



DÍOSPÓIREACHTAÍ PARLAIMINTE  
PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

**DÁIL ÉIREANN**

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

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## DÁIL ÉIREANN

*Dé Máirt, 17 Deireadh Fómhair 2017*

*Tuesday, 17 October 2017*

Chuaigh an Leas-Cheann Comhairle i gceannas ar 2 p.m.

*Paidir.*

*Prayer.*

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### Leaders' Questions

**Deputy Micheál Martin:** As the country is recovering from and absorbing the impact of Storm Ophelia, I take the opportunity to offer my sympathy to the families of those who lost their lives - Clare O'Neill from Waterford, a cancer nurse, who was driving her mother home; Michael Pyke from Cahir who was attempting to clear the road for his neighbours, and Fintan Goss who was on his way home to his family - all of whom lost their lives so tragically. Their deaths illustrate the serious nature of the devastating storm and the importance of the work of first responders and the national emergency co-ordination group, chaired by Mr. Sean Hogan. I pay tribute to them and Mr. Hogan who calmly and diligently, with all those involved, worked to protect the people and minimise the damage, above all, to them and, secondly, to property. First responders deserve great credit - members of An Garda Síochána, fire service personnel, members of the Army and Civil Defence, as well as the ESB and, particularly, local authorities, local councils, which co-ordinated the emergency efforts at county and local level, again to minimise loss of life and damage. The national broadcaster, RTÉ, with TV3, local radio stations and the media, played a very important public service role in disseminating information to the public at large. Above all, Met Éireann played a very important role. It nailed it in its forecasting in advance of the storm and its work throughout to keep people briefed. If any organisation deserves substantial resources from here on, it is Met Éireann. I put it to the Taoiseach that this needs to happen.

In the light of this, I ask the Taoiseach to ensure a comprehensive evaluation of our preparations for and response to Storm Ophelia will take place. That is important when an event of this magnitude occurs. We know that ESB crews are out bravely restoring power to people's homes. Water supplies and so on are also being restored. I also ask that a national audit be undertaken by the local authorities. Will the Taoiseach initiate such an audit in the context of providing ring-fenced funding to deal with damaged and dangerous trees? Many communities and pensioners will not be in a position to fund the cutting down of dangerous trees, of which there will be many around the country because of the impact of the storm. It would be useful to undertake a comprehensive audit of the response and ring-fence funding, in addition to ordinary local authority funds, to undertake that comprehensive work.

Yesterday's storm is a reminder that the Atlantic is warming and that the frequency and intensity of storms such as this will increase. I do not wish to be political in the context of the national effort which was made, but Ireland is not meeting its climate change targets and we must step up our efforts significantly to respond to them.

Is the Taoiseach interested in working with other parties in this House to review legislation to make it an offence to disobey safety warnings during a major weather event such as this? There was a lot of anger yesterday that the lives of first responders had been put at risk by needless activity. It is important that, as the Legislature, this House shows cause by protecting first responders and creating a far greater awareness of the dangers inherent in such reckless activity.

**The Taoiseach:** It is always possible to learn lessons and strengthen future responses in the case of a national emergency. Today the Cabinet decided that it would undertake a full evaluation of our response once the clean-up was complete and power and water had been restored to everyone in the country. It will take place prior to the next meeting of the Office of Emergency Planning in November.

I very much agree with the Deputy's sentiments about people disobeying safety warnings. Not only did those who disobeyed safety warnings put themselves at risk, but they also risked the lives of members of the emergency services. There were two incidents yesterday which almost cost the lives of members of the emergency services and we were close to many more fatalities than were suffered yesterday. It was the worst storm to hit Ireland in 50 years or more. It was the first time there was a national alert which was declared on Sunday, 15 October at 1 p.m. As the Deputy noted, the storm did take three lives, those of Clare O'Neill, Fintan Goss and Michael Pyke. Everyone in the House offers his or her condolences to their families, friends, communities and all those grieving today.

