate the development of the airport and that there is sufficient capacity to meet existing and future demand.

It is my understanding that the runway development was subject to a rigorous environmental impact assessment, EIA, as part of the full planning process. At that time, the environmental impact statement, EIS, clearly stated that the impacts of the runway on carbon emission would not be significant and that mitigation measures such as improved aircraft engine efficiency, efficient airport operations and international climate agreements would address aviation carbon emissions. I also note that the 2020 national reduction targets under EU Decision 406/2009/EC (Effort Sharing) do not include international aircraft emissions so the north runway project will not have any direct impact on these targets.

Aviation emissions are to be addressed separately under an agreement reached at a meeting of the International Civil Aviation Organisation, ICAO, in 2013 to establish a global market-based measure for aviation emissions. It is anticipated that the details of that global scheme, which will apply from 2020, will be finalised at the ICAO general assembly in September 2016. Currently, aviation emissions from flights within the European Economic Area, EEA, are subject to an emissions trading scheme known as the EU ETS scheme. This scheme imposes a cap on the emissions of individual airlines such that all intra-EEA flights to and from Dublin Airport are covered by this scheme.

Deputy Clare Daly: The Minister is correct in saying that the daa is responsible for airport development but the rigorous EIS that was carried out will be 13 years old by the time the new runway is operational in 2020. Obviously, our understanding of emissions and climate change has developed since that original permission was given almost ten years ago. One of the difficulties is that we had originally tabled these questions to the Minister for Communications, Climate Change and Natural Resources only to have them referred back to the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport. There is a certain conflict in that regard.

Some of the issues are very pertinent. Aviation is responsible for about 5% of global carbon emissions. In respect of best practice, some environmentalists would say that there should be a moratorium on usage. If one looks at Dublin Airport, particularly post Brexit, one can see the number of passengers the airport now gets and the number it would need to offset the costs of the second runway that will inevitably drive up the number of flights and emissions. At the very least, a revised analysis of this would be necessary.

Deputy Shane Ross: The Deputy will probably be aware that at the moment, the daa is in the process of examining the scope of a further EIS for the purposes of seeking a review of the operating restrictions foreseen for Dublin Airport under the existing planning permission for the north runway and has recently gone to public consultation on this matter. This consultation provides an opportunity to contribute to the content of an approach adopted in the EIS.

Deputy Clare Daly: The problem is that the new scoping exercise for the new EIS is, as the Minister says, to look at lifting the restrictions imposed on the planning permission which is almost ten years old. There is a real problem with that on a number of fronts. First, our understanding of the impact of noise and environmental damage from aviation has progressed substantially in the past ten years, yet even at our lower level of understanding, An Bord Pleanála decided that permission could only be given with these restrictions. It is precisely these restrictions that the daa is attempting to lift, which will undoubtedly have an enormous impact. The Minister says it has done that as part of the new process. In fact, it is not really sure why it is doing it or where the information from that scoping exercise will go because it depends on what the Minister does in transposing EU Regulation No. 598/2014, which is the subject of other questions on the agenda which will not be reached. Perhaps the Minister could enlighten us as to how he is going to deal with the transposing of that directive.

Deputy Shane Ross: The issue of emissions is obviously separate from the issue of noise. Both issues must be separated and will be rigorously addressed. I assure the Deputy that I will watch very closely the activities of the daa in mitigating noise. I can give her the assurances I gave her previously in the House that it is imperative that the interests of the residents are looked after, that the inconveniences and disturbance they have suffered are regarded as a very high priority and that the mitigating measures are adequate and satisfy normal, decent standards so that people are not disturbed to an extent that makes their lives miserable while the runway can go ahead.

Written Answers follow Adjournment.

Message from Seanad

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Seanad Éireann has passed the Paternity Leave and Benefit Bill 2016 without amendment.

6 o'clock

Topical Issue Debate

Bord na Móna

Deputy Barry Cowen: I raise this issue because it is a concern of mine and of many workers within Bord na Móna that jobs are being put at risk in its transport rail and road divisions by the board's plans to outsource those services and impose unilateral pay cuts on existing workers. There was much consternation, deliberation and negotiation, and ultimately it went to the Labour Court. Other aspects of the negotiations took place over a protracted period of time and culminated earlier this year in a Workplace Relations Commission agreement, which spoke about the ability of the relevant section of the board to outsource services. In this case, as a result of Bord na Móna's intention to outsource its road division and impose cuts on its rail division, 130-odd workers are affected. If there is a breach of the WRC agreement it could have a knock-on effect on the 600 workers involved in the entire peat production, known as feedstock. My contention is that the board feels it is within its powers as detailed within the

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agreement, which states:

Bord na Móna's road haulage operations are currently being reviewed with a view to significant cost reductions and while the company notes the union's opposition to outsourcing in general, the option of outsourcing has been included in this review and if this standard tendering process determines that outsourcing is the most economic option it will be pursued. In that eventuality, existing Bord na Móna drivers will not be required to transfer to an external operator or operators and will have the option of redeployment on current pay and terms within Bord na Móna or voluntary redundancy applications may be sought.

Also within the WRC agreement was the proposal to appoint a joint industrial relations commission, which had been suggested as a forum to deal with issues such as this if there was contention around them. The contention around them is by virtue of the fact that the workers or unions were not afforded an opportunity to offer similar savings from within their own divisions to meet the demands that were being placed on them by Bord na Móna, whose overall reductions amounted to 30%, much of it from pay, as per the agreement that was reached with the entire staff in January. Based on the WRC agreement, in the event of dispute in areas such as this, there was provision for the setting up of a joint industrial relations council to further adjudicate on such issues. That opportunity has not been availed of, and now we have a situation whereby the transport staff voted yesterday on a work to rule. The unions may eventually take the opinion that this is a breach of the entire agreement, which has a knock-on effect on 600 workers. Intervention is needed to adjudicate on that and to allow the joint industrial relations council an opportunity to further adjudicate.

Minister for Communications, Energy and Natural Resources (Deputy Denis Naughten): I thank Deputy Cowen for raising this important issue and I acknowledge the presence of Deputy Eugene Murphy. It is an issue close to all our hearts. As Deputies Cowen and Murphy are aware, Bord na Móna is facing significant business challenges in the context of the deregulation of the electricity market and increasingly competitive and challenging environments across all its business areas. In order to ensure its continued success and survival, the company is implementing a programme to transform all areas of its operation and structure, the key objective of which is to improve business efficiency and effectiveness. In April 2016, following a series of negotiations with the assistance of the Workplace Relations Commission and the Labour Court, Bord na Móna reached agreement with the Bord na Móna group of unions on pay progression and new working methods across a range of issues related to business transformation.

The specific matter raised by the Deputy is an operational matter for the company and not one in which I as Minister have a function or role. I have, however, sought a report from the company on the issues raised and am informed that the matters referred to by the Deputy cut across two specific areas. With regard to rail transport, I am advised that Bord na Móna transports peat to its three peat-fired power stations via its rail network. This work is carried out in accordance with the standards laid down in respect of the work methodology. Bord na Móna has confirmed that it is normal practice dating back many years to periodically review these standards to see if they can be updated to reflect developments, for example, in technology. I understand that this was done by an industrial engineer who reviews current practices and re-defines standards.

The recently adopted general agreement under the WRC makes provision for this matter. Bord na Móna informs me that the loading and haulage work standards, which were outdated

for many years, were reviewed during 2015 and updated in June 2016 to reflect modern equipment and workplace practices. I am advised that the new arrangements have resulted in reductions in bonus payments, in some cases by up to 12%. Bord na Móna has assured me that the Workplace Relations Commission agreement mentioned earlier clearly covers the adjustment and sets out an agreed compensation arrangement.

With regard to the outsourcing of services, I am advised that Bord na Móna currently transports some peat by road, which is quite expensive. Between 15% and 20% of all peat sold is transported by road. Bord na Móna's peat business has ten trucks and 18 permanent drivers, which carry approximately 60% of the peat transported by road. The remaining 40% is carried by third-party trucks. An analysis of the internal cost per tonne transported versus the third-party cost per tonne transported found that significant cost reductions could be realised if the road haulage was outsourced. The WRC agreement provides that outsourcing could be introduced where it results in cost savings, provided that employees are given the option to redeploy within Bord na Móna on their current terms and conditions. I am informed that the company has advised the unions that it intends to implement this outsourcing by 1 September 2016 and that all drivers will be deployed within the business on current pay terms. I understand that discussions are ongoing between the company and the unions on this matter.

Deputy Barry Cowen: I thank the Minister for his response and acknowledge that he has sought a report from the board on this issue. I ask him to request that specific acknowledgement be made in the report of the submissions by workers or their representatives on their ability to achieve the same cost savings proposed in the outsourcing element of the cost-saving effort. I ask for that to be acknowledged, adjudicated on and responded to.

I ask that the board further acknowledge the provision in the WRC agreement that in the event of a dispute in an area such as this it was agreed by both parties that a joint industrial relations panel be put in place to adjudicate. If that is the case - and I am led to believe it is - we should not be discussing this issue here. It should be dealt with through that channel, because if that channel is not explored, authorised or respected, we are faced with a much bigger problem.

The Minister mentioned the challenging role faced by Bord na Móna and its staff. Over many years, there has been much transformation throughout the company. I hope to discuss with the Minister at a later date the options that exist for funding and tax in the area of gas emissions. The charge was reduced by the previous Government and it is imperative that the Minister uses part of that for reinvestment in the localities that can be affected by Bord na Móna.

Deputy Denis Naughten: The emissions trading scheme, ETS.

Deputy Barry Cowen: As I stated, we can talk about that another day. It is important that the Minister reflects on the two points I have made and ensures that any such report that emanates from the board takes note of and responds to those, and then we could have a solution.

Deputy Denis Naughten: I thank Deputy Cowen. I have no direct role in this. It is an operational matter for the company. Having said that, Deputy Cowen, like me, has received representations from transport staff, both on the rail side and on the road transport side, as has Deputy Eugene Murphy. All of us across the midlands have received them. There is a bigger issue here in relation to the overall industrial relations environment within the company. It is important, where a successful agreement has been reached and adopted by the staff and the company, that it can be kept intact.

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I listened to what Deputy Cowen said. I will relay those issues directly to the board and ask it to consider them. If staff can come up with savings, that needs to be assessed thoroughly. If there are mechanisms, through councils or whatever, to resolve these issues, they need to be used. I listened to what Deputy Cowen said and I will reflect that back to the board, but these are operational matters. As Deputies in the area, we are all concerned about any industrial relations issues. It is in the interests of everyone, within the board and within the wider community, that these agreements are implemented in full.

Waste Management

Deputy Mick Barry: Last Friday night, a cohort of 11,000 customers of a waste collection company based in Cork by the name of Country Clean, which provides waste services in both Cork city and Cork county, received a text from it. The text indicated that, as of Monday last, there would be an increase in the pay-per-lift charge. The pay-per-lift for general waste was to increase from €8 per lift to €12 per lift, and for recyclable waste from €4 per lift to €7 per lift. Customers were also asked to increase the amount that they had in their accounts on standby for payment from €20 to €22.

The Minister, Deputy Coveney, came in to the House only a matter of weeks ago stating he had an agreement - it was dubbed in the House "a gentleman's agreement" - with the Irish Waste Management Association, the representative organisation for the waste collection companies. The Minister gave a guarantee to the House and to customers that there would be no price hikes for 12 months. I put it to the Minister of State, Deputy English, that this is a clear breach. Not only is it a price hike, it is a price of hike in the region of 50%.

I am asking for action. Country Clean has gone to ground. The company is not taking phone calls from radio stations or anything of the like, and I am asking for action from the Government. The Minister stated in June that legislation would be brought in to enforce a price cap in the event of breaches of this kind. What action does the Minister intend to take to stop this from happening to these 11,000 customers?

Deputy Joan Collins: As Deputy Barry stated, the Irish Waste Management Association agreed with the Minister recently to implement the price freeze that has been spoken about. As I stated on Thursday last on Leaders' Questions to the Tánaiste, there was a collective sigh of relief across the country such was the anger and anxiety of waste customers.

Greyhound has done the exact same. The company has said to its customers they can opt out of pay-by-weight, and if they do, they can enter into another deal where one must pay €140 up front. I made the case of a woman in my area who had paid €59.95 for a year's contract with Greyhound in January of this year and now she has been told she must pay €140 to go back into that contract from 1 August to July next year. That is a massive increase.

These companies are holding the Government and their customers, and, in Greyhound's case, its workers, in contempt in relation to this so-called gentleman's agreement. The Tánaiste stated on Thursday last that the Minister was monitoring the matter and, if necessary, he would bring in the legislation to force the companies to implement this price freeze.

Country Clean is continuing to act in this way. Another company is now following suit where it is increasing its black bin charge from €8 to €12 and its green bin from €4 to €7. De-

spite the polluter pays principle, they are hiking their prices up by that amount. These companies are ignoring the agreement. The Minister must not be ruthless but forthright in coming forward and doing something about this. What will he do?

Minister of State at the Department of the Environment, Community and Local Government (Deputy Damien English): I apologise that the Minister, Deputy Coveney, is not here himself to take the debate. He was hoping to be back in time to take it.

It is true that earlier this month the Minister, Deputy Coveney, secured an agreement with all major waste collection companies to freeze charges in order that customers would pay no more than they currently pay for waste collection over the next 12 months for the same level of service.

While the majority of those in the sector have clearly honoured the agreement, there appear to be some instances of divergence from the terms, or if not the terms then certainly the spirit, of what was agreed. We are disappointed and unhappy, therefore, if it is true that a waste collector, cited by the Deputies, is requiring existing customers to pay an increased charge for the same level of service contrary to the sector-wide agreement that was negotiated in good faith.

Our Department has been in touch with the company in question, Country Clean, which has explained that the pricing change only relates to some of its customers and is due to the discontinuing of waivers for a small percentage of pay-by-lift customers, which the company purchased from Cork city and county local authorities in 2011. Country Clean has continued the waiver up to this point but is now intending to remove it. The company also stated that it is open to those customers to move to the flat-fee pricing plan offered by the company.

While regular presenters of waste, that is, those who present both a residual black bin and green bin every fortnight, would see no increase in charges under this change, it could result in increased fees for lighter producers of waste.

We consider that unacceptable. Customers should not be punished for displaying good management practices by producing less waste. Furthermore, I also do not believe that this approach is consistent with the spirit of the agreement reached with the sector last month. The Minister, Deputy Coveney, has asked our officials to follow up directly with the company and to ensure it understands his expectations in this regard, and also the implications of what the company plans to do.

The approach being taken by different waste companies is being closely monitored. In this regard, the Minister mandated officials from our Department to meet representatives of the waste sector earlier this month where issues concerning the consistent implementation of the agreement were raised. It was made clear to the representatives from the waste sector that if a fair and reasonable approach was not being delivered, we would be forced to take further steps to ensure the agreement was honoured. The Minister has also been clear that if there is evidence of the agreement being breached, he will look at further legislative measures, where necessary, to enforce it.

The compliance of the sector and its effectiveness in co-operating and implementing these new arrangements are likely to feature within the overall review of the functioning of this waste collection sector and to influence consideration of the need for a regulator to ensure we have absolute clarity in terms of predicted behaviour, charging systems and the parameters within which the providers operate.

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I thank the Deputies for raising this issue. We have publicly expressed our dissatisfaction before with how certain companies are operating in a manner that is not in keeping with the spirit of the agreement reached with sector in June. Under the agreement, customers should not pay more than they currently pay for their waste collection and for the same level of service until July next year. That was a very clear agreement and the Minister, Deputy Coveney, outlined it to the House and took questions on it. The operation of the price freeze by industry is being closely monitored by the Department. Departmental officials have held three meetings with representatives of the waste industry since 1 July and are in regular contact around issues arising from this matter. We will continue to liaise with operators as necessary on the consistent implementation of the agreement.

I reiterate that at those meetings it was made very clear to the industry that, if the companies were not taking a fair and reasonable approach, we would be forced to take further steps to ensure the agreement is honoured. In this regard, I will ask my officials to meet representatives of Country Clean and Greyhound if necessary to investigate this matter further and seek early resolution.

Deputy Mick Barry: I welcome the response from the Minister of State, particularly the parts of the statement indicating, “We consider that unacceptable”, “I also do not believe that this approach is consistent with the spirit of the agreement reached with the sector last month”, and, last but not least, “I will ask my officials to meet representatives of Country Clean and Greyhound if necessary to investigate this matter further and seek early resolution”.

It is hot outside and people are concerned about what will happen if their bins are not collected this week. In other words, people cannot wait weeks for this to be resolved. I am asking for a commitment that if Country Clean is not brought to heel immediately, or in a day or two more or less, we will move quickly on the issue with legislation to cap prices, meaning this sort of action will be forbidden by law.

Deputy Joan Collins: I reiterate those comments. We have raised this issue for the past number of weeks, including on the Order of Business on a number of occasions. We keep being told the issue is being monitored, watched or processed and there are meetings with representatives. Greyhound will implement this on 1 August, which is less than 14 days away. Everybody has received a letter about it. The Minister of State must move more quickly on this as the companies are continuing to do this. They are breaking the agreement made with them and something must be done about it.

I put a question to the Minister a couple of weeks ago about having an investigation into the companies. He stated:

Waste collection is the statutory responsibility of local authorities. Under section 33 of the Waste Management Act 1996, as amended, there is a general duty on a local authority to either itself collect the household waste in its functional area or alternatively to arrange for its collection by third parties.

We need to consider that and introduce a statutory instrument so if a company is in breach of its obligations, the collection should be taken from it so the local authority can take over or it can be given to another company that will abide by the rules.

Deputy Damien English: I again thank the Deputies for raising the matter. I know it is frustrating at this stage and I am quite conscious that the Deputies have said that August is

close. The Minister, Deputy Coveney, has been very clear about this and he expects the deal to be honoured. That is the bottom line and it has been made clear in all negotiations. Our officials have been out there and it has been made clear that there will be consequences if the deal is not honoured. There have been further investigations this week and we will have to see what happens at the end of the week. I am conscious of the Deputy's comments regarding collections in the next couple of days. I hope we can have an update towards the end of the end of the week. I will liaise with the two Deputies on that as well. The Minister was very clear about this to the representatives of companies that he expects the deal reached to be honoured. It is as simple as that.

Neuro-Rehabilitation Policy

Deputy Louise O'Reilly: Is the Minister of State aware there are over 25,000 people who need rehabilitation each year? Most of these people struggle even to get the most basic level of service, according to the Neurological Alliance of Ireland. One of them is a lady named Vera Ronan. She was a happy energetic woman, active in her community and fond of the game of darts. She was close to her family and a very vibrant individual. She suffered a fall on 2 July 2015 and following some very good care in Beaumont Hospital, she was transferred on 18 July 2015 to Connolly Hospital, receiving care there for approximately six weeks. Following that, she waited in the hospital bed for a transfer to the National Rehabilitation Hospital or for any form of rehabilitation services. Her family assisted the nurses and carers and sat by her bedside, minding her as anybody would mind their mother. They watched her deteriorate and wait every single day. While she was in the bed, there were people downstairs on trolleys in the accident and emergency department. She should not have been in that bed; she should have been getting neuro-rehabilitation but she could not get it.

According to the Neurological Alliance of Ireland, the problem is at crisis level. We should have 270 inpatient beds for our population but we have fewer than half that number, with none outside Dublin. We should have four regional inpatient specialist rehabilitation services nationwide but we have none. There should be a minimum of nine community neuro-rehabilitation teams nationwide, with one in each community health organisation as a starting point, but there are only three, with none adequately staffed. I know Vera Ronan's family and their hearts break over the eight months lost, when their mother could have made serious progress. Every day that is lost, it takes two or more days to get the day back. It was heartbreaking for her family to have to see her in a hospital bed when she did not need to be there, effectively getting very expensive bed and breakfast. She needed neuro-rehabilitation.

Will the Minister of State commit to publishing a meaningful plan by the end of 2016 for the implementation of the national neuro-rehabilitation strategy that covers key actions, timeframes and a deadline to implement it? We have the report and know what needs to be done. We need a timeline, actions and identifiable targets. Will the Minister of State commit to appointing a senior manager in the HSE in 2016 to complete the plan and lead on the development of rehabilitation services nationally? We are failing people who need these services so badly because they have a chance of recovery; every day they spend without the neuro-rehabilitation services, they are being pushed back even further. There are 25,000 people per year who require this level of intervention. We have a plan so we do not need another report, as the Minister of State knows as well as I do. We need timeframes and a commitment to implement the plan.

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Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Finian McGrath): I am pleased to take this opportunity to update the Deputy on the implementation of the National Policy and Strategy for the Provision of Neuro-Rehabilitation Services in Ireland, which made a number of recommendations for services for people with neuro-rehabilitation needs. The programme for a partnership Government places a particular focus on a number of key programmes and strategies, including publishing a plan for advancing neuro-rehabilitation services in the community. Currently, a steering group led by the Health Service Executive social care division, with representation from the national clinical programmes for rehabilitation medicine and neurology and the Neurological Alliance of Ireland, has drafted an implementation framework for the national policy and strategy for neuro-rehabilitation services. The draft framework is the subject of consultation at present.

Following the development of the neuro-rehabilitation policy and strategy, the HSE established the clinical programme on rehabilitation medicine. The scope of the clinical programme on rehabilitation medicine covers the whole of the patient journey from self-management and prevention through primary, secondary and tertiary care. It provides a national, strategic and co-ordinated approach to a wide range of rehabilitation services. The implementation framework will guide and oversee the reconfiguration and development of neuro-rehabilitation structures and services at national and local level.

The framework outlines the key issues, themes and considerations, particularly with reference to the necessary reconfiguration and development of community services within the HSE's community health care organisations and inpatient specialist rehabilitation services. It is envisaged that implementation will involve reconfiguration and development of resources with the community health care organisations to establish specialist neuro-rehabilitation teams within each area as well as reconfiguration and development of specialist inpatient rehabilitation services. This is in line with the rehabilitation medicine programme model of care and national trauma policy and integration of all specialist rehabilitation services within what is envisaged as being managed clinical networks where each of the nine community health care organisations will establish local implementation teams. A neuro-rehabilitation network, based on a hub and spoke model, will serve population-based areas of the country. Managed networks will link closely with the National Rehabilitation Hospital, community rehabilitation teams, primary care centres and acute hospitals in their areas.

Alongside these developments, the Government announced a major capital development of the National Rehabilitation Hospital. This will deliver a modern, purpose-built hospital on the current site. It will have 120 inpatient beds and will include support therapies, paediatric and acquired brain injury wards, a hydrotherapy unit and a sports hall. A priority for the implementation of the recommendations of the national policy on neuro-rehabilitation services in Ireland will be to establish a structure and methodology to provide the development of neuro-rehabilitation services. This will include the reconfiguration of current service provision. Services will be developed by the HSE social care division and other relevant HSE divisions in collaboration with the national clinical programme for rehabilitation medicine. This will ensure appropriate planning, service delivery and governance for neuro-rehabilitation services.

I agree with Deputy Louise O'Reilly that it is not acceptable that 25,000 people are waiting for rehabilitation services. I listened carefully to what she said about Vera, the woman she mentioned.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: The Minister of State will have another opportunity to speak.

Deputy Finian McGrath: She has waited long enough. I will raise the issue with the Minister.

Deputy Louise O'Reilly: With the greatest of respect, what the Minister of State has just read out is word for word a copy of a letter I received. I did not even have to look at the copy of the reply I was handed because I had it already. I received it on 15 July from the HSE. I asked the Minister of State for a date and a meaningful plan by the end of this year, with dates and achievable timeframes. The report was first published in 2011 and these people have already been let down enough.

The Neurological Alliance of Ireland currently has a campaign called "We Need Our Heads Examined". Sometimes I say that to myself when getting out of the car in the morning on coming into work. The campaign outlines the litany of broken promises and missed deadlines. We do not have a deadline today. What we have is a plan but we had a plan before we came into the House. What we need are deadlines and timeframes and a commitment to appoint a person from the HSE who will drive this forward.

There are many benefits to the strategy. The HSE itself is clear that its implementation will result in reduced length of stay in acute hospitals, a 10% reduction in readmission rates, a 5% reduction in care requirements and a reduction in discharge to nursing homes. There is a saving to be made. However, we still do not have a date.

The Minister of State agrees that it is not acceptable. If that is agreed, will he agree that we need to put a plan in place? We do not need more statements such as "we will have a group" or "this might happen and, at a later date, something else might happen". Vera Ronan has lost vital time. She has also taken up a bed in a hospital that could have been used by someone who needed it. We have people on trolleys in the accident and emergency department and Vera in the hospital bed but she does not need to be there. It really is not acceptable. If the Minister of State agrees that it is not acceptable, will he agree that we need a plan with a timeframe and identifiable and achievable goals as well as a person to head this up and drive it forward? These people have been let down far too many times.

Deputy Finian McGrath: This is exactly what will happen. In the programme for Government, the 2016 national service plan includes the rehabilitation strategy and integrated care programme. On particular plans over the coming months, the 2016 capital plan includes the progressing of this National Rehabilitation Hospital. There are also actions to implement the rehabilitation strategy and the integrated care programme. For example, each community health care organisation is to review the draft implementation plan. Second, they will amend implementation plans following feedback as appropriate. Third, each community health care organisation is to map existing services and identify deficits. Finally, each community health care organisation will identify reconfiguration of staff to prepare a plan for implementation of the strategy.

I will go back to the Minister on this matter. There are no particular dates but there is a plan for 2016 to get on and build the hospital. As stated, I find it unacceptable that people in this particular situation are in hospitals. Deputy O'Reilly makes the valid point that their occupying of a bed takes it from someone else who needs it. I will go back to the senior Minister, Deputy Harris, and put on the record my concerns about implementing the actions that are committed to in the programme for Government. We need to do our best to support these people. There are 25,000 of them out there. We have a direct plan to put in a 120 bed unit as a start and we

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have to roll out other services as well to assist these people. We need action and I will demand it from the Minister.

Road Network

Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire: Gabhaim mo bhuíochas leis an Aire as bheith anseo. The Minister will no doubt be aware of the importance of the N28. It is one of the most strategically important roads in the State. In terms of outlay in comparison to potential economic return, it may well be the best value for money. This has been on the cards for some time now. The road will link the Bloomfield interchange and Ringaskiddy at motorway standards. Needless to say, the economic case for the motorway is extremely strong, particularly in the context of the crucial strategic employment area that is Ringaskiddy, the rapidly growing town of Carrigaline and the strategy which both Government and council have developed for the Cork Harbour area, including the National Maritime College of Ireland which the Minister discussed with Deputies last week.

Cork Chamber helpfully commissioned a report, Cork to the World, in 2010 by Indecon on the economic case for the N28. If the Minister has not read it, I can tell him it is well worth reading. I will ensure a copy is left in his pigeonhole for his attention. To give a brief outline, the assessment indicates that the N28 upgrade would provide a catalyst for realising massively enhanced foreign direct investment, involving an estimated 1,100 additional high value jobs and related additional employment incomes of €97.1 million in annual terms or €1.4 billion in present value terms over a 25-year period. That is a substantial amount and crucially important to Cork's industrial future.

There are also the potential implications if the road is not delivered in a relatively short period. The Indecon report states that the estimated loss in trade that would result from a failure to provide the required port capacity - which is the Port of Cork redevelopment that is linked to the N28, to which I will return - is €3.8 billion per annum or just below 22.4% relative to projected 2030 trade. This is the equivalent of a loss of €59.4 billion when measured in present value terms over a 25-year period. Mar sin, muna chuirtear an N28 ar fáil, caillfear trádáil agus tionscnaimh.

The development of the Port of Cork, one of the most important maritime developments in the State and crucially important to Cork's industrial future, is closely tied to the N28. Phase 3 of that development, which involves roll on-roll off traffic, will not happen unless the N28 upgrade is delivered, and nor, incidentally, should it happen, as it would be an entirely unreasonable imposition on residents. The delivery of the N28 is vitally important to the local community. Residents of Shanbally and Ringaskiddy have had to suffer heavy freight travelling through their villages daily for far too long. In addition, this has the potential to assist with extremely heavy traffic in Carrigaline.

This matter is being discussed once again following a report given to Cork County Council following a meeting between Transport Infrastructure Ireland and a delegation from the council. The report was received with great disappointment by councillors. It confirmed that a number of projects for Cork would not happen within five years due to lack of funding. It stated that a contractor for Dunkettle would not be appointed until late 2018 and, despite its being the top priority for Cork, work would not begin until at least 2019 or 2020. The M22 and the M28 will begin only after Dunkettle is delivered, and this will not be until 2021 at the

earliest. The N28 hinges hugely on Dunkettle. If we are serious about regional development outside Dublin, the delivery of the N28 is absolutely key. Cork has waited long enough and it needs to be expedited.

Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Shane Ross): I thank Deputy Ó Laoghaire for the opportunity to address this issue. As Minister for Transport, I have responsibility for overall policy and funding in relation to the national roads programme. The construction, improvement and maintenance of individual national roads, such as the N28 Cork to Ringaskiddy scheme, is a matter for Transport Infrastructure Ireland, TII, under the Roads Acts 1993 to 2015 in conjunction with the local authorities concerned. Within its capital budget, the assessment and prioritisation of individual national road projects are matters for TII in accordance with section 19 of the Roads Act.

The N28 is the national primary road that links Cork city to Ringaskiddy. The existing N28 is approximately 12 km long and is a single carriageway except for a dual-carriageway section at the approach to the Bloomfield interchange, the junction with the N40. The combination of traffic levels and the road layout results in delays for the current users of the N28. This affects both local traffic and long-distance through traffic.

Ireland has just under 100,000 km of road in its network, and the maintenance and improvement of national, regional and local roads place a substantial financial burden on local authorities and on the Exchequer. Because of the national financial position, there have been very large reductions in Exchequer funding available for roads expenditure over the past number of years. For this reason, the focus has had to be on maintenance and renewal rather than major new improvement schemes.

The capital plan, published in September 2015, outlined proposed transport investment priorities to 2022. I understand that the transport element of the plan was framed by the conclusions reached in my Department's strategic investment framework for land transport. This report highlighted the importance of maintenance and renewal of transport infrastructure together with targeted investments to address particular bottlenecks and critical safety issues. The capital plan provides €6 billion for investment in the roads network in the period to 2022, with €4.4 billion earmarked for the maintenance and strengthening of the existing extensive network throughout the country and €1.6 billion for new projects. Allowing for the commitments relating to the PPP projects, the balance available for new projects within the available capital envelope was limited. Given the funding limits, the decision made by my predecessor was to provide for a mix of projects across the country to address particular constraints, including bottlenecks and port connectivity. While it will not be possible to address all the demands for improvement schemes over the capital plan period, the plan does provide for a number of important projects in the Cork area which are scheduled to commence construction within the plan period, including the upgrading of the Dunkettle roundabout, works on the N22 road between Ballyvourney and Macroom and works on the N28 Cork to Ringaskiddy road, subject to appropriate planning consent.

In April this year, Cork County Council, in partnership with TII, launched a public consultation on the next stage of the M28 Cork to Ringaskiddy motorway scheme. The preferred route alignment and junction strategy for the scheme provides for 10.9 km of motorway standard dual carriageway from Bloomfield to Barnahely and 1.6 km of single carriageway from Barnahely to east of Ringaskiddy. TII has reported that the outcome of the public consultation was positive. I understand the business case in respect of the project is being finalised for submission to my

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Department and the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform.

The transport element of the capital plan is based on a gradual build-up in capital funding for the road network from the current relatively low base towards the levels needed to support maintenance and improvement works. Funding will continue to be tight in 2017, with a step up in 2018 and 2019 and then a significant ramp up from 2020. As Minister I have to work within the capital budgets included in the plan, and TII, in planning the construction schedule for individual projects, also has to take account of the annual budgets available.

As I have indicated previously, we are all conscious that the recovery of the economy is generating spending pressures across the Government system, including capital investment needs. As part of the programme for a partnership Government there is an increased emphasis on the need for spending on public services, but the Government still has to operate within the EU fiscal rules and this does constrain options. There will be a mid-term review of the capital plan and this will provide an opportunity to assess progress and consider what scope there is for increased levels of investment depending on economic growth.

Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire: The part of the Minister's response that jumps out at me the most is the reference to the 12 km of the N28. The investment involved would result in 1,100 high-end jobs, but there will be a potential loss of €59.4 billion in present value terms over 25 years if it is not developed quickly enough. The value for money in this project is enormous. If the Government is serious about balanced regional development and attracting major multinational employers outside the Dublin region then projects such as this need to be prioritised.

The Minister mentioned two self-imposed constraints on the Government. The first is the fiscal compact, and we made an argument at the time of the referendum about the implications that would have for capital spending. Even within these restrictions, however, the Government's proposed capital plan is under-strength and unambitious. For some time, the State has been below the OECD average for spending on capital infrastructure, and that state of affairs continues. This project has been long-fingered for too long. Massive amounts of freight travel through the surrounding villages, which is having a detrimental impact on the communities there, and it will be a serious loss for Cork, Ringaskiddy, Carrigaline and the whole harbour area, not to mention the southern part of this country, if this is not delivered soon. A starting date in 2021 is far too late, and by then Cork and the region will already have lost out on billions.

Incidentally, the Minister mispronounced my name. I am Deputy Ó Laoghaire.

Deputy Shane Ross: I apologise for that. I did not mean to do so.

I understand what the Deputy is saying, but I come across people putting similar cases for their own areas every day. I am utterly sympathetic to the needs of the Cork area, particularly its need for jobs, but we are working within very serious financial constraints. We would prefer not to be working within financial constraints, and this is a particularly expensive project, as are all roads of this sort. We have to prioritise them, as there is very little money for them before 2019, 2020 and 2021. It would be wrong of me to come to the House today and promise that it will be prioritised or brought forward. In any case, the scheme does not yet have the necessary approvals, though some others in the area do have them. In April this year TII, in conjunction with Cork County Council, held a public consultation into the proposed route and the business

case in respect of the project is being finalised for submission to my Department and the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform. Those procedures have to be completed.

While I am sympathetic, the Deputy has to realise that we have a fundamental problem with the roads in this country. The 99,000 km of roads are a huge albatross around our neck, as they have to be maintained. This is massively expensive, and much more money is spent on maintenance than on actual building projects. If the Deputy or other Deputies would like to stop the maintenance and start building, they should say so, but this is a problem that we aim to ameliorate in 2019, 2020 and 2021, when we have great hopes for growth. We hope to be able to indulge ourselves in capital expenditure of this sort, which is absolutely necessary, but I cannot hold out any promise. I cannot say that if matters improve I shall push for roads and other projects of this sort to be prioritised and brought forward. In the meantime, I will do everything I can to hasten-----

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Minister, excuse me, I do not make the order. I only implement what the House has agreed-----

Deputy Shane Ross: I am sorry.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: -----and I have been lenient with you.

Deputy Shane Ross: Yes.

Housing Strategy: Statements

Minister for the Environment, Community and Local Government (Deputy Simon Coveney): I thank Deputies for affording me the opportunity to present to them the key elements of the Government's Action Plan for Housing and Homelessness. The housing emergency, which is especially acute in our urban centres, is the most pressing social and economic issue facing the country. To have a home is a basic human need, and we are elected to this House to ensure all our citizens have a place to call home. The publication today of Rebuilding Ireland - an Action Plan for Housing and Homelessness is a step forward in providing good quality, well-designed housing for all our citizens within the context of a just society.

The concept of a just society is not new in an Irish context. Fifty years ago this September, the then Minister for Education, Donogh O'Malley, surprised the nation by announcing a free education scheme. Fifty years later, I think there is complete cross-party agreement on the gravity of the housing issues facing us. I believe that through the implementation of this housing action plan we can transform the State's approach towards social housing and the interaction of communities involving private and social housing. The current levels of homelessness are not acceptable in a decent society. A home is a basic need. At the launch earlier this afternoon, in the short video highlighting the new Sophia housing development in Sean McDermott Street, a young man captured the life-changing possibilities of providing a homeless person with an opportunity to have his or her own home where he or she can finally close the door on the experience of homelessness and have a place that provides warmth, security and a balanced, hopeful future.

A Programme for a Partnership Government rightly put the homelessness and housing challenge front and centre and committed to the delivery of an action plan within 100 days. That I am here today presenting an action plan, 74 days into our Administration, is testament to the priority that the Government, I as housing Minister and my Department places on developing

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and publishing this action plan as quickly and as comprehensively as possible. We were able to move swiftly because of a range of enabling and supporting work, including the contributions of the Oireachtas Committee on Housing and Homelessness, whose Chairman, Deputy John Curran, and members worked hard to bring together the many facets and challenges to be faced in addressing the many housing issues. I believe we have responded to all the key and implementable recommendations of that report. In the document we specifically have an appendix responding to each recommendation in turn in some detail.

Our current housing challenges have deep roots. For a decade, our broken public finances and even more broken banking and development sectors have been incapable of providing the housing we know we need. I believe that the publication of this document, Rebuilding Ireland - an Action Plan for Housing and Homelessness, is an important moment in public policy terms because it is the first time that Government has set out a holistic overview of the overall housing system. For too long, whether in this House, in council chambers or in public discourse generally, we have polarised the debate on housing provision, focusing alternately on social housing or home ownership needs but never bringing those two elements together in a detailed way. This action plan crucially brings together the two sides of the one issue, which essentially is about providing affordable homes, and State intervention when people cannot afford to do so. Too many of our cities, towns and villages show the effects of that kind of thinking, resulting in ordinary decent people being instantly categorised based on where they live or the name of the estate where they come from. This action plan points towards a very different path for the future. While it opens the door to a massive public house building and acquisition programme, it aims to deliver that programme not through large swathes of mono-tenure estates but through a mixed tenure approach to integrated and cohesive communities.

This action plan is ultimately focused on delivering more homes for the people who need them. It includes more than 80 separate actions structured under five main pillars that will address the needs of people who are homeless and at risk of homelessness; accelerate social housing delivery; build more homes for the wider housing market; improve the rental sector; and utilise the houses we have, many of which remain vacant.

I will outline particular actions that stand out for me as Minister and for the Members of the House. With regard to funding and viability, with the support of the wider Government and, in particular, my colleague, the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform, Deputy Paschal Donohoe, a massive €5.35 billion of funding will be provided from now until 2021 to support the delivery of some 47,000 units of social housing. To ensure a planning-led approach to meeting our current housing challenges, a €200 million local infrastructure housing activation fund will provide enabling infrastructure to open up large sites for early development by housing providers, with potential to develop between 15,000 and 20,000 new homes directly linked to that investment, at least 10%, and potentially much more, of which will be social housing. A complementary National Treasury Management Agency, NTMA, and private sector large-scale infrastructure development finance fund will seek to provide additional funding for on-site works by developers. Underutilised and publicly owned lands will be opened up for mixed tenure developments to provide the social and market housing we need side-by-side. Funding has been put in place for increased limits for rent supplement and housing assistance payment, HAP, from 1 July this year, costing approximately €55 million next year. A total of 2,000 affordable rental homes will be brought on stream, using the proceeds of the State's sale of its stake in Bord Gáis Energy, and measures will be developed to bring on stream an additional 7,000 student accommodation places by 2019, thereby providing purpose-built units for our

growing third level sector, and in the process, freeing up rental properties in our cities, which is badly needed.

With regard to regulatory reform, legislation will be developed and introduced to the House in the autumn to speed up the planning process by enabling large housing applications to be made directly to An Bord Pleanála after careful preplanning consultation involving local authorities, to streamline Part VIII procedures for local authority and approved housing bodies, and to remove regulatory barriers to reusing vacant and underutilised properties, particularly in our city, town and village centres, many of which have suffered most in recent years.

A major new strategy for the whole of the rental sector will be brought forward before the end of this year, striking an effective balance between, first and foremost, the rights of tenants and creating a stable environment for badly needed investment. We have had debates on that sector already in the House, and I look forward to those consultations continuing. Putting in place a national planning framework early next year will ensure a long-term approach not only to planning for housing the 500,000 people who will live in our country over the next 20 years but also to identifying key sites and measures to ensure proper use of land and vacant properties. We will also be examining further legislative measures on mortgage arrears to do all we can to keep people in their homes, where at all possible.

On the issue of delivery, a new housing delivery office will report directly to the Secretary General of my Department and to me, as Minister, to co-ordinate key elements of the overall social and market housing delivery programme under this plan. A total of 1,600 currently vacant homes will be acquired by the Housing Agency for onward transfer to local authorities and approved housing bodies, AHBs, as an initial exercise for a new procurement centre in the agency.

7 o'clock

A total of 20,000 new homes, 2,000 of them Part V houses, will be brought on stream by NAMA. There will be 1,500 rapid delivery homes built by this time next year - a trebling of the previous target - to banish the spectre of families living in totally unsuitable hotel accommodation. A new National Treasury Management Agency, NTMA, backed special purpose vehicle will look to access private funding sources to deliver additional social housing as part of mixed tenure developments. There will be 3,000 new homes delivered on State lands as pathfinder mixed housing developments. We hope that these will show an example for many others to follow. Social housing design, approval and delivery procedures will be overhauled to ensure swifter delivery. The number of tenancies provided by Housing First teams for rough sleepers in Dublin will be tripled from 100 to 300 tenancies and the housing-led approach will be extended to other urban areas. An additional 7,000 housing assistance payment tenancies will be delivered in 2017 and 2018. A new initiative will be put in place to provide access to independent expert advice and legal advice for people facing serious mortgage arrears, and more households will be facilitated with the option of a revamped mortgage to rent scheme.

Additional resources will be made available to An Bord Pleanála and local authorities to ensure they meet the statutory deadlines to which they have committed. This is an 18-week turnaround time for decisions for large-scale residential developments. The role of the Residential Tenancies Board will be expanded and strengthened. Resolution of unfinished housing estates will continue focusing on alignment with the social housing investment programme. Proposals for new urban, village and rural renewal programmes will be brought forward to harness the synergies between planning, housing and community development initiatives of the

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relevant Departments.

On the supporting measures, there will be enhanced supports for homeless families with children, such as the provision of free travel in order that families can better access the services and amenities they need. A range of measures will be advanced to meet the needs of homeless people with mental health and addiction issues. The HSE has committed to trebling the amount of money it will commit to supporting homeless people within 2016 and 2017. It is currently €2 million and it will rise to €6 million next year. As housing delivery activity ramps up, emerging skills needs will be met through measures to support the supply of skilled tradespeople. There will be better management of social housing stock through rapid re-letting of vacant units and through the introduction of choice-based letting which has enabled a 25% reduction in the numbers on the housing list in Cork.

Above all, I believe that through the implementation of the action plan, we can and will comprehensively address the homelessness issue, and not before time, and arrest the growing affordability gap for many households looking for a house. The implementation of the plan will drive the rental sector to provide a range of quality accommodation in bigger numbers and deliver housing in a way that supports and does not direct economic growth. We can also achieve wider objectives such as the need to support proper planning and sustainable development.

I look forward to hearing the views of Deputies on the analysis and actions proposed under Rebuilding Ireland - an Action Plan for Housing and Homelessness. I also look forward to receiving constructive input to moving forward its implementation. The State cannot do this alone. We need all stakeholders, especially housing providers, landowners, agencies and policy-makers across Government to work towards a common goal of providing good quality, affordable and well-located homes for our growing population. Business as usual is simply not an option. We each have our roles and must fulfil our respective responsibilities with the public sector empowered to act and the private sector enabled to support and deliver.