What I witnessed on Sunday and yesterday was public service at its very best. We can all be very proud of the public service today. The national emergency co-ordination centre and the national emergency co-ordination group worked very well. I extend my particular thanks to the staff who all continue to work from Kildare Street today, the emergency services, local authority staff, the staff of Departments, Met Éireann, the transport companies, health service staff who worked extra shifts and often covered shifts for others who were unable to get to work, the Defence Forces, volunteers, including those in Civil Defence and many others. Decisions were made swiftly and communicated well. As a result the loss of life and limb was minimised. Today the clean-up is under way; roads are being made passable, while homes and businesses without power are being reconnected. Some 170,000 homes and businesses have been reconnected since 3 p.m. yesterday. There are 6,700 staff and contractors on the ground assisting in the clean-up and making repairs.

This morning's Cabinet meeting discussed routine business and also Storm Ophelia. The Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government, Deputy Eoghan Murphy, updated the Cabinet on this morning's meeting of the national emergency co-ordination group which he had attended on the Government's behalf. We have informed local authorities that they will receive additional resources to enable them to continue with the clean-up and that the provision of additional resources needed for road and infrastructure repairs will be considered in the normal way once they have been assessed and costed. The Defence Forces remain available to assist and aid the civil power on request.

Some 515,000 homes and businesses remain without power. By tomorrow morning all

will have an indicative date for reconnection. Most will be reconnected within three to four days, but in some cases it may take up to ten days. Extra crews are coming here from Britain, Northern Ireland and France. I ask people to bear in mind that it is highly specialised work which cannot be done by anyone, only by trained staff and we must always ensure their health and safety.

Schools will reopen tomorrow when school buses will run as normal. The national emergency co-ordination group will continue to meet. When it comes to water supplies there are about 80,000 homes without water, but tankers are being deployed as necessary in areas where water is not available.

**Deputy Micheál Martin:** I thank the Taoiseach for his reply, and I welcome the fact a comprehensive evaluation of the preparations and reaction to storm Ophelia will take place to inform future practice and future behaviour in what will become a pattern over the next number of years in terms of the frequency and intensity of such storms. I referenced a specific project in terms of eliminating dangerous trees. It is an important issue as traditionally there can be a patchy response and some councils are better than others. Some households are not in a position to respond and an opportunity could be taken now to do a once-off national audit and assessment and intervention on the specific issue.

There is a good article this morning by Harry McGee in *The Irish Times* on the draft national adaptation plan and the need for the State to step up its investment in adaptation to prepare for such storms and their impact. This will need investment. When will the plan be finalised? It is important in the budgetary and Estimates context that not only is it published but that work is undertaken on delivering it. It is important in terms of preparation for future storms.

We are on target to miss our targets, if the House will excuse the pun, by 2020. This does not reflect well on us as a country. If anything, this storm, notwithstanding many sceptics, some in this House and elsewhere, shows there is an issue we cannot shirk any longer as a nation.

**The Taoiseach:** With regard to the dangerous trees, it is a very valid point and I will certainly ask the Minister, Deputy Eoghan Murphy, to engage with the County and City Management Association to see whether there is merit in a special programme to assess and remove some of the trees that may pose a danger to the public in future. The national mitigation plan on climate change was published-----

**Deputy Micheál Martin:** The adaptation plan.

**The Taoiseach:** I do not have a date for the publication of the adaptation plan, but the mitigation plan was published a month or two ago after a special meeting in Celbridge. In terms of our response to climate change, Deputies will be aware of the budget announcements yesterday, which included provision for special incentives to encourage more people to use electric vehicles, additional funding for cycling infrastructure throughout the State, funding for the Minister, Deputy Naughten, to bring in the renewable heating initiative to move towards renewable heat, and, by the end of the year, he will bring in price supports for other forms of renewable energy so we can increase the amount. The ten year capital plan will, of course, have to take into account the need to adapt to climate change, for example, electrification of some of our railways and other such investments and further investment in flood defences and other such adaptations, recognising the fact that while we cannot put any one storm down to climate change it is a scientific fact that we will see more storms and more severe weather events in the years ahead so

we need to prepare for them.

**Deputy Mary Lou McDonald:** I join with the Taoiseach and all of the House in our expressions of sympathy to and solidarity with the families and loved ones of Clare O'Neill, Michael Pyke and Fintan Goss. I also recognise the enormous efforts of our emergency services, our first responders, those organisations that deal with the homeless, ESB crews, public transport teams, people working in the health services and everybody who pulled together in the course of this weather event to keep us all safe. I also acknowledge communities the length and breadth of the land which will never lose their capacity to care about their neighbours and to keep an eye where necessary.