I believe this strategy to be a significant step forward. It is not the perfect article and we do not pretend it is. If there are mistakes in the strategy, we will correct them. However, I believe it is a very good start as a signal of intent by Government and a commitment of very significantly increased resources. It is a plan that has been tested and will deliver, if implemented, a very significant increase in the number of social house constructed and provided. This would kick-start the private sector into building the many more houses that are needed. We have the capacity, with this plan and its implementation, to get to building 25,000 housing units by mid-2019, but we need to go well beyond that figure to deal with the deficit that was created over the ten years of virtual inactivity in the construction sector. We need to go beyond 25,000 to somewhere between 30,000 and 35,000 housing units which are a mix of social, affordable and private. The structures, mechanisms and decision-making procedures that we are looking to streamline and improve by this strategy, can and will facilitate that. The construction sector's response today to the plan has so far been positive. We want to work in partnership with all the stakeholders, whether that is to address the vulnerabilities of people who are homeless, or people who are rough sleepers who rely on emergency accommodation night by night, or families who are living in totally inappropriate emergency accommodation at the moment. Ambitious targets have been set but it is intended to deliver on those.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Declan Breathnach): I call Deputy Barry Cowen who will be sharing time with Deputies John Curran, Mary Butler and Pat Casey. In fact, he will be sharing with just two. Is that agreed? Agreed.

Deputy Barry Cowen: I thank the Minister for his deliberations. As he has said, and as many of us have said in the Dáil since it reconvened, the housing crisis and homelessness crisis or emergency is the greatest issue facing Government, the country and society. It was high on Fianna Fáil's agenda when we sought to facilitate an arrangement to allow Fine Gael to lead Government based on the numbers it had with a view to producing a new housing strategy. I acknowledge the foresight of the Dáil in putting together an all-party housing committee on an emergency basis. I acknowledge the work it did under the chairmanship of Deputy John Curran and the way in which it sought to meet and consult all the stakeholders in the sectors in the housing area, those who are greatly affected by homelessness and all those who help and assist them. The work of that committee has fed into a process which allowed the Government to make a wholesome response and bring forward a strategy that has the potential to address this issue, in the full knowledge that other strategies were not that successful. There are aspects of this strategy that appear fine and good and have potential. However, we must be mindful of the fact that in November 2014 we heard a lot of this also. Unfortunately, much of what was promised then has not materialised.

It is against that background that I will read into the record a paragraph from page 44 of the strategy which was published today. It talks about increasing and accelerating the delivery of social housing:

The Social Housing Strategy 2020, published in November 2014, committed to providing 35,600 new social housing units between 2015 and 2020, at an estimated cost to the Exchequer of around €3.8 billion. Local authorities and Approved Housing Bodies are delivering these units through a variety of new-build and acquisition mechanisms as well as through leasing arrangements and tackling vacant stock [an exaggeration]. Given the scale of the current pressures in terms of delivery, more direct intervention is required to expand and accelerate overall social housing supply, particularly in the short term.

Under this Action Plan, targeted social housing supply is being increased to 47,000 units over the period 2016 to 2021 (at which stage some 10,000 units will be delivered on an annual basis). This will be achieved with Exchequer support of €5.35 billion, with the following delivery profile as set out in [the following graph].

What jumps out from this paragraph is that the figures indicate an increase of 12,000 housing units on the last plan, much of which has not been delivered and many of which were lease units rather than new build units. That equates to a little more than 2,500 new housing units per year in addition to the previous plan that was in place. The committee recommended 10,000 new units per annum.

It might be described as ambitious but there were many priorities within the content of the recommendations that offered opportunities to meet that demand for housing. We have to provide houses or units for people to live in.

Apart from all that, I acknowledge that there is an increase of €2 billion over five years which has to be welcomed. I acknowledge there is an appendix with timelines attached and I heard the Taoiseach today call them "timebombs". They will be timebombs if they are not adhered to, and we in opposition, like anybody else in opposition, will seek to hold the Government to account for that. We will have a watching brief to ensure that what is in the plan will be implemented.

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I will be brief about what is not contained and why I think the plan is incomplete. I am seeking to be constructive. I have the same rights and representative responsibility and role to effect change for my constituents, for the country and for society. While there is an aspirational commitment in respect of the rental sector and first-time buyers, much of what the Minister hopes to enact will, I expect, be contained in the budget such as rewarding landlords for improving the quality of tenure over time for families. The all-party committee made sound recommendations on that to be taken on board.

I am surprised and disappointed there is not a firm commitment to student accommodation. There is a commitment to review student accommodation and report back in quarter two next year, this time next year. Many of us know there is a crisis in respect of student accommodation. Students are competing with families for accommodation in cities and near colleges. That is not right or appropriate. I had hoped a vehicle would be put in place to allow colleges access funds to build units and provide them as soon as possible. That process should have been commenced much sooner than the commitment in this plan.

In respect of mortgage arrears and mortgage distress, we would like to see firm legislative proposals to allow mortgage-to-rent solutions be imposed by courts rather than considered by courts where there was a bank veto for too long.

The housing delivery office has potential but does not go far enough. A housing procurement agency or housing authority is needed to drive development and change and to build houses. The Dublin Docklands Development Authority did a job. It might have wound up in an unfortunate manner but the job it was asked to do was to develop the docklands and it did so. A housing authority's job is to build houses and this has the potential to build houses, but the way in which the Minister seeks to fund it off-balance sheet is very limited from what I have seen without getting into greater detail. The Minister says it has the potential to deliver 5,000 units over five years. I would have expected it had the potential to deliver many multiples of that. It has the potential to draw down funding from a wide range of sources, including the credit unions who want to get involved, to help and gain a return for their funds, rather than have them in the pillar banks with no return where they contribute to profits piggybacked on people who are paying 2% over and above the European average. We do not want them to be associated with that. We want them associated with providing a vehicle whereby a massive amount of funding can be given to provide the massive number of units needed.

People want homes and houses, irrespective of where they come from. We can provide a vehicle whereby they can be leased for 50 or 100 years, if necessary, to get over the EUROSTAT issue the Minister mentioned that he fears. This could provide adequate resources, funds, contracts and joint ventures in order that local authorities can appease and settle those who are on their waiting lists, approved housing bodies can play their role, colleges can build units and the private sector can borrow from that fund at competitive rates because they are not competitive now. I accept the mixed tenure commitment will seek to help those who have a good education and good jobs and cannot even start to rent, let alone own a home. They have to be accommodated and I expect they will be.

Deputy John Curran: I welcome the opportunity to contribute to this debate. Having read the plan, and to be fair about it, I broadly welcome it. There are issues I have with it and there are things I would like to have seen done differently. I welcome it because if this plan is implemented in full, in the fashion outlined and the timelines are met, we will be much better off than we would have been with the plan we were implementing three months ago or before

the general election. This makes a serious effort under several headings to tackle the housing issue. The Minister said, in an honest assessment, that it does not have all the answers but it is a good start. It is a start. Certain elements are framed in such a way that it is an evolving plan. The answers are not all here, there is further research to be done and people who read the plan need to acknowledge that the Minister has not said this is the definitive handbook, that all the answers are here. There are certain areas that must be further developed.

Our greatest sympathy and that of any public representative is with the people in emergency homeless accommodation today, whether in hostels, bed and breakfast establishments, guesthouses and so forth. The Minister put his head on the block a bit today when he gave a very definitive timeline and I genuinely wish him well. For people living in such inappropriate accommodation, the urgency the Minister has attached to dealing with that is important. I acknowledge that he has published this report significantly ahead of time. That demonstrates his urgency in dealing with this issue.

From the point of view of the Oireachtas Committee on Housing and Homelessness, one of the issues on which we probably differ is that we had envisaged a national housing procurement agency, an overarching body, but the Minister proposes a housing delivery office within the Department. We need to see the detail. He also says the housing agency would run a procurement centre in parallel. We differ on that in terms of the efficiencies that might be driven. The Minister has made his plan and I do not think a plan should fall over on this issue but it was not as we had envisaged it. We felt that the way to go would be to have one centralised office that would be effective and efficient over a decade to drive the housing programme the Minister has delivered here, and one that Ministers after him would have to follow. He has chosen a different route.

The Minister has some innovative proposals about vacant properties which need to be dealt with urgently. I am conscious that Central Statistics Office, CSO, figures produced last week indicated that even in the greater Dublin area where the housing crisis is at its worst there are still significant numbers of vacant properties. While not all would be suitable for residential occupation, local authorities need to be tasked with identifying them and developing the initiatives the Minister has indicated in dealing with that.

There is certainly a job of work to be done in the private rented sector. It is several years since we had a strategy in that area but private rented accommodation will endure for some considerable time, as it has in most other countries and cities. One of the biggest concerns people have is about security of tenure. The Minister says that by the end of the year he will have a strategy for the sector, which is important. This will also, however, require legislation to underpin it in respect of rents, security of tenure and other similar issues.

The committee asked for a moratorium on repossessions for a short period while additional legislation comes in, either what the Minister mentioned in the programme for Government or proposals that we might have. While mortgage arrears are mentioned in the report and the Minister refers to the potential for legislative measures later in the year, I would like to remind him that one of the committee's specific recommendations was that the code of conduct on mortgage arrears should be amended on a statutory basis to include an offer of split mortgage or mortgage to rent. Those issues should be considered.

The Minister refers to the off-balance sheet issue in the plan and I was a little bit surprised that only 5,000 social housing units will be built over five years. We felt that could have been

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more ambitious. Perhaps there is a job of work to be done with pension funds, the Irish League of Credit Unions and so forth.

Deputy Simon Coveney: We think there is a lot more potential there but we wanted to have a basic target figure.

Deputy John Curran: I am not being critical; I am setting out what I feel. I am pleased to hear it, but as a committee we spent a considerable amount of time with the NTMA and the Department of Finance. Having met groups such as the Irish League of Credit Unions and others, we feel this model has greater potential. I acknowledge and accept that the Minister is saying it is a starting point. I agree that we have to start somewhere, but we felt it had significant potential.

My time is running out, but I want to finish on a specific point that I do not want to miss. The Minister has established a local infrastructure housing activation fund at a cost of €200 million. The report states it could deliver 15,000 or 20,000 housing units. I want to put a document on the record that was presented to the committee during our consultation. It clearly indicated that across the four local authorities in Dublin, 48,000 or 49,000 housing units could be developed without planning permission and local authorities had a deficit of about €160 million. The document should be specifically considered because the Minister is not addressing the issue that was presented to us with the amount of money he is spending.

The Minister should examine the information we received during our meetings. It is important that the deficit in infrastructure is front-loaded to allow private development and social housing on lands across the four Dublin local authorities.

Deputy Eoin Ó Broin: The launch of the housing action plan is a significant event. It is particularly significant for the 4,152 adults in emergency accommodation, an increase of 160 on the previous count, and for the 2,206 children who will sleep in emergency accommodation tonight, an increase of 29 on the previous count. It is also significant for all the people who are sofa-surfing or living in overcrowded accommodation, those at risk of homelessness due to repossessions or excessive rents, the 130,000 or more households languishing on local authority housing lists for up to ten years and those priced out of the first-time buyer market. The plan the Minister launched today will determine whether things start to get better for many, if not all, these people.

It is also a big day for the Government. This is the first real test of how it intends to govern, whether it will abandon the failed policies of the previous Administration and embrace new ideas and new politics or continue to underinvest in social housing and under-regulate the housing market as it did over the previous five years. As we all know, that had devastating consequences for many people.

I commend the Minister, the Minister of State and their team on completing and publishing the report early. It involved a significant amount of work, something I acknowledge. I also acknowledge the work of others who assisted the Minister. The continual references to the Committee on Housing and Homelessness is a very positive sign. The Minister referred to appendix 2 of the report when he referred to cross-referencing recommendations of the committee with his recommendations. In fact, he only referenced our priority recommendations. Although that is welcome, there are only 23 priority recommendations while there are 84 other recommendations.

I have only read the full plan properly once. The Minister has only fully accepted seven of our 23 priority recommendations. The 15 others have not been accepted or fall substantially short of what we proposed. I have written to the Chair of the Select Committee on Housing, Planning and Local Government, Deputy Maria Bailey, to request that not only do we have a meeting to scrutinise the plan this week or next, but also that the Minister attends the committee in order that we have time to get into the detail of many of the questions Deputies will no doubt want to ask. He will address some of them today, and I hope he will facilitate a committee meeting.

I want to comment very briefly on each of the five pillars of the plan. I want specifically to address funding. The total amount of funding allocated goes to the very heart of this plan and its ability to deliver on its commitments. Earlier today, the Minister claimed that increased investment on the Kelly plan is in the region of €2.2 billion. This is simply not the case. I will talk Deputies through the figures. Deputy Alan Kelly's plan committed €3.8 billion over six years or €633 million per year, on average. The Minister's plan commits to €5.35 billion over six years or €891 million per year, on average. That is an annual increase or difference of €258 million between his plan and that of Deputy Alan Kelly's. Over the course of six years, that is €1.54 billion.

The total increase in the Minister's plan compared with what would have happened otherwise is significantly short of what he says. In fact, if one compares the five years left in Deputy Alan Kelly's plan and the first five years of the Minister's plan, the difference is €1.2 billion. That is a substantial gap. Massaging the figures is not a good place to start when one is announcing such an important plan. The Minister should clarify that issue on the floor of the House today.

I will deal with the pillars in order. I strongly welcome the commitment in the plan to reduce dramatically the use of hotels by mid-2017 through rapid build and the acquisition of vacant units. That is a very brave commitment on the part of the Minister. I am concerned that the timescale is very tight and I am not sure how many families the Minister intends to move into rapid or refurbished units and how many families will remain in them permanently or will be moved on to council housing or housing assistance payment, HAP, schemes. That is not clear in the plan, and it would be good for the Minister to clarify that today or at a later stage.

I also welcome the commitment on additional funding for mental health supports for people in emergency accommodation. I am deeply concerned about the text of the plan with respect to tackling mortgage distress, in particular preventing people at risk of losing their homes from becoming homeless. The proposal for a dedicated court in the programme for Government seems to be gone. The clear commitment in the programme for Government for amending the code of conduct on a statutory basis also appears to be gone, and there seems to be a significant roll-back on what was in the programme for Government to help those families in very significant mortgage distress. Again, I would be interested in hearing the views of the Minister on that.

Sinn Féin absolutely and unequivocally welcomes any increased investment in social housing and output. There is an increase in both of those in the action plan, which I fully acknowledge. I also strongly welcome the shift towards the greater use of mixed tenure estates, as the Minister has outlined.

I see the plan moving in the direction of local authorities providing housing, while private sector developers build estates and benefit from the cost rental and private units. That is a more

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expensive way to do things and denies the statutory sector the profits that generate from that which could be recycled into increased social housing provision. I do not believe it is the best use of local authority land or expertise. Therefore, I again urge the Minister, as I did privately before, to include in the mixed tenure plan or aspect of the plan the ability of local authorities not just to lead but to develop fully, control and benefit from those mixed tenure estates.

Obviously, an additional 12,000 social housing units are outlined in the plan, but it is important we interrogate that figure fully. The headline of 47,000 social housing units does not adequately characterise or capture what is taking place. According to the Minister, 26,000 units will be built by councils or approved housing bodies or purchased under Part V. I am interested to know whether there is an estimation of the balance because clearly the State has more control over housing provided by local authorities and approved housing bodies as opposed to Part V.

Some 11,000 units are to be provided through other acquisitions by council and approved housing bodies. Given the fact that the census figures from 2016 tell us there are 189,000 vacant units in Ireland, it seems to me that the 11,000 target is too small. If I am misreading the plan, I ask the Minister to clarify the figures.

A journalist asked the Minister about the 10,000 units to be provided through leasing, and he evaded the answer. How many will become public or voluntary housing association owned units? How many will remain in the private sector and be leased over a period? That is quite important.

On the potential 5,000 units to be delivered through a special purpose vehicle off-balance sheet, are they in addition to the 47,000 thousand units mentioned in the plan? Are they included in the plan? Who will own the units? These are crucial questions. From my estimation - I am more than happy for the Minister to correct me - what we are looking at is an increase of the real social housing stock owned by approved housing bodies and local authorities in the region of 6,000 units a year over the lifetime of the plan. That is 40% short of what the committee proposed and that was a minimum.

I am deeply concerned that the total increased funding according to the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform, Deputy Paschal Donohoe, at the press conference this morning for next year is €150 million. Could the Minister confirm whether that is the case? I appreciate the fiscal constraints on the Government but if it is, given the scale of the crisis, that is not enough when we need to front-load direct State investment in social housing.

Pillar 3, which relates to building more homes, is disappointing given how much of a centrepiece the Minister has made of increased provision of private housing by the market. In the region of 25,000 units a year are required. I echo some of the comments made by Deputies Cowen and Curran so I will not repeat what they said. It seems to me that there is little of real substance in terms of concrete actions to make homes more affordable. There is no great value in increasing the stock of private housing if it is costing between €330,000 and €350,000 for first-time buyers. I am deeply concerned about that.

Notwithstanding the additional 12,000 social units, I am concerned that the Minister is talking about 100,000 units ultimately for social use being delivered by the private rental sector. The Minister referred today to 84,000 housing assistance payment, HAP, units, 10,000 leased units and 4,000 rental accommodation scheme, RAS units. That remains an enormous over-reliance on the private rental sector. I admit it is slightly better than the proposal of the previous

Minister, Deputy Alan Kelly, but it is still deeply concerning.

Pillar 4 focuses on improving the rental sector. I fully agree with Deputies Curran and Cowen that this is the most disappointing section of the strategy. There are no firm commitments.

Deputy Simon Coveney: There are firm commitments.

Deputy Eoin Ó Broin: There is the promise of a strategy and we will engage constructively with the Minister in the Dáil Chamber and in the committee whenever he develops the strategy but there is a lack of firm, hard commitments not only on the long-term development of the private rental sector but the type of legislation on tenancy terminations or the purpose and outcome of a review of standards.

There is nothing on rent certainty, despite the escalating rent crisis and nothing specific on student accommodation other than, again, just a promise of another strategy at some future point. I acknowledge the point made by the Minister that his team did not have enough time to develop that part of the strategy. I suspect the real blockage is not the lack of time but, rather, the unwillingness on the part of his Cabinet colleagues to take the kind of policy decisions required to provide long-term solutions to a broken private rented sector.

Pillar 5 deals with utilising existing housing. Last week, as we are all aware, the Central Statistics Office revealed that there are 189,000 vacant units throughout the State. When the Housing Agency published its report based on the 2011 figures, many rubbished it, saying that the 2016 figures would show a significant reduction in the number of vacant units. They were wrong and the Housing Agency was right. While I again welcome the proposal to allocate €70 million to acquire 1,600 vacant properties, that is nowhere near enough. If the Housing Agency spends the money quickly, will the Minister replenish it and make it a rolling fund, and will he ask local authorities to develop actions plans for the long-term reintroduction of such units into the overall public private stock at local authority level?

The plan is undoubtedly better than that of the previous Minister, Deputy Alan Kelly. There is no question about that, but in the view of the party and constituents I represent it is simply nowhere near enough. The Minister has adopted much of the rhetoric of the report of the Committee on Housing and Homelessness. He has adopted some of its spirit in his recommendations but the gap between the committee's report and what the Minister has published today remains far too great.

There will undoubtedly be some improvements for some families following what the Minister has announced today. I will take the Minister at his word, that those of us who will sit with him in committee, privately or in the Dáil Chamber, to try to improve the quality of the plan will see improvements over a period. We will not be found wanting to make constructive, realistic proposals to the Minister as we did to the Committee on Housing and Homelessness. Crucially, however, unless the Minister is more ambitious and unless the Government ensures greater investment in the direct provision of local authority and approved housing body social housing, the crisis that is gripping tens of thousands of families in the housing system today will continue and things will continue to get worse.

Deputy Jan O'Sullivan: I welcome the fact the Government has published its action plan for housing and homelessness and that it has done so ahead of time, and also that it has taken on board many of the recommendations of the Oireachtas committee, although, as has been pointed out, not all of the recommendations in full and not all of the recommendations that were

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made. Nevertheless, it is welcome that the action plan has been published and that it has five pillars which are designed to address what is a very serious problem.

I am concerned at what the plan does not contain and whether it can break the logjam that halted construction after the economic collapse of 2008. That is the challenge. People who are homeless, or are at risk of becoming homeless, need the plan to work. I wish it success because it is the most important issue and it needs immediate and effective action.

The biggest issue staring us all in the face is the need for housing at a time when there are zoned sites available. However, hardly anyone is building, apart from one-off houses in the countryside to which the Minister referred at the launch of the plan this morning. If it is cost-effective to build one-off houses, why is it not cost-effective to build multi-unit developments with the economies of scale attached to building more than one unit, especially given the demand that is building up in the cities? We are constantly being told by the private sector that it is not cost-effective to build, yet people are building one-off houses in the countryside. Therefore, those protestations must be challenged. I agree incentives should be provided, and some were announced today, such as the upfront payment for Part V units and making publicly owned land available for private housing to be built for profit. I agree with the Minister and others who have said that a social mix is desirable. It is good that publicly owned land will be made available for social and affordable housing, but it will also be made available for private development and presumably for profit. I agree with Deputy Ó Broin that there needs to be some public payback for that. While I agree with the principle that we need a social mix of housing, there must be some reward to local authorities where publicly owned land is being used for private profit. We must learn from the mistakes of the past whereby huge swathes of public housing are in one part of the city and other parts are entirely composed of private housing. The Minister cited Cork as an example.

There is also a pressing need to have disincentives to the hoarding of land and sites until they become more profitable. While I agree that we need to provide carrots to get the private sector to build, we also need sticks to ensure it does not sit on land to make a greater profit at a later stage. While the Minister answered questions on the plan this morning, he specifically said he is concerned that investment funds are buying up zoned land. I share the Minister's concern. The only purpose I can see for buying zoned land is that one can hold on to it for some time to make a profit. The Minister must provide a strong deterrent to the hoarding of land for future profit.

The Labour Party put forward proposals in the Social Housing Bill yesterday. I hope the Minister will look at the proposals contained in the Bill, one of which is the implementation of the Kenny report and other of which is to bring forward the vacant sites levy. I accept the Minister said this morning that he would bring forward the vacant sites levy as soon as he legally could, but he should keep the matter under review because it is not planned to introduce it until 2018 and I believe it could be brought forward earlier. These two measures would provide the necessary deterrent to the hoarding of land.

Our Bill proposes the implementation of the recommendations of the Kenny report which, as we know, was published more than 40 years ago. An all-party commission on the Constitution in 2004 found that it was not contrary to the Constitution. I was a member of that committee. The Kenny report proposes that land acquired for the purpose of building houses through compulsory purchase orders, CPOs, would only have its current value plus 25%. In other words, one could not sit on the land and then make a profit by having it rezoned for housing.

A second proposal of our Bill is that the remit of NAMA be broadened and the organisation rebranded as the national housing development and finance agency. I know there are a number of measures proposed regarding the Housing Agency, for example, and the NTMA and others being part of the solution. However, we believe that NAMA could be a much greater part of the solution if its focus were changed and if its considerable monetary resources and expertise were used for the provision of housing, whether social or private.

We also propose measures to professionalise the landlord sector. Again, there are references to this in the housing strategy, but I believe that genuine measures could be introduced in this regard. There is a professionalised landlord sector in other European countries that provides stable, affordable rented accommodation but we do not really have that in this country, and we need more measures in this regard.

The fourth measure in our Bill I wish to highlight - I acknowledge that Sinn Féin has also proposed it - is the linking of rent to the consumer price index. We published all these measures about a month ago in a draft Bill, which we have added to, and we published the full Bill yesterday.

The Government is not proposing any specific actions regarding any of these four measures and others that we have published. We in opposition want to be constructive but we also hope that the Government will seriously consider measures presented by the Opposition.

We also urgently need more measures to give security to those privately renting. Some measures in the housing strategy will give some protection for tenants, such as, for example, where houses are being sold, that tenants stay in their homes. The Minister has announced that in large developments there will be protections. I have not seen any measures that would protect, say, the person who is in an individual apartment or whose landlord owns only a small number of properties. The majority of people privately renting are in those kinds of situations where the landlord does not own a very large number of properties in any one development. More security of tenure is required. Again, I know the Minister has said that there will be a plan later in the year in this regard, but a number of measures need to be taken in this area because people in the private rented sector face a great deal of insecurity.

I welcome increased funding for construction of social housing, building on the €3.1 billion provided by the former Minister, Deputy Alan Kelly, in the strategy he announced in November 2014. It is important to note the amended amount of €5.35 billion and, again, Deputy Ó Broin has pursued the numbers surrounding this issue. However, the Minister's plan goes up to 2021, whereas the plan of the former Minister, Deputy Alan Kelly, went up to 2020. I know that they are both six-year periods, but there was very little money available to spend in the first year of the plan of the former Minister, Deputy Alan Kelly. Fair is fair, and we must give credit to the former Minister. When I was in that Department, there was no money, and any bit of money we had we put into voids and bringing local authority houses back into use. That was effectively spent certainly in some local authorities, and I would cite Fingal as a particularly good one, but there was hardly any money to spend on the construction of houses. That money is now becoming available because the economy has been fixed, so we need to ensure it is spent, and spent effectively, but I do welcome the additional money.

There will be real challenges in getting the money spent. That will be the real test of the success of the plan. Money allocated to local authorities for social housing gets turned into actual houses at a snail's pace. I highlighted a hole in the ground in my city last week. I had allocated

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the money to housing there when I was Minister of State with responsibility for housing and planning. We had been given a commitment and I had it in writing that the houses would be built by April 2016, but it is still a hole in the ground. I am not hitting out at my local authority in particular because I know there are similar situations throughout the country.

We need to get rid of these obstacles and logjams. The matter will not be addressed simply by fast-tracking the planning process. If one considers Part VIII, for example, it is only an eight-week process plus possibly another four weeks if additional information is asked, so that is not the problem. I have some concerns about tampering with the planning process to address the issue of the slow pace of build because that is not where the problem is. The problem surrounds getting the money, getting to the planning process and then getting the construction done. The Minister needs to focus on that area. I point to the Minister of State sitting beside him because we were together in the Department of Education and Skills. Schools can be built relatively quickly, and I think I saw the Minister of State, Deputy English, on a television programme talking about that. There are examples in the Department of Education and Skills, both in my time and that of other Ministers, of our being able to build schools. One allocates money and the school or classrooms or whatever is built in a relatively short time. There are real issues to be addressed in this regard, and I hope we can get rid of those logjams.

In the time that is left to me I want to refer to a few other matters. I agree that student housing is referenced in the strategy but it needs much more specific proposals. Anything I saw in the plan was, I believe, there already. On the issue of homelessness, which is very important, I fully support the proposals of the Department of Children and Youth Affairs and the involvement of the Minister, Deputy Zappone, in supporting children and simple things like transportation. The cost of travelling was identified, along with the need to get to school, to have preschool facilities and to have the school completion programme available to these young people. They are extremely vulnerable and protection policies need to be in place to ensure these children are not exposed to any risk. These measures are very important, but getting the families into homes is the real solution, and that must be the focus.

I support the Housing First proposals and note that there is a proposal to expand them. I have some experience of this as well and was at a conference in Limerick two weeks ago on Housing First. It is about giving people a home, taking them as they are, whether they are addicted to drugs or have mental health issues or whatever, putting them in a home and giving them the wraparound 24-hour support they need to stay in that home. When it is explained to private landlords that such support is available, that the housing association working with those people will deal with the paying of the rent, and the kinds of supports that are in place, it should be attractive to landlords as well. It is a model that works and has been shown to work in other parts of the world, so I urge that that programme be supported, continued and expanded.

There are a large number of measures in the plan. There is a need for more strategic focus, particularly on the disincentives to construct. I would like to see a lot more focus on that and on the fact there are nearly 200,000 vacant houses in the country that are not holiday homes. I suspect that most of those are private because the voids money has brought back into use much of the local authority housing and housing authorities have got quicker at turnover. We in opposition will work with the Government to deliver on this plan. However, we want the Minister to listen to the measures proposed by us and by other Opposition parties. At all costs we must avoid the boom and bust cycle that nearly broke our economy and our society, and that was the basis for the huge problems of housing and homelessness that we have now and which have caused such misery and anxiety for so many of our citizens.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: There is nothing I would like to believe more than that this plan will deliver. Everybody in this House wants to solve the problem, and how could they not, given the scale of hardship and suffering for homeless people in emergency accommodation or those who have been waiting on housing lists for 15 to 18 years with little or no hope of ever being housed? However, when one looks at the detail of this plan I do not think it will deliver. That is so, not just because it does not take on board what people like ourselves have been saying since 2011, but also because of what was confirmed by the chairperson of the Housing Finance Agency, Dr. Michelle Norris, this morning. She summarised what we have been saying for five years and it stands as the most accurate critique of the failure of this plan to get to the kernel of the problem. Dr. Norris said:

We have become too dependent on the private sector to house low-income households. If we are going to deliver houses we need in the short term, in my view, local authorities to be introduced to building at a large scale that will involve them having permission to borrow money.

Therefore, local authorities must directly deliver council housing and be given the money to do so themselves. Dr. Norris has recognised the problem and she is right. The question is whether this plan proposes to do that, and it does not. It is littered with references to incentives, private developers, vulture funds, competitiveness-----

Deputy Simon Coveney: It is not.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: It does not mention vulture funds specifically, but it talks about those who will build large-scale rental property. Those are the vulture funds, the people who bought up land and property and own it. The most telling confirmation that my assessment of this is right came when I asked the Taoiseach earlier today if he could tell me how many local authority houses would be built under the plan. He frankly admitted that he could not give me an answer to that question. It is not in the plan. I have heard since from journalists, which I presume came from the Minister, and who I suspect, like everybody else, want to believe that this plan is a new departure. Everybody wants to believe that, while we all wanted to believe that Deputy Alan Kelly's plan was going to change things, but it did not.

The Taoiseach could not answer the question of how many council houses will be built, and neither can this report. The nearest it gets to answering the question is on page 45 where it states, "With cooperation and mobilisation by local authorities and AHBs, this Action Plan envisages a significant progressive increase in social housing build activity to over 5,000 ... a year by 2021." Let us read that carefully. It is not 5,000 a year to 2021. That would still only amount to 25,000 and it would not all be council because some of it would be from approved housing bodies. However, the Minister hopes to get up to 5,000 in 2021. Therefore, of the headline figure of 47,000 social housing units, which sounds good, fewer than 25,000 - in fact, I suspect it is considerably less - will be actual local authority houses.

In the time of the previous Government the housing list went from 96,000 to 140,000 families and households, and although we do not quite know what it is now, it is up by more than 45,000. If the rate of increase in the housing list continues, we will have a longer council housing list at the end of this plan than we currently have. That is because at the centre of its strategy, this plan does not envisage local authorities taking advice from the Housing Finance Agency and getting back to direct provision of large-scale local authority housing. Why are the figures not in it? Will the Minister tell me how many council houses will be built under this

plan? The Taoiseach could not answer and I bet the Minister cannot do so either.

Deputy Simon Coveney: I will provide clarity later.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Declan Breathnach): This session is for statements, not questions.

Deputy Simon Coveney: I provided clarity earlier today, but the Deputy did not show up.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Declan Breathnach): Deputy Boyd Barrett should continue without interruption.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: Deputy Gino Kenny showed up. It is not in the report. The bulk of the report is about the housing assistance payment, HAP, and the rental accommodation scheme, RAS. I disagree with the principle of HAP, but for the desperate people coming into my constituency office daily I would like to think I could say, "There you go. It's not a council house, but it's something." I can tell the Minister, however, that it is not going to happen. Given the numbers involved, the Minister might get some of it but he will not get anything like the targets he is talking about. There is no evidence that they are signing up in significant numbers and why would they?

Deputy Simon Coveney: They are.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: I know from my own locality that they are not. I read these figures out the other day and will do so again. Even with the Minister's increased rent caps or HAP limits, rent levels in Dún Laoghaire-Rathdown for a single one-bedroom dwelling are €1,800 per month, which is double the Minister's limit. Why would a private landlord enter into an arrangement with the Minister for a cap of €1,300 when average rents are €1,800? For a three-bedroom dwelling why would they enter into an arrangement with the Minister when the average rent is €2,200 and all they can get from him is €1,300? They will not do it and that is the problem. Sadly, I do not have time to go into the detail. As is so often the case, there is a reliance on the private sector and an ideological blindness. In addition, there is kowtowing to developers who say they cannot make enough profits which is why they will not build and deliver social and affordable housing. We keep kowtowing to them, however, but they still do not deliver, and we do not get the council housing we need to solve the problem.

Deputy Maria Bailey: Give us your solutions.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: I just gave them to the Minister - build council houses.

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: We are in the midst of the biggest housing crisis this State has ever seen. The Minister's plan proposes yet more focus on private developers to resolve this, yet this is the same market that caused the problem in the first place. The Minister has now introduced a new element by making it crystal clear that public land - the most precious way we have of resolving the housing crisis - is to be gifted by councils to these private developers. It is an incredible thing to do in the midst of a housing crisis.

Deputy Simon Coveney: Nothing is being gifted to anybody.

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: It is up to 75%, as well as money upfront for Part Vs and a range of other rewards. The Minister never listens to anything we have to say, but will he listen to the CEO of NAMA? He said it is not that housing is unprofitable for private developers, it is just

not profitable enough. Apparently a profit of €20,000 is not enough for them, so the Minister is now proposing to reward them for hoarding and the strike of capital that they have been engaged in. This time the Minister will give over local authority land.

I will start with the poverty of ambition in this plan. We hear that this is the biggest investment in yonks. Deputy Alan Kelly used to tell us the same when he was the Minister.

8 o'clock

This would not even bring us to the level of building that obtained in 2007 but, as we know, there is now a waiting list that is a multiple of that number. In 2007 and 2008 we were building approximately 5,000 local authority or housing association houses and acquisitions and houses provided under Part V stood at approximately 9,000. This information is available from the bar charts contained in the report, which the Minister can check if he so wishes. The plan now is to provide 9,000 social houses per annum, which is an incredible paucity of ambition at a time when leprechaun economics indicate we have massive growth rates in this country.

There is also a poverty of ambition in the context of the 200,000 vacant houses. From my reading of the plan, 1,600 such houses are to be acquired. Perhaps the Minister would clarify if that is the case? Local authorities are to be ordered by the Minister to hand over land to private developers for development, in respect of which trickle-down housing of the order of 25% to 30% is indicated. Why are we doing this? According to the Minister for Finance, there is no shortage of money. There is €5.4 billion available under the Ireland Strategic Investment Fund, ISIF, which could be used for the provision of public housing but we are barred under EU fiscal rules from doing so. Has the Minister asked the EU for a derogation because of our housing emergency? Has he had any communication with Brussels on this matter? According to the report, the Department has, while the housing crisis has been raging, spent two years trying to find a workable off-balance-sheet model to get around this quandary. We have the land and the labour in the form of our many unemployed construction workers and we also have the money but we are not allowed to provide housing on a public basis. The solution must involve the private sector and it must be self-financing. It is capitalism. It is the neoliberal impediment that is preventing us from resolving our housing crisis.

I would like now to speak about the ISIF, which has moneys to the tune of €5.4 billion, and NAMA's €2.4 billion in cash reserves. The total resources of €8 billion of these two entities could be spent on social and affordable housing provision but the State cannot use that money to build housing. That is the problem. Let us simplify matters. The Minister announced approximately ten different schemes today but our inability to use the funds to which I refer is the problem, which is outrageous. The Minister also announced a new type of housing estate today. The term "mixed tenure" has been used, which is something similar to motherhood and apple pie. Everyone is in favour of diversity.

Deputy Simon Coveney: They are not, actually.

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: We all want to see a different mix of people in estates.

Deputy Simon Coveney: There are many people who are against it.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Declan Breathnach): Deputy Coppinger, without interruption please.

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Deputy Ruth Coppinger: The Minister is continually interrupting.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Declan Breathnach): Deputy Coppinger keeps putting questions to the Minister. A set amount of time has been allocated to each speaker. If people continually interrupt, they are interfering with those who want to contribute.

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: Perhaps the Acting Chairman would allow me a couple of additional minutes to allow for the interruptions. Some 25% to 30% of the housing on council-owned land will be social housing and 75% will be privately mortgaged or, to use the new term, “affordable rental” houses. What does affordable rental mean? Perhaps the Minister will clarify if I am correct that it is 70% to 80% of market rent. The cost of renting in many parts of Dublin is €1,200 to €1,400. That is not affordable. That we would call such a level of rent affordable is laughable. The people in Tyrrelstown who live in houses and not apartments are paying €1,500 per month for small dwellings. An affordable rent for them under the proposed scheme is not affordable. We need to raise the eligibility levels for social housing so that people such as bus drivers, etc., can apply for it. We also need to provide people with affordable mortgages, such as were previously available from the councils. The mortgage I obtained from Fingal County Council 12 years ago when I was a teacher allowed me to access a house. We need to give other people that same opportunity.

I received an e-mail last night from a family whose rent is being increased by €100. While €100 would not be a lot to the Minister, it is to the family in question. The couple’s monthly income - they are both working - is €1,700. They live in a two bedroom house with their three children and their rent is being increased to €1,200 per month, which will leave €500 per month for five people to live on. Is there anything in the plan for them? No, there is not one solution. What we need is emergency legislation to ban repossessions. The Committee on Housing and Homelessness recommended a moratorium on repossessions but the Minister did not take that on board. How many months will it take before it becomes obvious to him that we need rent controls and that the private rented sector is the source of homelessness and poverty? The Minister plans to entrust 65% of social housing provision to the private rented sector. This is a hugely expensive way of providing social housing. We need to return to utilising public land and public funds to build a range of affordable and social housing for people to buy or rent.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Declan Breathnach): The next speaker is Deputy Maureen O’Sullivan. Is the Deputy sharing time?

Deputy Maureen O’Sullivan: I am sharing time with Deputies Connolly and Wallace.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Declan Breathnach): The Deputies have five minutes each. Is that agreed? Agreed.

Deputy Maureen O’Sullivan: We know the problem and we know the reasons and the circumstances that gave rise to the current housing crisis. We know also that this crisis was brewing for years. The interventions which could have been made at various stages and which would have made a difference to the situation not escalating or becoming worse were not made. One significant factor was that local authorities stopped building houses.

We know all the statistics, including that there are over 90,000 people on the social housing waiting list, that the numbers of people in homelessness are rising, that the numbers of those in emergency accommodation are also rising and that the numbers of individuals sleeping rough and the hidden homeless who move from couch to couch are increasing as well. In addition,

many of the people on the housing lists long term are being pushed down those lists because there are more people coming onto them. We know that demand is exceeding supply.

Having been a member of the Committee on Housing and Homelessness, I know that the solution involves a multifaceted approach. I acknowledge the wide-ranging consultation in which the committee engaged, including with the Minister. We are at a point now where we need action rather than words. What we do not want is actions that will lead to negative consequences later. One of the key areas is social housing provision so that we can get people out of emergency accommodation and private renting, which is more cost-effective. When one balances what the Government is spending on emergency accommodation, homelessness and rent supplement versus what it would cost to build social housing and get people back into homes, that to which I refer makes economic sense. Many individuals and families are putting themselves under immense pressure to get top-ups to meet the cost of rent. It is essential that we get social housing right.

We know that 10,000 units per year is not enough but if we can deliver on 10,000 real social housing units, it will make a difference. Lone parents with children, senior citizens, couples and single men who are on the housing lists should benefit from this new build. For me, success will be the movement in significant numbers of such people into one-bedroom, two-bedroom and three-bedroom units. I would like to speak about children because a number of mothers asked me to specifically refer to the devastating physical and mental effects on their children of living in emergency accommodation and the shame they feel when their friends see them going into a hostel or hotel. I know projects in the north inner city that are accessing counselling for such children.

I tried to read as much of the report as I could this afternoon. Obviously, I was looking at it from the point of view of the cross-party committee report. The latter report was pretty well received by those working in housing and homelessness and I did hear some positive reaction to this report. It is disappointing, however, that some of the committee's recommendations are not included in it. For example, was the advice of the Attorney General sought on the committee's recommendation for a moratorium on home repossessions? Will the Minister give an assurance that homeless shelters will not close unless residents have viable alternatives? Will he similarly provide that hotels that are in NAMA and being used as emergency accommodation cannot be sold until the residents get alternative accommodation? One of the key pillars of the plan ought to have been around prevention but I do not see any proposals in that regard in the report. On rent certainty and fixed tenure, I presume the affordable rental sector issue will be addressed in the autumn statement.

Yesterday, I attended a meeting with Social Justice Ireland on financing for social housing at which it was suggested that we could invoke the structural reform clause in the EU Stability and Growth Pact, which would, it was suggested, provide us with €1 billion in on-balance-sheet funding and, along with that, the off-balance-sheet mechanism of low-cost finance, which we know is available from credit unions and the Housing Finance Agency.

In the case of O'Devaney Gardens, I looked at submissions made to Dublin City Council by residents who live in the area. They are very much in favour of mixed tenure and want quality housing. They made an interesting point about the need to define "affordable". Perhaps that issue might be looked at also.

How much funding will be available to each local authority, particularly those with the

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longest housing waiting lists such as Dublin City Council? We suggested one framework. The Minister is suggesting the housing delivery office and the housing procurement office, but I am anxious to know who the actual driver will be.

I welcome what the Minister said about mental health and addiction issues, but there is a lack of specific measures to deal with them. We need timeframes for monitoring, evaluating and implementing measures. The Minister should come here before Christmas at the latest to give us a rundown on what the actions taken have achieved. I listened to the response of Brother Kevin Crowley, for whom I have great respect. He said action was needed and that the time for talk was over. We need action now.

Deputy Catherine Connolly: I listened to the Taoiseach tell us this morning that the local authorities had not measured up. He repeated this later using different phraseology. Let me say Galway City Council has measured up. It produced a housing report every quarter of every year in which it set out its strategy and identified the land it had zoned for residential purposes. The accompanying note stated construction had been suspended and that there was no funding available. That was the position in Galway where I had been since 1999 and left earlier this year. Not a single social house has been constructed since 2009. There is a housing crisis in Galway because we did not use public land to provide homes with public funds. I am sickened to the core when I hear Labour Party Members justify this by saying because of the state of the economy we could not afford to build homes. There is something seriously wrong with our definition of what an economy is if we cannot afford to give people homes and there is something definitely wrong with an economic strategy that does not allow people security with all of the positive benefits it brings.

I welcome some of the measures included in the report such as the strategy for urban and village renewal. There are 84 recommendations made. I agree fully with Deputies Richard Boyd Barrett and Ruth Coppinger that there has been a complete failure to address the fact that a state must provide homes on public lands. The facts are outlined on page 45 of the report. The Minister intends to build up to 5,000 houses by 2021. He cannot possibly provide homes with this strategy at the rate at which the waiting lists are increasing. What is worse is that he is going to rely on the very market forces that, through repeated Government policy, caused the crisis in the first place.