I want to return to the issue of the unfair changes that were made to the eligibility for the State pension. The changes were made and the consequences were known at the time to the Government. It was well understood that they would have a disproportionate impact on women. Tens of thousands of women in the State are now affected and they are prevented from receiving their full entitlements. Many are losing out to the tune of €30 per week.

The National Women's Council, Age Action Ireland and the ICA have all called for a reversal of these changes. Indeed, the Taoiseach's own Minister for Finance described the situation as "bonkers and unbelievable" but it seems it was not bonkers enough to be addressed in his recent budget. In our budget, Sinn Féin did provide for this reversal. It would cost the Exchequer €70 million but the Government chose to ignore this proposal. Both Fine Gael and Fianna Fáil voted against a Sinn Féin motion in the Dáil last December that called for the 2012 changes to be reversed and for a remedy to be implemented. The Taoiseach, therefore, has had two significant opportunities in the past ten months to demonstrate he is on the side of these women, and he has reneged on both, leaving the women high and dry.

It seems that something happened at the weekend for the Soldiers of Destiny - not an epiphany or genuine realisation that they were wrong on this matter. Put simply, what happened was that the issue hit the headlines. Along came the Fianna Fáil Ard-Fheis and, lo and behold, despite passing on every opportunity to right the wrong, Fianna Fáil announced a change in its position.

**Deputy Timmy Dooley:** Something the Deputy never did.

**Deputy Mary Lou McDonald:** It has now tabled a Dáil motion, which I welcome and which sets out to achieve the very thing it opposed last December.

**Deputy Michael McGrath:** Not true.

**Deputy Mary Lou McDonald:** Therefore, there is more brass on the necks of the Fianna Fáil leadership than one would expect in a marching band. Can we welcome Fianna Fáil to the corner of these women, no matter how late, cynical or self-serving its arrival might be? Here is the rub: the Taoiseach will lose the vote on the motion tomorrow night as I believe the Dáil will vote in support of the women. Given this reality, my questions are straightforward. Can the Taoiseach enlighten us as to when Fianna Fáil raised this issue with him in the course of the budget negotiations? Can he tell us when the 2012 changes will be finally overturned, and if their reversal will be accommodated in the social welfare Bill?

**The Taoiseach:** This is a very complicated area. It is an area that took me quite some time to understand when I was Minister for Social Protection.

**Deputy John Brady:** Women understand it, though.

**The Taoiseach:** Based on a lot of the commentary I have heard and even some opinion pieces I saw in the newspapers yesterday, I believe it is not fully understood by many of those who write about it or comment on it.

With regard to the comments of the Minister for Finance, Deputy Paschal Donohoe, it is very important to say his term “bonkers and unbelievable” referred to the existence of the marriage bar, which has not existed since 1973 but which was certainly a bonkers and unbelievable rule. It existed not in law but in many employments before that year. People who understand the pensions system will know that any public servant hired before 1995 pays PRSI at a lower rate, the 0.9% rate, and that rate does not entitle any public servant hired before 1995 to the State contributory pension, whether married or single, male or female, marriage-barred or not. It is important, therefore, not to confuse the 2012 change with the marriage bar because they are quite separate issues.

With regard to the changes of 2012, they did not just affect women, they affected men as well. Depending on whose estimates one accepts, the difference is about 60:40. Therefore, women were disproportionately affected. It did affect men as well as women, however, and it is important not to ignore all those men who did not deserve a mention in the Deputy’s question. They were also affected by the change.

It is important to bear in mind that going back to the pre-2012 system is not necessarily fair either because it also had anomalies built into it. The most obvious of these was that somebody who paid 20 contributions, on average, got a 98% pension whereas somebody who paid 48 contributions, on average, got a 100% pension. Therefore, somebody who paid more than twice as many contributions got only 2% more in her or his pension. If a change is to be made to these rules, it should not be made in isolation because all one would do is throw up new anomalies and injustices. As a Government, we do accept there are anomalies in the system, the averaging one being the most obvious in that regard. Again, it is separate from the 2012 issue.