I hope the Minister will conclude tonight by acknowledging that there is a national emergency, not because the economy failed but because we failed to use it to provide homes for people. Each Deputy has an anecdote. I can say I made representations today on behalf of a family who has been on the waiting list in Galway since 2002. They are number one on the list. Galway City Council has responded by stating it is not in a position to tell the family when they will have a house. Sticking with the position in Galway but making a general point, Dr. Pádraic Kenna of NUI Galway has concluded a piece of Europe research that continued for over two years. While I hear Deputies ask for a moratorium on house repossessions, with which I agree, Dr. Kenna points to the significant finding of the research that evictions result from increased rents and that such evictions are greater in number than those arising from a failure to pay a mortgage. The document fails utterly to give security in the rental sector, while its thrust is we have to rely on it. I am appalled that the Minister thinks we should give public land bought at the highest prices to private companies on which to build to provide social housing rather than the other way round. The Kenny report has been quoted by the Deputy from the Labour Party. Successive Governments have refused to act on it. We have refused to recognise the long-term gain in providing homes for people would spur the economy and lead to a much healthier soci-

ety and wealthier country.

We are going to give more money to approved housing bodies, which are unregulated. In the past few weeks we have come into the Chamber to talk about the unregulated charities sector. We have approved housing bodies that are operating in an unregulated market.

Deputy Simon Coveney: We are committed to regulating it.

Deputy Catherine Connolly: I have noted it and I am about to thank the Minister for recognising the gap and for the fact that there will now be a regulator. I hope a regulator with resources will be put in place much more speedily than has been the case in the charities sector.

Deputy Mick Wallace: I am sorry I do not have more time. The Minister will not be shocked when I say I would have liked to see a lot more in the report, but I will not shoot him, rather I will give him the benefit of the doubt and I am hopeful he will deliver a lot more in time. Rome was not built in a day, but it was started. I accept that it is a start and will not dismiss it out of hand.

I will address the issues that we still need to address. I do not think the issue of affordability has been dealt with. We still have a huge problem with how we provide housing and dealing with this issue is a huge challenge. I am not saying the Minister should be able to sort it out overnight, but as he learns more about it, I hope he will take a stronger line in some areas. Land-banking is a massive problem within the industry that will stay with us for a while longer. It does not look as though the funding issue has been addressed either, as I would like it to be. The EU rules must be challenged. We are still very much restricted by them and they are stopping us from borrowing cheaply to invest in State housing provision.

We have discussed the issue of affordability a lot at the housing committee and established that there is a big difference between the cost of providing local authority and private sector housing. The difference can be up to €100,000, which is an awful lot of money. We are not providing quite as many social houses as we thought. My understanding is we were recommending 50,000 local authority new builds, but perhaps I have misinterpreted. I understand we are looking at a figure of 26,000 local authority new builds. This represents a missed opportunity.

In a building regulations blog someone wonders why the Minister did not establish a fund of something under €100 million and buy 50,000 or 60,000 houses to take people out of emergency accommodation. Investment funds are still buying houses for less than the cost at which we can build them. Why does the Government not take that position?

The Labour Party suggested we rebrand NAMA. I would prefer to abolish it. I am very concerned that we will expect NAMA to provide 20,000 houses in the next few years. This is an organisation that looks worse by the day. It lacks accountability and transparency and has been seriously economical with the truth. It is dysfunctional. The Minister might think I am making it up, but I am not. It is not an organisation on which he should be hanging his coat to help him resolve the housing crisis. We are going to use land owned by the people, yet nine out of ten units will be available through the private sector and NAMA will be doing deals with developers and investment funds to provide it. Many of the people in question have actually grown from a dysfunctional property market in Ireland. Some of their strength is based on ill-gotten gains. They are people who formerly worked in NAMA and got involved in this area. People were asking why the private sector is not building and they get a couple of things mixed up. There is an entity called the builder and an entity called the developer. The builders are

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prepared to build, they are able to build and they want to build. The developer is a different animal. It is true to say it is not financially attractive enough for him at present. It is for the builder but not the developer. One of the main causes of this is that the so-called developers, of which there is now a new, much bigger version, namely, investment funds or vulture funds, are still preoccupied with picking from the carcass of what is left of stressed assets from the failed financial institutions and NAMA. That is a huge problem for us. Builders are prepared to build. They are not saying there is not enough money in it for them. They cannot get the money. People should stop confusing builders with developers.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: The Deputy's time has expired. We will move on to the Rural Alliance, which has 15 minutes. I understand Deputies are sharing time.

Deputy Danny Healy-Rae: We are not the Rural Alliance; we are the rural Independents.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: We will arrange for that to be rectified. Having said that, I will still allow Deputy Danny Healy-Rae to speak.

Deputy Michael Harty: I am sharing - five minutes each - with Deputies Mattie McGrath and Danny Healy-Rae from the rural Independent group.

I will speak on a sub-group of homelessness which is street homeless people. Homelessness is a deeply unhealthy state. Many of those on our streets suffer from mental illness combined with drug addiction - a so-called dual diagnosis - but many also have physical illnesses which relate to being on the streets and their drug addiction. If people have that triple diagnosis, they are in a seriously unhealthy state. If we are to avoid unnecessary deaths on our streets, we need to address those three issues. The challenge for this Government is to provide safe, secure and appropriate housing tailored to the individual street homeless person's needs coupled with essential medical, addiction and social support services to ensure that exiting homelessness is sustainable and for the long term. Those health and support services should be a priority. There should be linkage between supplying appropriate housing and appropriate services if we are to allow these people to get off our streets.

There are some startling statistics available, including that: 85% of our street homeless people have either a mental illness, a drug addiction or a physical illness; 50% of them abuse drugs as well as having a mental illness; 13% have serious mental illness such as schizophrenia or bipolar disorder; 33% have self-harmed in the past six months; and 50% are on methadone or taking heroin. There is an alarming rate of suicide ideation and attempted suicide among these individuals. It is very difficult to obtain accurate figures on how many people are street homeless in Dublin due to the transient nature of homelessness and the scatter of homelessness around the city. If one adds the number of rough sleepers, which a recent count indicated was 106, to those who are in night shelters, hostels or treatment centres, the figure rises to over 300. Estimating the number of homeless in other areas outside Dublin is equally as difficult. All one has to do is walk up Grafton Street and along St. Stephen's Green towards Baggot Street to see the evidence of street homelessness. I did so three weeks ago and at around 10.30 p.m. there were 14 people setting up their sleeping bags and cardboard boxes in doorways. That was in 500 or 600 yards walking around the city.

There are many complex factors that lead to homelessness, including family breakdown, poverty, poor education, unemployment, leaving institutional care, drug addiction, alcohol addiction and mental illness. There is a disproportionate number of homeless people on our

streets who have been in care or in prison. Foreign nationals make up a significant number of those experiencing homelessness because they lack access to housing entitlements. There are two broad methods of exiting homelessness. One is the Housing First model, which has been mentioned extensively in the report. Housing First offers a homeless person on the street secure accommodation without any barriers or questions. After they have accepted that they get wraparound services - psychiatric, medical and addiction services - but they are taken off the streets before they get them. The treatment first model is a staircase model whereby people are offered detoxification, stabilisation and rehabilitation services before they are offered a house or accommodation. There is a need for both of these models. There are many variations of these models but the most important part of all of them is providing somebody with secure accommodation. There is one frightening statistic on those who go into psychiatric hospitals and have delayed discharges. At the beginning of January, there were 10,000 hospital days accumulated on delayed discharges. If a hospital bed costs €500 a day, that is €5 million wasted on delayed discharges.

I commend the report to the House. Increasing the number of Housing First units from 100 to 300 is very important. There are 50 people already waiting for housing if they could get the accommodation from Housing First. The lack of accommodation is the critical part. I wish the Minister every good fortune in implementing the report. I hope all the other Departments associated with the Minister's initiative can supply what he requires from them.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: I welcome the report and wish the Minister well. I wish Deputy Bailey well as Chairman of the Joint Committee on Housing, Planning and Local Government, which I look forward to working and engaging with. I pay tribute to Deputy Harty and others who worked on the interim committee. I know the work that Deputy Harty put in and he has provided very interesting statistics on foot of his professional experience. I will talk more generally and about the delivery.

I wish the Minister well. He is more down to earth and realistic in what he has to do. We had a previous Minister who announced something every day. I am talking about Deputy Kelly. The houses would not fit in Ireland if he had built them all. Blunder, bluff and bluster was all we got from him. He would turn sods and design maps but really he did absolutely nothing. We hear the Labour Party lecturing and telling us what we could do and the Deputies on the left that know everything about building, developers and bankers, but there are very few of them involved in voluntary housing associations or in other aspects of housing. They should do something rather than telling us all how to do it.

We have a serious housing crisis. We know that. I have spoken to the Minister before on this. I hope he gets involved and gets down and dirty because there are blockages. I agree with Deputy Wallace. I do not agree with him a lot of the time. Tá sé imithe anois. I do not know if he was a developer or a builder or a bit of both. That is his business but some people are confused. He knows the difference between a developer and a builder. We cannot denigrate and demonise every builder in the country. They were the backbone of the economy and they provided great employment. I am glad that the Seanad agreed a motion earlier tonight to give self-employed people some benefit from PRSI. They are a decent race of people. They are not aliens, they do not have horns and they are not monsters. They are genuine people. I have worked for many of them and I saw the results. They want to build and have the capacity to build small schemes of houses and one-off homes for people who want to house themselves if they can get a mortgage.

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There are a lot of blockages in the system. I agree that NAMA is a vehicle. I said it in this House - from this very seat - on the night NAMA was set up that it was like a wild animal being released in the woods and nobody knew where it would end up. We do not know now if it is in Austria or Syria or where it is but we know it is a mess. It is unaccountable and it is not delivering. I see there are aspirations regarding how many houses it will build and deliver. We have had that before. It failed and it is not accountable. The sooner it is disbanded and the animal is reined in or lassoed and brought down to Puck Fair in Killorglin - he need not be put up at a height, just put him up in pictures - the better, because there will be inquiries and investigations into NAMA in decades or years to come.

There are blockages in respect of planning. I do not know what has happened to our county councils. They have suffered cutbacks in funding and staff and they have also lost their way and their will to build houses.

The Census has referred to the number of vacant houses. Local authorities have a lot of them. They are boarded up, in some cases for years. They tell us that they cannot get funding or approval from the Department of the Environment, Community and Local Government and the Department tells us something else. There should not be such blockages.

Planning is also an issue. There are young couples in my area who want to build houses. I have told the Minister, Deputy Coveney, this previously and I want him to come and see the area. Lately, I heard from three such couples who had done everything - they got the design, engineers and everything else. Willing to house themselves, they paid a lot of money. The planning rules are so restrictive. There are fiddly issues stopping them and delaying them. On the other hand, there is lovely zoned land in the town of Cahir and elsewhere which should be developed. We cannot build any house because there is no access and the planners are afraid to give permission for any more than two or three houses. As I said, people want to buy houses for different reasons.

Vulture funds are buying up the houses that borrowers have been evicted from. There is no coherent message in the plan for those in mortgage distress, and to stop the banks evicting borrowers. I thought there would be. There is a mention but nothing cohesive. We must stop that because we will never deal with the housing crisis if we do not stop mortgage holders being made homeless on a daily basis by the banks. A whole army has built up around this, with sheriffs, repossession agents and so on. An industry that has mushroomed out of that is distasteful, dishonest and nasty. It is terrorising borrowers and that needs to be addressed.

I wish the Minister well and I look forward to working with him. However, there are blockages, and they are simple ones. I am glad that the Minister has an overreaching responsibility in planning. I also am glad to see that something I advocated in my county development plan in Tipperary is being considered. It concerns shops and village centre places which are empty for five years or less and which will never again be opened as a shop. In such cases one need not apply for a change of planning and be involved in more preplanning meetings with planners, which one now must wait six weeks for in my county, who will place every obstacle at their disposal to prevent action being taken. As a result, we will get towns alive again, allow people to come in to live in those places and deal with the housing lists as well.

Deputy Danny Healy-Rae: I thank the Minister for getting the ball rolling with this housing strategy. However, I will not praise the strategy until I see how it works because, as we all know, and as I know having been a member of Kerry County Council for 14 years, the devil is

always in the detail and we have to see, as Deputy Mattie McGrath stated, how the blockages that we have been dealing with over the past number of years will be dealt with.

The first pledge is to address homelessness. I have been told that in regard to Dublin, the making illegal of bed-sits has contributed greatly to the number of homeless sleeping on the streets. Maybe the Minister should look at how that could be overlooked or changed for the time being until we have more housing stock available.

In the past six years, Kerry County Council has built three houses but, unlike the Taoiseach and the former Minister, Deputy Kelly, I do not blame the local authorities. Since early 2015, when Deputy Kelly made an announcement that we had €62.5 million in Kerry for housing, there has been no house built yet because there has been blockages with the Department of the Environment, Community and Local Government dealing with the applications for the social housing in places such as Killarney and Tralee. Thirty houses were to have been built in the summer of 2015 but to date there is no house built because there were four stages of approval demanded by the Department. Those four stages seem to go on forever. That is where I am asking the Minister to get involved and provide the staff, and ensure that the staff deal with the issues because there should only be one model for local authorities to deal with in respect of each type of housing. Whether it is a one bedroom, two bedroom, three bedroom, four bedroom or five bedroom house, there should be one model for the country. The current situation has been causing unreal delays in getting 30 houses built in Kerry. I ask the Minister to address that aspect.

If we are to provide more housing, we need more staff. As I understand it, even at present there is an embargo on local authorities getting staff. The Minister, Deputy Coveney, and the Minister of State, Deputy English, are shaking their heads. I know the blockages are still there because I deal with them every day. I go to Kerry County Council at least once a week, every Monday. I know what is happening there. There are still blockages. They do not have the additional staff. It was disingenuous of the Taoiseach to criticise the local authorities and lay the blame at their doorstep because they are not to blame. I can tell the Taoiseach - I will make no bones about it - I will be more critical of him than his own party colleague, Deputy Griffin, if this does not work or if he does not put his shoulder to the wheel and ensure that it does.

On the pledge to increase speed of delivery of social housing, I hope that this process will be streamlined and, as I stated, more staff will be put in place. On the pledge to increase the output of private housing to meet demand, the private builders tell me they cannot access funding or capital at present to build the houses and that when they do, they are charged an interest rate of 12%. They cannot work with that because, they tell me, in a €180,000 house they will only have a €4,000 or €5,000 profit. They cannot take all of the responsibility and deal with all of the liabilities for that little gain. Something has to be done with the banks that we are supposed to own.

On the pledge to utilise existing housing, I highlighted this at meetings of Kerry County Council which owns many such houses. When we were working on a programme for Government, I insisted that we look at these vacant properties to see if they could be brought up to scratch. I welcome this, if it can be made work. It involves a lot of work, if one gives a loan to the house owner or landlord and hopes to get back the rent after five years or whatever, but it is a laudable exercise. I ask the Minister to put extra effort into that. I hope he will do so because there are a lot of houses vacant in my county. I even know of one house in a prominent place in a street in the heart of Killarney which, they tell me, is vacant for 70 years.

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I wish the Minister all the best with this housing strategy. He will have to get stuck in. Many commentators say we will have holidays but I do not anticipate that the Minister will take a holiday this summer because there is a lot of work to be done.

I have one other issue to raise. In County Kerry, the former national roads authority, NRA or, as it is now being called, Transport Infrastructure Ireland, TII, has deprived three couples of getting planning permission exiting onto a national secondary route. This is very unfair. Whatever regulations they are going by now were signed into law by the then Minister of Transport, Tourism and Sport, Deputy Varadkar, in 2012. I ask that the Minister look into that because it is depriving many in our county of access. All they are asking for is planning permission and they are being deprived of it by this one rule by the Department of the Environment, Community and Local Government and TII.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: I gave Deputy Danny Healy-Rae the extra few seconds for the mistake I made earlier, and I apologise.

Deputy Danny Healy-Rae: I thank the Leas-Cheann Comhairle.

Deputy Catherine Murphy: I welcome today's action plan for housing and homelessness. We all will agree it is long overdue. In the previous Dáil, many of us could see that there was a housing infrastructure deficit. In my own area, I began to see functioning families at risk of becoming homeless in the period 2012-13 because there was a big construction projection, which was welcome at the time but which exposed a significant deficit. At that stage, we were seeing families - I had some in my area - that were sleeping in cars.

Throughout the term of the previous Government, there was an inability to listen, even to practical steps that were proposed. The committee of which I was a member, the Joint Committee on Environment, Culture and the Gaeltacht, invited all the housing agencies to hearings in early 2013. Even at that point, we made a proposal that European Investment Bank funding would be leveraged. It is disappointing that much of that advice was not taken up. Therefore, it is a crisis that partly could have been avoided.

I have briefly gone through the 117 pages of the document and I will devote a good deal more time over the summer to get more familiar with it. Certainly, the detail of some of the initiatives will need to be discussed further by us. The Social Democrats published a housing document and there is a section included in our manifesto. We are very happy to see some aspects of what has emerged today. We sought the establishment of a housing delivery agency and I note that there is a procurement section devoted to local authorities in the Minister's Department. We will wait to see how it works, but it certainly has possibilities. The idea that a housing agency can have a procurement function is important, although it is not quite what we sought. The procurement aspect is important.

A couple of years ago we spoke about €3.1 billion being available like monopoly money. It was trotted out time and again, but it did not deliver a result. We cannot have the figure of €5.33 billion doing the same rounds; it must be more than just a figure that is spoken about. There must be practical action. There are some practical measures included in the document and it will be important for us to see how they play out.

There is a language issue. I heard it on the news again tonight that there will be the delivery of 47,000 houses. Those on the periphery will presume this means the building of 47,000 houses, but, of course, that is not what it means. It is very important that we say what will hap-

pen. Some of them will be provided under the housing assistance payment, HAP, scheme-----

Deputy Simon Coveney: They are not. All 47,000 will be new social houses. It does not take in the figure for the HAP scheme; it is a separate figure of 80,000.

Deputy Catherine Murphy: I am very happy to be corrected.

Deputy Simon Coveney: It is important to clarify the matter.

Deputy Catherine Murphy: It is important that the figures are as stated.

Deputy Simon Coveney: It includes building, acquisitions and bringing vacant properties back into the fold.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: I thank the Minister for the clarification.

Deputy Catherine Murphy: I am very happy to give way when there is such a correction. I have some concerns about the bypassing of the planning system in the way proposed. I recognise that there is a crisis, but in bypassing a system, a process can be made more expensive and difficult, as in the making of submissions. Sometimes submissions are full of good ideas. I am concerned that we could potentially lose out on good conditions that could be attached to planning permission as a result. I am also concerned that we may be circumventing the Aarhus Convention, as people are entitled to be consulted and have a role in the process of deciding on environmental issues in an area.

One of the issues we have included in our housing document, which we have brought to the Minister's attention on a number of occasions, is the favoured mixture of tenure and size, with scaling for value when the amount of houses built can reduce the cost. It appears that this is the case in what has been proposed. It is the approach that should be taken, but the only concern I have is the amount to be paid for sites by the private sector. That income will be important to build other local authority houses in other areas or to provide for the involvement of tier 3 housing associations. There are some tier 3 housing associations in my area and although there are some minor criticisms about cherry-picking, housing of a very good standard has been delivered by some of the larger organisations or associations.

Last week the Central Statistics Office indicated the sheer scale of vacant units. I accept the point made by the Minister - I have made it also - that all of these vacant units are not in the right place or perhaps in high-demand areas. Nevertheless, there are many in high-demand areas and they could be released in Dublin. We should not confuse them with local authority voids, as very often people confuse one with the other. These vacant units tend to be available in the private sector and it is a question of putting imaginative schemes in place. I noted that a number of initiatives were identified in the report and hope they will help to free some of these units. For every 1% of vacancies in the Dublin area, we could release approximately 5,000 units. They may well be suitable as student accommodation or not suitable for families, but the knock-on effect would be to release other units. I will wait to see how some of the initiatives play out, but it is important that this aspect be addressed. It is addressed to some degree in the report, but we will see how it works in practice.

There are a number of other issues. For example, there appears to be a reliance on the HAP scheme. I found it difficult in some respects in my area and it does not add to the supply. It is not a particularly sustainable approach in the longer term as we keep having to pump money

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into something that must be renewed over time. It is useful as a short-term initiative, but it is not a solution in the longer term. One cannot avoid the prospect of having to build a sizable number of houses into the future, probably every year for the next ten or 15 years.

The mortgage-to-rent schemes are torturous and I have dealt with a few of them.

Deputy Simon Coveney: Yes.

Deputy Catherine Murphy: We must get to grips with them if we are to get them to work. It is a very good idea if it can be made to work as there would be the least amount of disruption for a family while the equity issue was being dealt with.

There are measures relating to starter homes that are likely to be included in the budget. There are families still in what could be described as starter homes who may be inappropriately housed. For example, a family with two or three kids may be living in a two-bedroom apartment on the third or fourth floor. That group are trapped, although their housing needs appear to have been met. That group will have to be considered in the not too distant future as their living environment is not sustainable. There would be resentment if they were not given some way to move on from that accommodation to something more suitable.

There are also issues where people were victims of timing. There was a period - 2009 and 2010 - during which a group of first-time buyers were excluded from mortgage interest relief, while others who purchased either side of those years were included in the scheme. In fairness, that issue should be examined as some of the people involved may be inappropriately housed also. It just does not make sense that others who purchased either side of that period can avail of mortgage interest relief.

The Minister was correct to start the document with the section on homelessness which must be the number one priority. We all recognise the most recent escalation of homelessness primarily involved functioning families. I attended the briefing this afternoon, at which I heard the Minister's speech and noted the point about the Housing First approach. It is absolutely the right way to go, offering services and a sustainable approach into the future. The one thing we should not do is end up in 20 years time with people saying, "We know there was a housing crisis, we can document how it came about, but they made mistakes then that we are trying to undo". Some of what I see here is attempting to get a more balanced type of housing delivery that will allow people to downsize when they are older and may need less accommodation and that younger people who need less accommodation can move to a different size of accommodation when they have a larger family.