The Government believes any changes need to be carefully considered. They should not be done in isolation but comprehensively so as not to create new injustices or new anomalies. We should understand the full costs. We should answer the question of retrospectivity and whether it would apply to people who are already retired or just to people who are retiring now. We would need to understand who may gain and who may lose out from any change in the rules. Sometimes changing the rules can cause people to lose out as well as gain. We would need to profile the individual loss and we would also have to look at the impact on poverty. We should bear in mind that pensioner poverty among men in Ireland is higher than it is among women, which is something that often goes unreported.

A lot of work has been done in this regard by the Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection. The first part was the publication of an actuarial review of the Social Insurance Fund because any money that is paid out from the State pension, contributory, has to be paid in from the fund so one would have to work out how additional money would be raised for that fund. The actuarial review is completed and will be published quite soon. The Minister, Deputy Regina Doherty, will soon publish a detailed document on the total contributions approach for public consultation. It is the new approach we want to move to, whereby everyone’s contribution is counted and it does not matter when one makes them; what counts is the total number one makes throughout one’s working career. That would also provide a generous dis-

regard for those who took time out to look after children or disabled people in their home. The response should be comprehensive, not piecemeal.

**Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett:** The Taoiseach did not answer the question.

**Deputy Mary Lou McDonald:** I fully accept that pensioner poverty is an issue that affects men as well as women, but it is also a fact that the changes made in 2012 disproportionately affect women. That is why it is an issue of such concern for organisations such as the Irish Countrywomen's Association. As complex as pensions are and the rules and regulations concerning them, it is not complicated to understand that a change was made in 2012 which is costing thousands of people, disproportionately women, up to €30 a week. Those people, and those women, have campaigned long and hard and I imagine have lobbied every Member of the Dáil on this issue, and they tell me they have received assurances from every party in the Dáil that the 2012 changes will be reversed. I do not pretend for a moment that that is the beginning and end of pension reform. Clearly, it is not, but I am saying directly to the Taoiseach that those women and men who are affected adversely by the changes now need to have their full entitlements re-established.

Could I repeat my questions? The Taoiseach might actually answer them this time around. When did Fianna Fáil raise this issue with him? Did it form part of his pre-budget discussion? I imagine a simple "Yes" or "No" would suffice. I believe the Government will lose the vote tomorrow evening. In the event of losing the argument, and losing the day, will the reversal of the 2012 rules appear in the social welfare Bill?

**The Taoiseach:** It was not raised with me by Fianna Fáil or by Sinn Féin or by any other party in fact.

**Deputy John Brady:** I beg your pardon. It was raised by us in our pre-budget submission.

**Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett:** That is absolutely not true.

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** The Taoiseach should be allowed to speak without interruption.

**The Taoiseach:** The question I was asked was whether in the run up to the pre-budget discussions, Fianna Fáil raised the issue with me. Fianna Fáil did not. Did any other party? No, they did not. They might have done a year or two years ago but that is a different question.

**Deputy John Brady:** The Taoiseach is misleading the House.

**Deputy Mary Lou McDonald:** I thought the Taoiseach read our pre-budget submission.

**The Taoiseach:** That is not to say the matter was not raised in other discussions, perhaps with the Minister, Deputy Donohoe, but I was not at other discussions. As a Government we absolutely accept that there is a need to review this whole area, to examine anomalies and to come up with changes but those changes should not be made in isolation. If we are going to introduce pension reform we should do it comprehensively and properly.

However, there is one area where I disagree with a number of the NGOs and people campaigning in this space. I have read some of what they have said, which is that they want to move away from the contributory principle altogether. I disagree with that. I respect that other people may have a view. The National Women's Council took the view in an article written

yesterday that contributions should not matter and that there should just be a pension and everybody should get the same. I do not agree with that because that would mean saying to people, men and women alike, who paid PRSI for 20, 30 or 40 years that that now counts for nothing. It would say to people who now pay PRSI that that would count for nothing.

**Deputy Mary Lou McDonald:** That is a separate issue.

**The Taoiseach:** If Sinn Féin shares the view of these NGOs and campaign groups that we should get rid of contributory pensions and the contributory principle and tell men and women alike to pay PRSI all their lives but that it should count for nothing, then Sinn Féin should tell the people that that is the party's policy.