The different types of tenure are important and I noted that the Minister will revisit the issue of long-term rentals later in the year. That type of tenure is delivered in other countries and people find the arrangement satisfactory. There is no reason a portion of our housing stock should not fall into that category. We need to get used to the idea of changing our mindset, which is that it is in some way unsatisfactory if one does not own one's home. It is a viable type of tenure as long as people can see it as their home rather than someone else's property that they are renting short term and running the risk of having to move on and, therefore, do not develop roots in their communities, etc. As long as there is that kind of security, it is a viable type of tenure and one deserving a good deal more effort. However, the Minister will address it later in the year.

Domiciliary Care Allowance: Motion [Private Members]

Deputy Louise O'Reilly: I move:

“That Dáil Éireann:

notes:

— the inappropriate and burdensome full financial audit of the entire household and all its expenses as the sole route for a seriously ill child or a child with a disability to apply for a medical card;

— the onerous application process, the exclusive focus on ‘financial hardship’ and the failure to take account of medical need and the impact of a serious medical condition on a child and their family in the application for a medical card that currently exists;

— that the report of the Expert Panel on Medical Need for Medical Card Eligibility - the Keane report - concluded that it would be neither possible nor ethical to produce a list of medical conditions on which to base automatic entitlement to a medical card and that ‘a list-ing approach risks inequity by diagnosis and a further fragmentation of services’;

— that the Keane report recommended that the development of a more compassionate medical card system, which accommodates those with significant illness and disability, should be used as a ‘stepping stone’ to the implementation of the first phase of free GP care for all; and

— the Department of Social Protection’s domiciliary care allowance scheme provides an example of an assessment model on which a new medical card eligibility test could be based, in that it is independent of both financial means and diagnosis titles; rather, eligibility is based on reaching a threshold of care needs;

acknowledges that:

— several campaigns, including the Our Children’s Health campaign, were launched by families impacted by illness and disability who have first-hand experience of the struggle to secure and retain medical cards for their children; and

— the programme for Government states ‘we will extend the entitlement to a medical card for all children in receipt of the Domiciliary Care Allowance in Budget 2017. Approximately 10,000 children would benefit from this initiative’; and

resolves to immediately extend a full medical card to every child qualifying for the domiciliary care allowance.”

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: I understand Deputy O'Reilly is sharing time with her colleagues.

Deputy Louise O'Reilly: I am sharing time with an Teachta Ó Caoláin. I will take ten minutes and he will take five minutes.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: You have 20 minutes.

Deputy Louise O'Reilly: I am also sharing with Teachta Munster.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: I will tell you when ten minutes has passed.

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Deputy Louise O'Reilly: As health spokesperson for Sinn Féin, I would like first to welcome those parents with us here today in the Gallery and mention the many more who could not be here because they are caring for their children at home. I would also like to thank sincerely all the Teachtaí Dála, across the House, who have put their names to this motion. This is not just a Sinn Féin motion. It transcends parties and politics.

It is important that, as we rise for the summer recess, we remember that for thousands of families across the State there is no respite. They have sick children who need care and access to services. They battle every day for their children and, sadly, most of their battles are with the State. I think we all agree that that is fundamentally wrong. However, today I hope we can move to lifting one of the greatest hurdles these families are facing, access to medical cards.

What sort of system tells a parent of a young child with a disability or an illness that the granting or continuation of a child's medical card depends on the parents' jumping through bureaucratic hoops to prove they do not earn too much? Access to quality health care should be a right and not a concession to be granted or withheld by any Government, Minister or civil servant.

Let me tell the House about Réiltín. According to her nurse, Réiltín has had a particularly fragile start in life. Her mam has given me permission to use her name here tonight but it gives me no pleasure to have to share this story. Her nurse wrote in a letter:

This little girl has had a particularly fragile start in life and while she has hopefully come through very difficult surgeries for Duodenal Atresia and complex heart surgery, she has Downs Syndrome and [she] has recently been diagnosed as deaf and may require implants in the future.

She requires [a] CPAP [machine] at night for sleep apnoea [and] has significant developmental delay. Her road ahead remains very challenging and securing a Medical Card for her would certainly relieve some pressure for [her] family.

Needless to say, Reilitin's parents, were very disappointed when Reilitin's card was refused and [they] cannot understand why discretion was not applied to their daughters case.

A further communication from her nurse tells us that she was informed that Réiltín's continuous positive airway pressure, CPAP, machine is not covered by her long-term illness card. This has just added more stress for this family. The nurse describes Réiltín as a very deserving little girl and I do not think anyone would disagree with this, yet her medical card was not granted. We should not have to legislate for compassion but Réiltín's case proves that this is indeed what we must do. I, therefore, ask the Minister if he thinks it is right or fair that this deserving little girl has to wait. We do not think it is and the Teachtaí Dála who have co-signed this motion do not think she should wait either. We need to end the two-tier health care system and we need to move towards a system where every person who needs health care will have that need met.

I firmly believe that no Deputy in this House would disagree that children with a terminal or a life-limiting illness should have access to health care and adequate personal support irrespective of means. The public would be behind us. Anyone who has been through the medical card application process or who knows someone that has would tell us, as legislators, to simply do whatever is necessary. They would say we should forget about getting P45s, P60s, PAYE balancing statements, bank statements and evidence of mortgage payments and social welfare

searches, etc. They would say that once a person's illness or disability has been confirmed and a medical need established the State should do all in its power to help and support that person and his or her family. There should be no means tests, financial audit or, as the expert group under its terms of reference were initially examining, a list of specified medical conditions. We believe that access to a medical card should be on the basis of medical need only.

We need to move to a system that shows due respect and compassion, taking fully into account not only incomes, but the burdens imposed by medical conditions, illnesses and disabilities. We must see an end to the disturbing and insensitive practice of the requirement for those with life-limiting illnesses and permanent disabilities to respond to review after review, despite the ongoing progression of their illness and the reality that there will never be a recovery for them. Some people with terminal illnesses cannot get medical cards. There is no such thing as recovering from a terminal illness.

For those of us who are fortunate to have good health or for whom there are no caring responsibilities, the importance of a medical card cannot be fathomed in terms of quality of living and quality of care. First, it meets the costs of visits to the GP, medication, aids and appliances. Whether it is one's own diagnosis or that of a child or a loved one, being dealt the blow that one needs a range of aids or medicines to deal with it, as well as the illness or disability itself, can and does cause grave hardship. When a person's household is just over the income threshold, or just straddling it, and thus unable to get a medical card, getting access to these can be next to near impossible. I spoke to one family for whom two pieces of critical equipment for their child was the equivalent of the full year's carer's allowance payment one parent was receiving. They were over the income threshold for the medical card as a household. This is not right.

Second, the medical card is a passport to gaining automatic access to a range of community based and primary care services. This is a particularly challenging position to be in if one has a complex condition requiring ongoing multi-disciplinary support in the community. A number of studies have found that people suffering from an illness or a disability are more likely to fall into poverty than people in good health or who have debt problems due to health care costs. This is not the kind of Ireland that I think any of us want to live in. We should support vulnerable people and not exacerbate their vulnerabilities and hardship.

If the intention is to move to universal health care where access is based on need and not ability to pay and to remove the inequalities associated with that, it is right that people with disabilities, chronic conditions and distinct medical need are put to the fore of this plan. Our first step concerns the 10,000 medical cards for sick children.

9 o'clock

Then we must legislate for a distinct, new, medical need ground for eligibility for the medical card with an associated application route, using the DCA assessment framework as a model, an assessment involving the establishment of a threshold of medical need and not tested against a household's financial means or against diagnosis titles. We must legislate for this. Reviewing previous Committee of Public Accounts deliberations on the issue, the Comptroller and Auditor General, the Secretary General and the HSE are very clear. A system whereby qualification for a medical card is on the basis of medical need alone can only be given effect by a change in the legislation, not by a change in the administration of the scheme by the HSE.

The Minister knows from his meeting with Our Children's Health that, for these worn-out

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parents, the medical card process is torture in slow motion, with constant form filling, endless reviews, rejection and appeals. For those who may get the medical card, discretionary or otherwise, which is a child's passport to the basic care plan, there is no relief. There is still the endless worry and anxiety. There is always another application and they are always waiting for the next review.

I know that the Minister, Deputy Harris, has issued a press release following our announcement of this motion, confirming that it is his intention to bring forward the legislation. Getting down to the practicalities, when do we envisage that those 10,000 children will see the benefit of this change? This, for many children, is very much a life and death issue and it cannot be long-fingered. If the Minister does not intend to announce the measure until budget day, when will the legislation be presented to the House? Looking at the swathes of support for this motion, I do not see any opposition to the legislation so its passage is going to be easy. We are on board already and want it to happen. If the Minister brings forward the legislation we will support it. The families need a timeframe and to know when the medical card eligibility criteria will be changed. They need certainty and the Minister should give us the certainty of a date by which the legislation will be enacted.

We welcome the Government's commitment but this group has had many false dawns. There is a track record of broken promises to these people and we should not waste any opportunity to give them the certainty they need. We will press the Minister and the Minister of State tonight to give us a date and to give the families who are watching in the Gallery and at home what they need. They cannot take another broken promise and need to know when the criteria will be changed. The Minister has support for the legislation. We have drafted it already and have attempted to table it. We can do this and we should make it a priority.

Deputy Caoimhghín Ó Caoláin: Severely sick and disabled children in this country have been grossly neglected for many years. Parents and families of these children have put in a lot of time and energy fighting to ensure that their young sick child has the right to a medical card. It is totally unacceptable and plain wrong to put any parent or family through such an ordeal when all they want to do is simply care for their child, not fight a system that refuses to recognise their plight and distress.

I welcome the parents who are here this evening and the representatives of the Our Children's Health campaign. Our Children's Health campaign was launched in May 2014 by families impacted by illness and disability who have first-hand experience of the struggle to secure and retain medical cards for their children. Its primary aim is "to ensure children with serious medical need are no longer subjected to the crude, unfair, lengthy and frustrating means test in order to be considered for a medical card". The campaign has condemned the onerous application process, the exclusive focus on financial hardship and the failure to take account of medical need and the impact of a serious medical condition on a child and their family. Our Children's Health has argued:

We cannot continue to have a situation whereby children with the most serious medical need coming from ordinary families with modest incomes and huge outgoings remain ineligible. This is simply wrong and unjustifiable.

It is high time that medical cards were granted to every child with a serious illness or disability. Sinn Féin believes that the Department of Social Protection's domiciliary care allowance scheme provides an example of an assessment model on which a new medical card eligi-

bility test could be based, in that it is independent of both financial means and diagnosis titles. Rather, eligibility is based on reaching a threshold of care needs.

I acknowledge and welcome the fact that last week the Minister, Deputy Harris, met with Our Children's Health and committed to the automatic provision of medical cards to very sick children. It has been suggested, however, that this may not happen until 2017. That is too far away. This should happen now, as a matter of urgency. Let us not let any parent of a severely disabled or sick child have to worry a day more about their child's health needs. I repeat, we must act now.

The extension of an automatic medical card to all children in receipt of the domiciliary care allowance is only a stepping stone, albeit a very important one. Inequality is rife throughout the health system. Some pay more than others for the same care. Families in one part of the country get access to necessary services denied to those in a different region. The less well off die younger and live less healthy lives. The diminishing minority who can afford private health insurance get to jump the queue. Sinn Féin is the only party with a costed, credible plan for health. We would increase investment in the health system and use €3.3 billion of the money available to end the two-tier public-private system and deliver a new universal public health system for Ireland. Such a comprehensive system will not be achieved overnight but a beginning must be made and that requires political will and a fundamental change in the direction of policy, away from the current two-tier and increasingly privatised system. Ireland is the only EU health system that does not provide universal access to primary care. Free GP care should be available to the entire population. We are committed to the realisation of a world-class system of universal health care, accessed on the basis of need, free at the point of delivery and funded by progressive taxation in the Irish State.

I have no doubt but that every single Deputy in this House has been approached by a concerned parent of one of these children with a severe illness or disability who is at their wits' end trying to secure a medical card. Today, we have an opportunity to bring to a halt the distressing and cruel process that these families must go through. Let us get that ball rolling and ensure that those young children will have the automatic entitlement to a medical card that they are so deservedly entitled to. Iarraim ar Theachtaí na Dála seo a dtacaíocht a thabhairt don rún seo.

Deputy Imelda Munster: I am sharing time with Deputy Ó Laoghaire. I welcome the opportunity to speak on this motion on what is a very important issue. It is especially so when we consider the litany of disastrous cuts which families of children who are ill or have a disability have endured over recent years, such as the removal of medical cards and cuts to the respite grant. The Government eventually backtracked on these shameful policies but that was because of a public outcry. The difficulties for these families are huge and it was a shocking insight into the attitude of this Government towards the families. It now has an opportunity to put it right, however, with tonight's motion.

What will the Government do? Will it kick it down the road again like with so many other issues? Will it postpone it? If it does that, what does it say about the Minister? What does it say about this Government? Have they no compassion? Have they any idea of what these families and their sick children have been through?

Deputy Finian McGrath: We have lots of ideas.

Deputy Imelda Munster: If they have, I expect them to act with a sense of urgency. They

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can prove that when they respond to the questions asked by Deputy Louise O'Reilly. Will they expect families with sick children to wait even longer than they already have? In the next year, will they expect families to continue to go through the rigorous application process and the household audit they have had to endure to prove their sick child is deserving of a medical card? There is no reason to allow this to be postponed for upwards of a year. I ask the Ministers to do the right thing by these families and their children and bring a sense of urgency to this issue. They should prove me wrong by not kicking it down the road. They should act on it, but do it this year.

Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire: The motion to extend medical cards to ill and disabled children would be an immediate, clear, simple and direct step to aiming the moneys of the State directly where it would have most effect and reach those who are most in need.

Tá an córas liúntais seo bunaithe ar riachtanais an linbh. Dá bharr sin, tá sé ag déileáil le páistí a bhfuil an-tinn agus tá cur chuige faoi leith ag teastáil. Caithfear an méid sin a rá freisin faoi na cartáí go mba chóir a bheith ar fáil tríd an bpolasaí seo.

The domiciliary care allowance is by no means perfect. According to the last annual report of the Social Welfare Appeals Office, 1,258 applications for domiciliary care allowance were appealed, with only 313 given a revised decision. In the context of the number of people who would apply for it, that is a substantial number. Anecdotally, I am aware that many families must go through a long and difficult process. Deputy O'Reilly referred to having to battle the State every step of the way to get this payment processed. In that context, it is worth recalling that to qualify a child must be deemed to have a disability so severe that the child requires care and attention substantially in excess of another child of the same age. That is a very high threshold. Many families have to go down the appeals route, which is a further hardship for parents who have been already seriously overburdened and put under pressure. That is a matter that needs to be resolved. I ask the Minister to take that up with the Minister for Social Protection.

In the context of this policy, I am encouraged that the Minister intends to support the motion, which is a vitally important step that needs to be progressed urgently. That being the case, the point Deputy O'Reilly made about this being available without a means test and immune from changes to household finances is crucially important. Already, these families have to fight every step of the way to ensure that their children get the services they deserve. They should not have to fight harder, and again, for those medical cards.

Minister for Health (Deputy Simon Harris): I welcome the opportunity to address the House this evening on the Government's commitment to extend medical card provision to all children in receipt of the domiciliary care allowance, DCA, as we set out in our agreed programme, A Programme for a Partnership Government.

I would like to acknowledge at the outset that there is broad agreement on this issue across the House, and I am very encouraged by that, but no one political party holds a monopoly of concern or compassion for the parents and children who need to see this policy implemented.

Deputy Finian McGrath: Hear, hear.

Deputy Simon Harris: While I genuinely welcome the Sinn Féin motion as an opportunity to outline the next steps, as I have already outlined them at a meeting with the members of the Our Children's Health campaign, whom I would like to welcome to the Gallery, it is important

to say that no Dáil motion was necessary to convince me or the Ministers of State, Deputies McGrath and Corcoran-Kennedy, to do this. I have been convinced by the people who are in the Gallery tonight. I have been convinced by the parents of children who are in receipt of domiciliary care allowance, the parents I have met in my own constituency, the parents of children with autism, among other conditions, whom I have worked with for many years.

In fact, on my way into what I think was my second Cabinet meeting, I spoke with Mark, who joins us here this evening, one of the Our Children's Health campaigners, outside Government Buildings. On that occasion I took the opportunity to make very clear to Mark that this was a priority for Government and would be dealt with in the forthcoming budget. Many of us, as public representatives, have been struck by the practical challenges, as outlined by Deputy O'Reilly and others, that parents face in meeting the needs of their child with a severe disability.

As we discussed the issue that day, I came to further understand that, for many of these parents, meeting their child's needs was the first time they had sought assistance from the State. The process of providing family financial information, expert or medical reports, and additional supporting information was and is a real burden on these parents when they were only seeking a medical card for their child. I am very clear that a core objective of the Government is to use the strengthening economy to make life better for the Irish people, and this is one such area.

The Government has committed to this significant improvement to the medical card system for a number of reasons. First, about one third of DCA children do not hold a medical card. Therefore, about 11,000 more children with a severe disability will qualify for a medical card under this measure. Second, in future, all 33,000 DCA children will automatically qualify for a medical card. Therefore, those children will not be subject to the medical card means test at any point in the future. Finally, the requirement to go through the medical card assessment process will be removed for about 30,000 families looking after a child with a severe disability. Those families will no longer need to complete a means test application form for their child and support that with expert reports and other additional information in order for their child's case to be considered. Instead, mothers and fathers will be able focus on their primary objective of providing care and support to their child.

Last week, I held a meeting in the Department of Health with representatives of Our Children's Health. At that meeting, I reaffirmed the Government's commitment in its programme to providing medical cards to all children who qualify for the domiciliary care allowance. I confirmed that this commitment was a priority for me and the Government in the upcoming budget discussions and that my objective was to have legislation to enable it follow quickly after the required resources have been secured. I discussed at that meeting, and I believe there is cross-party agreement on this, the importance of doing this by legislation so that it makes it very difficult to be undone.

Deputy Louise O'Reilly: I am glad the Minister realises that.

Deputy Simon Harris: I am only ten weeks in the job, Deputy, and I am about to do it.

It is fair to say that all assessment systems have some limitations. It is probably practically impossible for a single assessment system to take account of all individual circumstances. If one tried with the best will in the world, it would probably become incredibly complex. While it is important that we acknowledge the limitations of the existing eligibility framework, it is also necessary to recognise the potential for improvements that we can make.

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I believe that the recently established Committee on the Future of Healthcare will play a key role in this regard. It was set up to achieve cross-party consensus on a single, long-term vision for health care and the direction of health policy in Ireland, and to make recommendations to this House within six months. I firmly believe that the health service will benefit greatly from a single unifying vision that we can all get behind. A long-term vision, built on a cross-party or even a social consensus, can help to drive reform and development of the system over the next ten years.

I am genuinely excited that this new Dáil has come together with the aim of achieving long-term consensus on the fundamental principles of health policy. In striving for the optimal single-tier health service for Ireland, there are inevitable policy trade-offs to be confronted. These trade-offs often involve tensions between efficiency and equity or between comprehensiveness and cost control. In all countries, not just Ireland, the trade-offs centre around three basic dimensions of the health service which must be confronted when designing a health service: the proportion of the population to be covered; the range of services to be covered; and the proportion of the total costs to be met.

On the specific issue before us, Deputies may be aware that the domiciliary care allowance is administered by my colleague, the Minister for Social Protection. It is a monthly payment for a child with a severe disability, aged under 16 years, who requires ongoing care and attention substantially over and above the care and attention usually required by a child of the same age.

I accept, as others, including Deputy Ó Laoghaire, have said, that the DCA measure is not the perfect solution to our health eligibility framework. The latest available data indicate that about 33,000 children qualify for the DCA. By comparison, about 390,000 children under the age of 16 years currently qualify for the medical card. The DCA is not based on a type of disability or the medical need of a child. Under the legislation, it is based on how much extra care and attention a child needs because of it. The DCA also has a range of qualifying criteria. These include the disability being likely to last for at least one year, that the parent is providing the care to the child, that the child resides at home, and that the child meets the medical criteria of the scheme.

Recently, I visited the Health Service Executive's national medical card unit, which administers the general medical services scheme. Its functions include the processing of medical card applications. It was established in 2011 as part of the HSE's primary care reimbursement service. I acknowledge the hard work of the staff I met. I know that they are committed to ensuring that anyone who is eligible for a medical card under the existing legislation receives their card, and that the system operates in a streamlined way. The medical card unit provides a single uniform system for medical card applications and renewals, replacing the different systems previously operated in local health offices. This ensures that people are treated in a similar manner irrespective of where they live.

The scale of the operations of the national medical card unit is enormous. In 2015 alone, the medical card unit processed almost 400,000 cases. These included 107,000 applications and 92,000 full reviews of medical card and GP visit card eligibility as well as over 195,000 self-assessment reviews of eligibility.

Currently there are over 1.7 million people registered with a medical card and a further 450,000 people registered with a GP visit card. Under the existing health legislation the standard assessment for a medical card is based on the combined income of the applicant and

spouse, or partner, if any, after tax, PRSI and USC have been deducted. In addition a further allowance is made for the costs of rent or mortgage, for the costs of travelling to and from work and the costs of child care that a family might face. In the assessment process the HSE can take into account medical costs incurred by an individual or a family. Where deemed appropriate in particular circumstances the HSE may exercise discretion and grant a medical card even though the applicant's means exceed the relevant threshold.

Deputies may be aware of a major report in 2014 by an expert panel on medical need for medical card eligibility which was chaired by Professor Frank Keane. The Keane report recommended that a person's means should remain the main qualifier for a medical card. Nonetheless, it is absolutely clear that there are people, including children, with medical needs and it is important that they should be able to access necessary assistance in a much more straightforward manner. On foot of the Keane report, the HSE established the clinical advisory group on medical card eligibility. This group is to develop a framework for assessment and measurement of the burden of disease and appropriate operational guidelines for the medical card scheme. The membership of the clinical advisory group includes clinical experts from specialist services and professions and, importantly, patient representatives. The group reports to the national director of primary care on a quarterly basis. It is expected that the group will make a report when it has completed its work in the near future.