**Deputy Brendan Howlin:** I would like to convey my condolences and the condolences of all my colleagues in the Labour Party to the families of Clare O'Neill, Michael Pyke and Fintan Goss. When *Met Éireann* warned of a risk to life, we all hoped that it might not prove to be the case. Unfortunately, it clearly was. The three families most involved have our sympathy and condolences and those of everyone in the House and throughout the country.

In the past 48 hours we have been served incredibly well by a wide range of public services. *Met Éireann* and the Office of Emergency Planning made sure that we were warned in a timely fashion of the imminent danger. The call to issue a red alert for the entire country must have been a difficult one to make but it was the right one. The calls by the Minister for Education and Skills and the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs to close all schools and crèches were also the right decisions. The decision to stay closed for a second day was the right one as well. It allowed school leaders to assess any damage or risk to children before they actually arrive at their school buildings. I hope the Minister for Education and Skills will also make a sensible call not to require schools to make up these days - clearly this could not have been planned for.

Countless others deserve our thanks, including the council workers in every council throughout the country, who worked through the night to clear trees and debris; the rescue services personnel, who put their lives at risk in some places where they really should not have been required to, as others have said; the public service broadcasters, public and private, at local and national level, who kept reminding people of the dangers that were evolving during the course of the day; the Garda; local authorities; ESB Networks crews; the Coast Guard; and RNLI volunteers - I saw the RNLI crew in my constituency take to the high seas when I was fearful of walking down the street yesterday. All these deserve our great thanks, as does the Government. The Government acted with calm throughout this particular episode. The Taoiseach can be happy with the work of his Government during the past 48 hours.

The severity of the storm certainly deserves a debate in the House as to our readiness for the overarching issue of climate change. The House has not debated the climate mitigation plan referenced by the Taoiseach. Such a debate would be timely, especially if it was well in advance of the publication and determination of the ten-year capital plan.

In the meanwhile, I have two questions. The first relates to how red alerts are understood. On Sunday night, we saw many companies unsure how to deal with their employees. Should we not have a clear understanding throughout the economy, as is the case in the education sector, of what should be done in the event of a red alert? I came across a report last year that goes back to 2010. The current Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade, Deputy Coveney, was the Minister responsible at the time. It related to establishing a national text alert system. Public

broadcasters are well and good but we could have a system, as envisaged in the 2010 report, where every individual in an affected area would have a specific warning. Is that something the Government will now look at?

**The Taoiseach:** I thank Deputy Howlin for his kind words about our public servants and everyone who helped out yesterday and today with the clean-up. They will continue this in the weeks ahead. I echo his comments on that point. I was enormously proud of our public service yesterday and today and I think we saw the public service at its very best. I want to thank him for his kind words about the Government and my Ministers. It does not often happen in this Chamber, so when it does-----

**Deputy Brendan Howlin:** It will not happen too often.

**The Taoiseach:** I want to thank him for that. I would be happy to have a debate on that and on climate change more generally but that would be up to the Business Committee. We will need to examine what a national red alert means. It was the first time we have ever had a national red alert and the whole country only went red on Sunday, 15 October, at 1 p.m., when certain decisions had to be made. One decision was to close schools and that was made within a few hours of the national red alert issuing. A decision was made that we could not leave it up to individual school boards and so on to decide and that it had to be done on a national basis. It caused genuine confusion for some people in the private sector because it was unclear to people as to whether or not they were to go into work. The advice we gave people was not to do any unessential travel but going to work is essential for many people. We will have to develop a better understanding of what a red alert means beyond the public sector and what it means in the private sector.

I am not sure if a national text alert is still in the offing. SMS is used much less frequently than it was in the past. It is probably dying out as a technology. People tend to use WhatsApp, Internet messages and so on. Any consideration would have to give some view to that and what the correct mechanism for informing people would be. I would like to say, as Deputy Martin said, that the media, and the national media in particular, were very helpful in getting messages out, including RTE, TV3 and others. The front page headlines on the newspapers on Monday morning were also very helpful. I do not think anyone who saw the front pages of the major newspapers on Monday morning could be in any doubt as to how serious the storm was.