As a result of the range of improvements implemented by the HSE on foot of the Keane report, the HSE is exercising greater discretion. There are now over 106,000 discretionary medical cards. This is the highest number of discretionary medical cards on record in the history of the State.

I shall conclude by saying that more needs to be done. I welcome this opportunity to address the House on the Government's commitment to provide medical cards to all children in receipt of the domiciliary care allowance. This is a key commitment in the programme for Government and is a priority for me in budget 2017. I am privileged to have become Minister for Health at a time when we are in a period of reinvestment in the health services, which gives me the opportunity to address some immediate issues such as this. I will act and we will act, as I hope will all Members, with a sense of urgency. The money will be put in place in the budget in October and we will move forward with the legislation. There are parents currently sitting in the public gallery. These, and the parents of 11,000 other children, will receive an automatic entitlement to a medical card early in 2017. That is acting immediately and urgently. We must all move together.

Deputies: Hear, hear. Well done.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: I call on Deputy John Brassil. He has 20 minutes which he will share with Deputies Scanlon, Ó Cuív and O'Loughlin.

Deputy John Brassil: I thank Sinn Féin for this motion and I thank the Minister for his very positive response. This was a specific proposal Fianna Fáil had in its manifesto and I am quite sure it was part of the manifestos of all the main parties. I am glad that for once we can stand here as a group to deliver on a commitment we made to one of the most vulnerable sections of our society.

Access to a medical card for children who have a serious illness or condition is a fundamental requirement and is important to the families. I welcome to the Gallery tonight the group

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from Our Children's Health and parents of children who have disabilities. While welcoming the good news I hope in future that basic fundamental requirements such as this could happen without the need for sustained campaigns from groups, families and political parties, when it is blatantly obvious that it should have been done a long time ago. The parents work so hard in dealing with their children who have disabilities and their time would be far better spent looking after their loved ones rather than campaigning on such difficult issues. I hope it is a lesson for us all.

With regard to other issues affecting children with profound disabilities, it is concerning that when those children become adults the level of care and available budget are just not sufficient. I met a mother last weekend in my clinic. She has a 19 year old son with a severe and profound disability. Before he turned 18 years of age he had received respite care once a week. This service stopped as soon as he turned 18. There was no adult respite care available. Unfortunately his mother became exceptionally unwell last year and at one stage was at death's door. She was advised to spend at least two months recuperating. After nine days in hospital she had to return home to assist her husband in looking after their 19 year old son because they could not get respite care. Perhaps the Minister of State, Deputy Finian McGrath, and the Minister for Health, Deputy Harris, would ring-fence specific funding to assist young adults and people with profound disabilities to get respite care. It is an important call as an additional support to help these people.

Cancer patients could also benefit from automatic medical cards. This year some 30,000 people will hear the words "You have cancer". Once a patient is diagnosed, his or her life changes beyond belief and the last thing that person needs is to go through the arduous process of applying for a medical card. Once a consultant confirms that a patient has cancer, a letter presented to the HSE should automatically entitle that person to a medical card for at least 12 months. During that intervening period any paperwork that is necessary can then be put together. As a practising pharmacist who deals with patients daily, I assure the House that once cancer patients are diagnosed, they need to concentrate all their time and effort on getting better. They can get better, but having to worry about the costs of medication and GP visits and so on is something they should not be burdened with. As the Minister is aware, once a person is diagnosed with cancer his or her ability to work and earn changes fundamentally. An automatic medical card would go a long way towards easing the burden and towards helping the patients recover.

If we are to bring these fundamental changes to our medical card system, general practitioners are the one key group we must bring with us in this process. While we would all love a universal GP system with visits free for everybody - we will work towards that - it is not going to happen overnight. The process is going to happen over years. However, for the 10,000 people the Minister is bringing on board this evening, and for the cancer patients whom I hope the Minister will also look to bringing in to automatic eligibility in the near future, we also need the GPs to be properly resourced and fully supportive of our proposals so they can carry out their work. Many well qualified doctors are leaving the State because the necessary supports to allow them to practice and carry out their business professionally do not exist. Rural areas are losing GPs on a regular basis because of lack of supports. I urge the Minister to consider, in working towards universal GP care, that we bring this important group with us and that every decision we make is made in consultation and in agreement with them.

It is really good news to hear that the domiciliary care allowance recipients will avail of the cards easily and seamlessly. It is a welcome measure and we can be proud of it. I welcome the

Minister's commitment to making this happen quickly. I also welcome the Sinn Féin motion in allowing Deputies to discuss the matter in the House. For once we can be proud of the commitments that have been made in the Chamber and that we, as a political body, have kept them and can stand over them.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: I invite Deputy Eamon Scanlon to speak and I ask him to note that there is over 30 minutes remaining for the three speakers.

Deputy Eamon Scanlon: I welcome the opportunity to speak on this motion. Fianna Fáil fully supports the Sinn Féin proposal to ensure the provision of a full medical card for every child in receipt of domiciliary care allowance. During the last Dáil this party was to the forefront in highlighting the Government's targeting of people on discretionary medical cards before the election. We committed to ensuring a medical card for all children whose carer was in receipt of domiciliary care allowance. The Fine Gael and Labour Party Government promised people with disabilities that they would be the Government's No. 1 social justice priority. I am glad to say the Minister has tonight confirmed that that is the case.

It is truly regrettable that thousands of families had their medical cards withdrawn, causing untold misery and hardship. They were families who had assumed they would always receive that care. I recall many children with serious medical needs who required substantial daily care having their discretionary medical cards revoked. For two years the then Government denied that there was a deliberate policy to cut the number of discretionary medical cards. There are approximately 10,000 children who, I believe, thanks to the announcement made tonight, will receive a medical card which they truly deserve. The Minister's announcement of the allocation of €20 million is welcome and I ask that the money be made available immediately, without having to wait for the budget which will be announced near the end of the year. The money should be made available now to take the burden off these families.

The campaign group Our Children's Health established in 2014 by Mr. Kevin Shortall and Mr. Peter Fitzpatrick must be commended for its tireless campaigning for better access to medical cards for sick children. It remains imperative that we establish a flexible assessment regime for discretionary medical cards in order that the financial burden people with a serious illness or disabilities are forced to endure will be lifted. Fianna Fáil made it a provision in the confidence and supply agreement with Fine Gael that the more humane system for discretionary medical cards it had suggested in the run-up to the general election be fully maintained. Fianna Fáil does not believe in a two-tier health system. We are committed to creating a more inclusive society and dismantling barriers that prevent people with disabilities from participating in society.

Deputy Joe O'Reilly mentioned C-PAP machines. I have been using one of them for the past 15 years. I hired it initially for €70 a week. After seven or eight months I bought it at a cost of approximately €1,600. The Department of Health is paying €86 a month to lease one of these machines, which works out at nearly €1,100 a year. Approximately five weeks ago I purchased a new machine with a mask for €750. The machines have come down in price and are available. I suggest to the Government - I am glad that an official is present - that it is being ripped off in leasing these machines. What was costing €1,070 to lease or rent can be bought for €750. Anyone who needs one of these machines really needs it. I would not be here tonight but for it. They are crucial to those who need them. This issue should be examined because I imagine millions of euro is being lost as a result of what is happening.

Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív: I, too, welcome the motion and the fact that the Government has

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accepted it. As well as the obvious benefit for those in receipt of domiciliary care allowance who will receive the medical card automatically, the other great advantage is that it eliminates the unnecessary hassle of filling in forms, with a vast amount of paperwork attached, particularly where a person is trying to prove not only medical expenses have been incurred in treating a medical condition but also ancillary expenses. Many of those applying for medical cards do not realise that, for example, the cost of travelling from a rural part of Ireland to Dublin and staying overnight is a legitimate expense they can include when making their case for a medical card. I welcome anything that simplifies life.

There are other groups who do not necessarily receive domiciliary care allowance but who are clearly identified as having young people with medical conditions. The Minister should consider extending it to such categories as quickly as possible and obviating the necessity to make a case.

During the term of the last Government I knew of a young person who, on our first meeting, I thought was six or seven years of age but who was actually 14 or 15 and suffering from a rare genetic disorder. It took us a year to obtain a medical card. The first battle we had to fight was to retain the medical card held until a decision was made. It then went to appeal and went on and on. The parents had a modest middle income. The child needed care 24 hours a day, seven days a week, and a medical card was being held back at a time when children in the whole of their health were being given free general practitioner, GP, cards.

I live in a world where finance will always be finite. Some people seem to live in a parallel universe where there is unlimited finance and no choices to be made. I have disagreed with the Government's policy of trying to give GP cards to everybody in the country and not giving full medical cards to those who really need them. We have our priorities upside down, given that very wealthy people are going to wind up with GP cards, while people who endure huge hardship cannot get their hands on a full medical card. As the Ministers of State opposite know from their time on this side of the House, many ancillary issues arise in not having a medical card.

Another practical point concerns the interminable reviews of the circumstances of people with discretionary medical cards or old people. How many old people, over the age of 66 years, does the Minister of State know whose incomes go up after they turn 66 years, unless they win the lotto? Is it worthwhile hassling them with forms and worry, year after year while carrying out these reviews?

Another habit of the Health Service Executive, HSE, is that when a person applies, it writes back looking for some information. There might be a delay in obtaining that information because the person might not understand what is required, or there are family circumstances and the HSE cancels the application, instead of holding it. The person concerned then has to re-apply, receive the documentation again and new forms and fill them in again. That is lunacy, bureaucracy gone mad and totally unfeeling. I have had to table parliamentary questions to try to get a medical card application held over while going through this ridiculous process, when the HSE already had the information, to obtain the ancillary information required. I knew of a case where the information was not provided because the people in charge of the medical card section had not even asked for it.

Another simple case will show how crazy the system is. Somebody who lives 60 miles to the west of Galway city came to see me in the past few days. The person concerned has to travel into the city for dialysis and seeks transport in and out. The sensible thing to do is to arrange the

outpatient appointment for the same day, but the taxi for dialysis patients leaves before outpatients are seen to. The people concerned have been told there is no financial support available. They cannot drive having been on dialysis. Their spouses cannot drive and they have to get by some miracle from Galway to the western tip of Connemara, Ballyconneely, at their own expense. Is that a humane system? That is common throughout the country and every Deputy can tell the Minister of State about such cases. The amount of money involved in these real hardship cases is very small. We need practicality, common sense and discretion to be brought back into the system.

Deputy Fiona O'Loughlin: I am very happy to see all-party consensus on this very important issue. I am glad to be a Member of an Oireachtas where all Members of the House are giving this issue such priority.

Domiciliary care allowance is defined as a monthly payment made by the Department of Social Protection to the carer of a child with a disability so severe that the child requires care and attention substantially in excess of another child of the same age to allow the child to deal with the activities of daily living. Surely this definition says it all. We are speaking about children with severe disabilities where a member of the family cannot go out to work because there is a requirement for the child to receive extra care and attention. It should be a given that all of our children are cherished equally and equitably, but that is not the case. Surely those who are most vulnerable and have been identified as such by virtue of being given this allowance should not have to engage in another battle for a medical card. At this point, 10,000 children are affected by that to which I refer.

It must be recognised that families with children who receive domiciliary care allowance are apprehensive about the future and the State support, something I am happy is being acknowledged today. Families have felt the effects of the economic downturn, with rising prices across household budgets, leading to increased fuel and food costs and rising transport and school costs, as well as the introduction of the household charge and USC, to name but a few. However, families who have children with disabilities are feeling the squeeze even more, with research showing that they are more likely to be living in poverty than other families. In addition, it has been estimated to cost three times as much to raise a child with a disability than to raise a child who has no health problems.

It is clear that any family entitled to domiciliary care allowance for a child should automatically be entitled to a medical card. It is now accepted that for all children early intervention in order to develop their potential is not only humane and compassionate, but has real economic benefits for society. This allowance is designed to enable those children with substantial disabilities for whom normal family care and mainstream services do not suffice to develop their potential and to experience, as closely as possible, the benefits of normal family life.

Children who should qualify for domiciliary care allowance, therefore, have disabilities or conditions that, given the services available to them at their age, location and family circumstances, require extraordinary parental input and additional expenditure if they are to develop as they should. Some children have a diagnosis or condition that will require costly and ongoing care into their adult years. They should receive this allowance without the unnecessary burden of having to undergo lengthy procedures to qualify for a medical card. Often, children have to have medical appointments and parents are advised to get additional medical reports. This should not be an extra burden, financially or otherwise. The long drawn-out process for approval of domiciliary care allowance has implications in assessing eligibility for carer's allow-

ance and the respite care grant. The parents of these children often face additional costs. The assessment process needs to be flexible in order to capture all areas of need. It should not just include a child's diagnosis. Rather, it should also consider the level of care and support needs as well as additional financial and emotional costs. The household income of a family should not be reduced because a child has been diagnosed with a disability. Domiciliary care allowance should help families to offset the financial and emotional costs relating to a disability.

Deputy Alan Kelly: I congratulate the Deputy on putting forward the motion. Everyone in the House is quite supportive of recognising the burden that so many families have had to undergo in terms of getting medical cards and the stress that has been caused to them by the process they have had to go through over a number of years. The fundamental underlying question in the motion is whether children with severe life-limiting disabilities or, unfortunately, in some cases terminal illnesses have the right to a medical card. The fundamental and unequivocal answer to that is "Yes".

I want to acknowledge the response of the Minister to the motion, the statement in the programme for Government and the clarification that has been given on extending the entitlement to medical cards for all children in receipt of domiciliary care allowance in the forthcoming budget. I acknowledge that 11,000 or so children will benefit from this initiative and it will certainly ease the minds of many parents and carers across Ireland who struggle to cope with the day-to-day costs of caring for a loved one with a disability.

I ask the Ministers present to clarify their intentions as regards the timeline for legislation. The House will, I presume, automatically pass any legislation. Therefore, there is no reason we not cannot pass it in advance so that we will not have to wait until later this year or early in the new year and payments can kick in as soon as possible once the budget has been passed. Legislation can include a timeline so that it automatically comes into force subsequent to the House passing the budget. That has been done before. The Minister might consider that. It is something that everyone in the House would probably welcome.

A number of issues have been raised. In the limited time available, I want to speak about them. Domiciliary care allowance is a vital resource for disabled children, their carers and their families. It is incredible that people in receipt of the allowance were not automatically entitled to medical cards without first undergoing a full household financial audit by way of the famous means test. I am glad the Minister spoke earlier about visiting a medical card unit. I am, like some other Deputies, a member of the Committee on the Future of Healthcare. It would be a good move for a number of us to visit such a unit, perhaps with a Minister, and discuss some of the issues that all of us in the House across the political spectrum face in terms of the onerous tolls on families engaged in the medical card applications process. In many cases, they have to repeatedly fill out forms. I do not blame the officials who are at dealing with the applications process. They work within the rules. Given the political process, we can pass on information to the medical card unit based on our direct experience and this could help the process.

Medical cards are a necessity for children who have disabilities as they allow parents to access publicly run health services free of charge. Their value is incredible to those families. I want to acknowledge the Our Children's Health campaign for the fantastic work it has done to highlight the difficulties in the medical card applications process. Everyone has learned a lot from the work it has done and the many horror stories it has highlighted in terms of the issues families face every day.

Greater flexibility must be shown in the provision of medical cards where there is an obvious long-term medical need on the part of the applicant. A strong ethical governance framework should direct all policy in this area. People should never have to live in fear of their medical cards being withdrawn as a result of a change in financial circumstances, particularly because those with disabilities understand that their circumstances will never change. The exclusive focus on financial hardship in the medical card application process is something that has to change. We must begin to move towards a system that takes a more compassionate and humanitarian approach to how we service the needs of those with severe disabilities. We discussed the Keane report, which examined whether eligibility for medical cards could be based on a list of certain conditions. We all know the outcome of that report. However, it is important that we continually assess the outcomes so that we can offer greater compassion and flexibility to ensure that people who need medical cards get them.

The motion also notes the Department of Social Protection's domiciliary care allowance assessment programme is an example of what a new, changed or tweaked medical card eligibility test could be based on. I concur that this process is much improved from the standard medical card application process as it prioritises the needs of disabled children first rather than the financial circumstances of their households.

We must remember that when we are allocating defined resources, in particular to those with disabilities, we are not just dealing with statistics. Rather, we are having a major impact on the lives of people who face significant obstacles which the rest of us would struggle to understand in our day-to-day lives. We must, therefore, be cognisant, first and foremost, of the needs of people with disabilities and how we can best provide for their additional requirements in a way which treats them as equal participants in society, rather than just faceless applicants in an overly bureaucratic process, which we are all collectively trying to change. The current medical card application system provides insufficient flexibility in particular for the needs of those with severe disabilities who face a financial means test. We in the Labour Party, and Members collectively across the House, would argue that the economic status of a household should never prevent children in need, in particular, from availing of services to which they should be entitled as a right.

It is with all that in mind that the Labour Party will support the motion. We are delighted that everyone in the House supports the motion and that the Government is accepting it. I note what the Minister said earlier but I stress to both Ministers of State who are present that this was a commitment in the programme for Government. We now have a motion that is supported by all parties and all Members in this House. It would be another welcome step in the right direction for the Minister to outline at the conclusion of the debate the timeline for putting the change in place and if it can be done in advance of the budget. That has been done previously with a post date to the budget timeframe so that once the budget is passed by this House - I hope the budget is passed by this House - that the measure will kick in straight away. That would be a very positive endeavour. The House would welcome it very much if the Minister could come back with such news.

Deputy Gino Kenny: I will probably need a quarter of the time available to me. As the saying goes, less is more. I welcome this Private Members' motion on the domiciliary care allowance and easier access to a medical card not based on financial circumstances, but on medical need. The hardship of an acute medical prognosis, which is then questioned and audited by unnecessary bureaucracy, leads to undue hardship.

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I welcome the Government's commitment to extend entitlement to a medical card to all children in receipt of the domiciliary care allowance in this year's budget. I hope the day will arrive when all health care, regardless of income, is universal. Perhaps one day medical cards will be a thing of the past. Public health and access to public health services should be based not on an audit of one's income, but on one's health requirements. When one's child or family member is very sick, one would do anything to make the pain go away. The added stress of having to justify and jump through legal hoops and bureaucracy to get something to which one's child is entitled does not have a place in a society that calls itself "civil". Begging and entitlement has no place in the health care system. Compassion and discretion do not have a price tag.

Deputy Thomas Pringle: I wish to share time with Deputy Joan Collins.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Is that agreed? Agreed.

Deputy Thomas Pringle: I fully support the motion. It is laudable that the Minister has accepted it. It is very welcome that he has because it makes perfect sense and there is no reason for any Government to reject it. Perhaps it is a sign of new politics because if this motion had come before the House prior to February of this year, it would have been rejected out of hand by the previous Government and it would have been voted down. The fact that 11,000 children will now automatically get a medical card is very welcome. It is a great relief to the families of those children who have a lot to contend with and many difficulties in their way. The State should not compound the difficulties such families have to deal with and it will be a great relief to them for their children to automatically get a medical card. In many cases the parents are not looking for a medical card for themselves but in order to have their child's needs looked after. Parents put their own lives on hold to ensure their child can have the best life possible and anything the State can do to facilitate that must be welcomed.

It is a pity we must wait for legislation, as Deputy Kelly outlined. The Primary Care Reimbursement Service, PCRS, could start to roll out the process now or the Government could bring legislation if it is necessary through the Houses as a matter of urgency given that it was a commitment in the programme for Government. I do not imagine the legislation would need to be complicated in order to bring about the desired result. Surely it could have been prepared and made ready in the ten weeks in which the Government has been in place.

The only problem I had with the motion was the proposal that the domiciliary care assessment would be used as a model for medical card assessment. I am pleased the Government has not accepted that aspect of the motion because it would have led to its own difficulties. In the previous Dáil, Private Members' motions were tabled about the assessment process for domiciliary care allowance and the difficulties parents had accessing that allowance in the first place.

When one has been around this House for a long time, one might become a bit cynical. I am afraid the domiciliary care application process might become more difficult in the future. I hope that is not the case but I fear that it might, given that getting it will in future automatically mean the family will be entitled to carer's allowance and a medical card. I hope that does not happen and that further motions on the issue are not tabled in the future on difficulties in getting the domiciliary care allowance itself.

Changes should be made to tweak the medical card application process and make it more responsive to people's needs. All Members have people come to see them in their constituency offices who are applying for a medical card. We know right well they will not pass the means

test, yet they have to go through the process even though they have medical conditions that would justify getting a medical card. They must go the entire way through the means assessment process and fail it in order to get to the point where their medical conditions are assessed. It would be a worthwhile change if the system allowed for the means test to be bypassed so that people could go straight to having their medical needs assessed.

Much of the discretion has been removed from the PCRS. In recent weeks, I am aware of a constituent who was refused a medical card because he was 19 cent over the limit on the means test assessment. In recent years if someone was up to €20 over the limit, he or she would have still been awarded a medical card. It is a disgrace that someone would be refused a medical card for the sake of being 19 cent over the limit. It might be a blip in the system but it happened and that should not continue.

Deputy Joan Collins: I am delighted to support the motion. I am very pleased the Minister has responded in a positive manner to this Private Members' motion. I welcome the fact that Sinn Féin opened up the motion for others to sign it. That is a reflection of the general support in this House, in particular from the Opposition in recent years, for progressing such issues. I fully support the parents who are in the Gallery tonight in their call on the Government to accept the motion and to put the necessary measures in place.

The situation in this regard is another example of the dysfunctional nature of the health service. Some day we will get a Government which will dismantle our unfair, unequal, two-tier health service and introduce free health care as a universal benefit for all, paid for by progressive taxation. I am a member of the Committee on the Future of Healthcare. I hope we will progress the issue of free health care in the committee.

It defies description that a child suffering from a serious illness or long-term congenital condition is not automatically entitled to free health care. It also defies description that a family caring for such a child must undergo a complex means test in order to obtain a discretionary medical card. The test is crude and outdated. The changes to the test in 2013 represented a cruel austerity cut. It meant that repayments on a home loan were no longer taken into account and a previous standard travel allowance of €50 a week could no longer be taken into account. That forced many parents to apply for discretionary medical cards, which put those families at the mercy of the State and allowed it to decide if undue hardship was placed on the family due to the illness or disability of a child. What a horribly bureaucratic term that is, undue hardship. It would not be out of place in a Victorian workhouse.

The Keane report recommended the development of a more compassionate medical card system to accommodate those with significant illnesses or disabilities. I am pleased that we are moving to that point. Given that the programme for Government gives a specific commitment to extend the entitlement to a medical card to children in receipt of domiciliary care allowance, it should accept and act on this motion.

10 o'clock

Again, when does the Minister think he can get that legislation through? Could it be worked on during the summer months and brought in quite quickly when we come back to the Dáil?

I want to raise one other point before I finish. An issue came up recently in my constituency office of a cancer patient who had the words "incurable cancer" as the description of her medical illness. The word "terminal" was not used because the consultant did not consider that

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it was an immediately terminal illness, although it was an incurable cancer, and the medical card was refused on that basis. It just shows that these are the issues that we must consider regarding medical cards. One should not have to write “terminal,” if an illness is not terminal but incurable, to get a medical card. That kind of broader look at the whole medical card system, as has been said by Deputy Pringle, should be considered as well.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: Deputy Danny Healy-Rae also wants to contribute, but if he does not come in, I will do the best I can. I am glad that this motion was tabled but I am even more pleased that the Government has accepted it. It is a sign of new politics. People may scoff and laugh at the new workings of the new Dáil, but this is practical proof, and it is not the first time in recent weeks that it has happened.

As someone who sat through all the talks on the formation of a government for so many days, I was delighted that the Minister of State, Deputy Finian McGrath, my namesake - I know he has just left - was appointed. He was very passionate at those talks about issues to the fore, especially in areas such as this. I congratulate him and Deputy Corcoran Kennedy on their promotions to Ministers of State at the Department of Health, as I know how passionately they both feel about health issues. The Minister of State, Deputy Corcoran Kennedy, will forgive me if I talk about Deputy McGrath, but he was present at the talks and lobbied very hard, and this issue was included in the programme for Government. Action on this issue cannot happen fast enough. Sinn Féin obviously feels this way, as we all do, but Rome was not built in a day, and tosach maith leath na hoibre.

There should not be any question about domiciliary care allowance once one goes through the arduous process to get the allowance for the sickest of children and in the most traumatic of cases. I am involved with a number of organisations, such as the Jack & Jill Children’s Foundation, Every Life Counts and One Day More. These are powerful, wonderful organisations that have done Trojan work and supported and given testimony to the reasons these special children must be nurtured, brought into the world and looked after. The State should not make it any more difficult or arduous for the families involved. The cruel terminologies must be removed from the discourse and the granting of the allowance should be automatic. I know a former Minister at some stage agreed something similar in a motion similar to this one. It is very important.

The fact that 11,000 special children, as I like to call them - very special children - will automatically receive this allowance is a good step, one that we should not have to boast about or fight for, but one that we should celebrate in 2016, the 100th anniversary of 1916. Something should be readily available to these children. I believe it will come, and it will work to the advantage of the families.

We must make a separation here, get a different ideological outlook and set the medical card apart from the domiciliary care allowance. Assessments of eligibility for medical cards are based on family income. A sick and special child should not be depending on this. There are extra burdens on such families. They love caring for their children and they step up to the plate, but the assessment should not be done in this way. The assessment should be based on the needs of the sick children who need those special medications and supports to live as best a life as they can with the disability they have, whether life-limiting or not and whether terminal or not. If a person becomes unemployed, he or she gets a medical card, and rightly so, for the whole family, but when a sick child needs a medical card, it should not be assessed based on the needs or the income of the parents, the household income or anything to do with the rest of

the family. We must have clarity on that area and work and strive towards such an approach.

There is also the issue of the terminology used and the questions asked about reviews and medical cards. We have heard such issues recounted here. We heard of a case not so long ago in which the parents of a child with Down's syndrome were asked if her condition had improved. There is no room for such language to be used by officials in the medical card section of the HSE. They should understand that it is very hurtful, very silly and downright contemptuous of the people involved. As I said, for people with medical cards, cancer patients, the sickest of people trying to access the system, it is too onerous and arduous. I certainly hope that when these 11,000 people automatically get medical cards, they will not make the domiciliary care allowance any more difficult for the children who need it.

I salute the work of the Jack and Jill Children's Foundation, especially Jonathan Irwin, its CEO, for what it does for sick children and the continuous work its nurses provide and the hours they give.

As I said, I wish the two Ministers of State very well in their promotions and look forward to working with them on many other issues across the floor. I hope that issues will be taken and dealt with. Sensible motions were not tabled heretofore, during the terms of past Governments, but they are being tabled now because of the new situation here, and it is a welcome development.

Deputy Danny Healy-Rae: Each and every one of us knows that health is paramount to families, especially to parents who have children. Unfortunately, however, some parents have a heavy cost to bear and unfair burdens when their children become ill and may be ill for many months or many years. Maybe some of them will never get back to full health. When they look for domiciliary care allowance, to which they are entitled, I feel they have to wait much too long. I have had a case in recent times that has been going on for months now - since April - and we are told that maybe we will have an answer by the end of August. To give Deputies a small bit of an insight into the background of the case, it concerns a child who is about seven years old, one of a family of five, whose bowel and colon were removed. She has a bag and may have it until she becomes an adult, although hopefully it will be removed then and replaced with a more acceptable system for keeping her alive. In the meantime, however, the family applied for domiciliary care allowance last April and will be waiting at least until the end of August. I feel, as I suppose do all Members here and county councillors around the country, that a six-month wait is not good enough.

It must be about staff. I do not think any staff in any Department would hoard an application like this, but there are not enough staff to vet these cases. It is the same with the carer's allowance. I know Deputy Mattie McGrath and others have made the case about the medical card but I am glad of this opportunity to highlight the need to speed up domiciliary care allowances for children. A sick child is a serious burden to carry for parents and in the case I have mentioned it may be for the rest of her life. I ask the Government to do something and to staff these places to ensure that a speedier outcome is available to those parents who apply for domiciliary care allowance.

Deputy John Brady: First, I welcome members of Our Children's Health to the Visitors Gallery. They are very welcome, but to me it defies logic that any parent should have to go out and mobilise and organise a campaign group or sit in a public gallery at 10.10 p.m. on a Tuesday evening in the hope that their national legislators will do the right thing. Members of

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this group represent so many families right across the State looking in here this evening, but there is no legitimate reason for any Deputy in this Chamber to vote against giving a child who is sick a full medical card. I have heard a number of announcements on this but there has been no action to implement it. In the most recent announcement, coming last week on foot of Sinn Féin tabling this motion, the Minister, Deputy Harris, said it would be implemented next year. However, next year is simply not good enough for many families, including children. These sick children need medical cards now, not next year. There are no excuses whatsoever. Sinn Féin has brought forward legislation which is in place, prepared and ready to go. Its implementation is all that is needed now. Unfortunately, the Minister, Deputy Harris, failed to give us a date when that legislation could be in place.

I do not agree with the Labour Party too often, but I agree with Deputy Alan Kelly that there is no reason that legislation cannot be put through now. I ask the Ministers of State present to provide us with a date when this legislation can be put through. The Government can rush through legislation when it suits it, be it the financial emergency legislation, property tax, water charges or a law to tackle head-shops. It has been done. If providing sick children with a medical card was a priority it could be done, too.

This is about political priorities and choices. The cost of doing this is a mere €9 million, which pales in comparison to the €14 million spent on ministerial transport costs from 2011 to 2014, or the €700 million spent on Irish Water. It comes down to political choices. Seriously ill children should never be left waiting for medical cards. Parents have to fight the system to get a medical card for their sick children, to which they are rightly entitled. This puts unnecessary pressures on parents. Those with disabilities have suffered hugely under the Government's austerity agenda - scrapping the mobility allowance, halving housing adaptation grants, cutting disability allowance and increasing prescription charges. The list goes on and on.

Not only is there a fight for medical cards in the first place but there is also a fight to get a medical card back when it has been taken from a child. In 2014, the Coyle family from my own constituency of Wicklow, had to go on national television to state their case before any notice was taken of their actual situation. Their child, Alexander, was the first person in Ireland to be diagnosed with Mowat Wilson syndrome, a profound intellectual and physical disability which brings life-threatening problems and seizures. Expenses include syringes and medication, nappies and other equipment, the cost of which exceeds €1,100 per month. Yet his medical card was taken away from him. At the time, Alexander's mother told how she had been forced to sterilise and re-use syringes which were meant for one use only.

This is not news to the Minister for Health, Deputy Harris, who has left the Chamber. He comes from the same constituency as Alexander. Yet, the Minister has no problem in telling us that we will have to wait for the implementation of this legislation. The Coyle family's position is replicated for so many families across the State who find themselves in similar situations. This Government is so far removed from the realities faced by so many families and the fact that we have to push for something such as this, proves it. Parents should not have to go on television to get a medical card for their sick child, nor should they have to battle with the system to get one when it is so desperately needed.

If we are all in agreement that sick children are entitled to a medical card, then we should see emergency legislation go through the Oireachtas now. It has been done before and it can be done again. It is a political choice.

This motion provides an opportunity for Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael to give something back to the cohort of people they have taken so much from. I hope this opportunity will not be not wasted.

Deputy Kathleen Funchion: Go raibh maith agat, a Leas-Cheann Comhairle. Comhghairdeas in your new role.

One of the key issues in my constituency of Carlow-Kilkenny is that of the domiciliary care allowance, DCA. Parents struggle to apply for and obtain the allowance, while there is the added pressure of not automatically getting a medical card.

I commend the work of parents who fight daily for their children and, in particular, a group called the DCA warriors who do fantastic work. They are an extraordinary group of people who fight tirelessly for parents in need of State support for children with severe illness or disabilities. However, the fact that this group is in existence, and is so heavily relied upon, is shameful.

Adding extra pressure on parents to wade through streams of paper and bureaucracy in order to prove their child or children's challenge or disability is inhumane and wrong. We should be creating a society that puts children and their needs first - a society that protects those children most in need. By supporting this Bill the Government would be sending a message that those children are a priority.

The messy delays that exist at the moment are playing havoc with children's lives. Unnecessary delays are an abuse of those children's rights to equal treatment in health and development. At the very least a medical card should come as an immediate right if one qualifies for the domiciliary care allowance. Immediately extending the medical card to children in receipt of the domiciliary care allowance would ensure that critically ill children who need urgent medical treatment, would get it.

In this centenary year, the words of our Proclamation are being repeatedly echoed across the country. Children have been learning about the meaning of those words in our schools as part of our centenary celebrations. The Proclamation "declares its resolve to pursue the happiness and prosperity of the whole nation and of all its parts, cherishing all the children of the nation equally." This is not the reality for so many children affected by the unjust system currently in place, however.

We need urgently to introduce and implement a schedule for the extension of full medical cards to people with serious illness and disabilities, without a means test and immune from changes to household finances.

I welcome the fact the Minister has said he is supportive of this legislation, but we need to see a timeframe and a date for rolling it out. Actions speak louder than words and if the Government is serious about this issue it is important not to pay lip service to it but to provide a timeframe for its implementation. It is the least that these parents and children deserve. It is difficult enough for families faced with a situation whereby their child or children might have a serious illness or disability, but it is humiliating for them to go into detail when completing the domiciliary care allowance application forms. In addition, they must go through the process again when applying for medical cards.

In this day and age, we should put a stop to that process. We need to see a date from the Minister also. While I appreciate his comment that this legislation is welcome, we do need to

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learn when such a Bill will be passed. I hope the Ministers of State will comment on that in their concluding remarks.

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Marcella Corcoran Kennedy):

I welcome this opportunity to address the House on the Government's commitment to extend medical card provision to all children in receipt of the domiciliary care allowance, DCA, as we set out in our agreed programme for a partnership Government.

I have listened carefully to the contributions of Deputies from all the various groupings. It is clear that the cross-party agreement that we have heard this evening shows that no individual or party has a monopoly on caring about the people of this country, and especially the young people and their families we are discussing here this evening.

Like many of my fellow public representatives, I have been struck by the practical challenges that parents face in meeting the needs of their children with a severe disability. Over the years, I have engaged closely with constituents, neighbours, with the Irish Wheelchair Association in my own county, the Carers' Association, and Laois-Offaly Families for Autism. I am well aware of the difficulties and challenges that parents are experiencing.

I also want to welcome Our Children's help group who have joined us in the Visitors Gallery. As outlined earlier by the Minister for Health, there are good reasons for this Government commitment. Approximately one third of children in receipt of the domiciliary care allowance do not hold a medical card. Therefore, approximately 11,000 more children with a severe disability would qualify for a medical card under this new scheme. In addition, all 33,000 children in receipt of the allowance would not in future be subject to the medical card means test and approximately 30,000 families looking after a child with a severe disability would no longer be required to go through the medical card assessment process, leaving mothers and fathers to focus on doing what they do best and what they want to do, which is to provide care and support for their child.

I am convinced that the recently established committee on the future of health care, of which many Deputies here this evening are members, and which acknowledges my own specific remit of maintaining health and wellbeing, can be of great benefit to the future development of our health system. A single long-term vision for health care in Ireland, built on a cross-party or social consensus, can help to drive reform and the system over the next ten years.

I recognise that as a result of a range of improvements to the medical card scheme implemented by the HSE over the past two years it is now exercising greater discretion. This reflects how the economy has improved and that there is now funding available to ensure that people are looked after the way we all them looked after. The number of discretionary medical cards has more than doubled. There are now over 106,000 discretionary medical cards, which is the highest number of discretionary medical cards on record.

I acknowledge the difficulties that some of our citizens are experiencing including, as outlined by some Deputies earlier, discretionary medical cards being refused on the basis of a person's income exceeding the threshold by 19 cent; on the basis of whether a cancer patient is terminal or incurable; and interminable reviews in respect of applications by the elderly. These are all issues that I have come across. I know how frustrating this is for people. I will refer these matters to the HSE for consideration. In regard to the issue raised by Deputy Scanlon, I cannot understand why a decision would be made to rent equipment if it is cheaper to buy

it. These are all questions that the HSE will need to answer. I know that they will be taken on board and given careful consideration. A visit by the health committee to the unit which considers medical card applications would be worthwhile.

Deputies will be aware that on foot of the Keane report, the HSE established the clinical advisory group on medical card eligibility. The objective of this group is to develop a framework for assessment and measurement of the burden of disease and appropriate operational guidelines for the medical card scheme. Membership of the group includes clinical experts from specialist services and professions, as well as patient representatives. The group is expected to complete its work and report on it in the future to the director general of the HSE.

I welcome this opportunity for Deputies to discuss this important issue that affects so many families in the country. The Government has given a clear commitment in its programme to provide medical cards to all children that qualify for the domiciliary care allowance. I am convinced that this will be a priority in the upcoming budget discussions. When the funding is in place we will aim to have the enabling legislation enacted as quickly as possible. I hope that this will reassure Deputies of the commitment of the Minister for Health, Deputy Harris, and all Ministers and the Government to deliver this scheme to the recipients of the domiciliary care allowance.

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Finian McGrath): I welcome this opportunity to address the House today on the Government's commitment to extend medical cards to all children in receipt of the domiciliary care allowance, as outlined in our agreed programme for a partnership Government. I welcome most of the comments made tonight during this debate, some of which I will deal with later in my contribution.

This is a very important issue that affects many thousands of families throughout our country. Deputies may be aware that the domiciliary care allowance, DCA, is a monthly payment for a child with a severe disability aged under 16 years who requires ongoing care and attention substantially over and above the care and attention usually required by a child of the same age. It is administered by the Department of Social Protection in accordance with the social welfare legislation. As a parent of a daughter with an intellectual disability, I spent many years campaigning for disability rights and the domiciliary care allowance. Now, it is in the programme. That is action. I also spent many years campaigning for the restoration of the respite care grant. That was restored four weeks ago. That is action. It is important that people, when making comments, know what is going on and the difference between action and inaction. This commitment is stitched into the programme for Government.

It is important to note that the DCA is not based on disability or the medical need of a child. Under the social welfare legislation it is based on the how much additional care and attention a child needs because of a disability. There are a range of qualifying criteria in respect of eligibility for the domiciliary care allowance. These include the disability being likely to last for at least one year, that the parent is providing the care to the child, that the child resides at home and on the child meeting the medical criteria of the scheme. It is estimated that approximately 33,000 children currently qualify for the domiciliary care allowance. By comparison, approximately 390,000 children under the age of 16 years currently qualify for the medical card. I agree that when moving towards a universal health service we need to set priorities. Children that are sick and children with disabilities, and not children that are healthy, are my priority. By contrast, the medical card scheme, which is administered by the HSE in accordance with the Health Act 1970, as amended, is primarily a means based scheme. Under health legislation,

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medical cards are provided to persons who, in the opinion of the HSE, are unable without undue hardship to arrange GP services for themselves and their dependants. The legislation also requires the HSE to have regard to the overall financial situation of the family.

I listened to many of the comments from my colleagues in regard to the urgent need to deal with the reform of medical card system. In the assessment process, the HSE can take into account medical costs incurred by an individual a family. Where deemed appropriate, in particular circumstances, it can exercise discretion and grant a medical card even though an applicant's means exceed the relevant threshold. As a result of a range of improvements implemented by the HSE since mid-2014, the HSE is exercising greater discretion. Since then, the number of discretionary medical cards has doubled. There are now over 107,000 discretionary cards, which is the highest number of discretionary cards on record.

I share the hope of the Minister for Health that we will be able to get cross-party support for this measure. I also recognise that there are enormous demands and cost pressures on our health service. Health care continues to rise to meet the needs of our growing and ageing population, as well as the increasing incidence of chronic conditions and medical technologies and treatments.

We have secured a substantial increase in funding for the health services for 2016 but I do not underestimate the challenges involved in the delivery of a safe and efficient health service for our citizens. I welcome the attendance in the Visitors Gallery tonight of Our Children's Health group, which I have always supported and will continue to support. I am pleased that the House has discussed this important issue this evening. I am determined to prioritise this commitment as part of the upcoming discussions and to see it implemented as soon as possible after we have secured the required resources. The discussions on the Estimates will continue over the summer months.

Deputy Louise O'Reilly: I thank all Teachtaí Dála who took part in this important debate. It is important not just for us to state here that this issue is a priority, but that people outside know it is a priority for us.

We welcome that there is broad cross-party support for the motion. However, we must be cognisant of the fact that the Minister of State, Deputy Finian McGrath, has just uttered words that will strike fear into the hearts of those who have been battling in this area. I am sure that was not his intention.

These children and their families need a date. They need to know that it will not be subject to the budgetary process and that the legislation is on its way. We have the legislation. I would not claim to be a master draughtsperson but it is very simple legislation. We have it and are more than willing to provide it. I raised this issue with the Taoiseach on the Order of Business on 31 May and his response was that legislation was not needed. It is great that the Government is acknowledging that legislation is needed and I am telling it that we have the legislation. As Deputy Kelly pointed out, it is possible to set the wheels in motion, put a date in place and ensure that we can give those families certainty so we are pressing the Ministers of State to give us a date and not to say that it will be subject to the budgetary process, the outcome of another review or a further delay because these families have been let down many times. The Minister of State, Deputy Finian McGrath, knows this because he knows children's health campaigners well. They have had many false dawns and they do not need another one. If there is cross-party support in this House, it is very simple. The legislation will sail through. The legislation

is ready and enjoys cross-party support. I know we are about to rise for the recess but it is still possible for work to be done on this legislation even though we are not here. We know this and we know it can be done.

The misuse of drugs legislation will finish its passage through the House this week and will go to Áras an Uachtaráin to be signed by the President. That legislation was a priority. It was something that An Garda Síochána looked for. While we had some misgivings about it, we supported it and there was broad support in the House for it. It is on its way to Áras an Uachtaráin this week to be signed by the President. An Garda Síochána knows that if it asks for something, the Minister delivers and that is good but the Minister for Health and the Ministers of State who are here need to deliver for the families of children with severe and life-limiting conditions. It is very simple.

The Government has given the commitment, which is very welcome. It is supporting our motion and that is very welcome. The cross-party support for our motion is very welcome but the Ministers of State know that what we need is a date and some certainty. I know some families are following this debate. If they are on a discretionary medical card, they go to bed every night terrified that this medical card will be taken off them so we are going to press the Ministers of State for a date. We are going to press them to put some definable goals in place and to give certainty to those families who will go to sleep worried. We are going to press them because cases like that of baby Réiltín should not happen - not in a civilised society. I hope that because I have raised the case of baby Réiltín on the floor of the House that it might herald some action for this individual case but we cannot do that every time we have an issue like this. This is why the legislation and the certainty are needed. I have met these families, as have the Ministers of State. We know these people. They are people in our communities who come to us for help and are dealt with on an individual basis. That is not right. At a time in their lives when they least need to battle the system, it is an endless round of form filling, appeals and denials of application. That is not right. We know it is not right. There is cross-party support for our motion because we all know it is not right. We are going to press the Minister and Ministers of State to give us a date by which these families can know. It is not good enough in case anyone thinks it is to come in here and tell us that it will be subject to the budgetary process because these people have been subject to enough already.

Question put and agreed to.

The Dáil adjourned at 10.35 p.m. until 10 a.m. on Wednesday, 20 July 2016.