The national adaptation framework consultation is open until 27 October, so we are still in the consultation phase. Once the Minister has the opportunity to consider the submissions, it will be brought to Government and published thereafter.

**Deputy Brendan Howlin:** I welcome the Taoiseach's commitment to having a full and proper debate on the climate mitigation plan. We might agree that we will do that in the next week or two and certainly well in advance of any final decisions being made with regard to the capital plan because it is important that we put money into an area that we are talking about and are now convinced about.

My second question is on how we act when there is a red alert. I had conversations with members of the Government on Sunday evening and we decided to close our own offices around the country. I had to ring people I had arranged to meet on Monday morning, including employers, who did not know what to do. We need to know, when events like this might occur, what specifically is expected of employers and employees in the event of a red alert affecting

their area of work. A commitment by the Taoiseach to provide such guidelines would be very welcome.

**The Taoiseach:** I am happy to give that commitment. This is the first time we have ever had a national red alert. We have had red alerts in individual counties or groups of counties before but not on a nationwide basis. If guidelines do not exist already, which I do not think they do, it would be a very good idea to issue guidelines as to what alerts mean in many different circumstances, particularly for private sector employment. We can certainly work that into the review and have it considered by the next meeting of the Office of Emergency Planning in November.

**Deputy Michael Healy-Rae:** The Rural Independent Group would also like to register its deepest sympathies for the families who lost loved ones in yesterday's storm. I also compliment the Government, local authorities and, in the county I represent, Ms Moira Murrell, who is CEO of Kerry County Council, and all the great outdoor staff for the great work that they did, not just in our county but throughout the country. Those people worked so hard to ensure that everything was dealt with in the proper way.

I wish to ask the Taoiseach about the specific commitment in A Programme for a Partnership Government to protect our post office network. I raised this matter many times here. I wish to declare that I myself am a postmaster so I know the workings of exactly what is happening.

We, the Independent group, passed a motion in November of 2016. I was grateful to every political group and individual here in this House who supported that motion at that time but, unfortunately, nothing has happened since. A motion was passed here. It gave a clear framework as to how we can protect our post offices. It is not an exaggeration to state that 700 post offices face insolvency in the next two years. When every postmaster who has been revised - a revision takes place every two or three years - gets back his or her figures, the postmaster is losing a lot of money, to such an extent that it questions the post office's viability completely. Does the Taoiseach understand that in 2012 the social welfare contract was worth €60 million to the post offices? Today, it is worth just over €50 million. Why did that happen? First, it is Government policy. The Department was actively encouraging recipients to leave their post offices and use the commercial banks. The post office customers were being driven to commercial banks. I give the Taoiseach credit that when he was Minister at that time and I raised it with him he acted and ensured that letters being sent out to recipients encouraging them to go to the banks also pointed out that they could use the post offices. However, we must do more. When I saw "we", I mean every one of us - every political party and every individual here. All we need do is recognise that community banking is what saved the post office network in other parts of the world. It happened in New Zealand. It did not happen in England and Scotland. That is why they lost 10,000 post offices.

Anything we lose, as the Taoiseach well knows, we can never get back. If a post office closes in a community it is like taking the heart and soul out of that community. We have to recognise that the network is worth saving. It can be saved but we need the Taoiseach and the Government to provide policies and direction that will direct more business and more activity to the post offices.

**The Taoiseach:** I reiterate that the Government is commitment to maintaining as much of the post office network as we can into the future. I read an interesting analysis not too long ago of politics in France. In France, those who are most likely to vote for the Front National, for extreme right or even extremely left parties, are those who live furthest away from the post

office, a Garda station or a train station.

**Deputy Dessie Ellis:** He must give it to a research group.

**The Taoiseach:** For many people the closure of post offices across rural Ireland and the closure even of Garda stations across rural Ireland is the equivalent to the State retreating and the State and public sector abandoning them. I am aware of the sensitivities in communities that when a post office is closed they feel that the State has pulled away from them and no longer cares about them. That is one of the reasons we are determined to-----

**Deputy Micheál Martin:** Reopen Stepside.

**Deputy Timmy Dooley:** Deputy Michael Healy-Rae is a centrist so.

**The Taoiseach:** -----maintain and secure the post office network into the future.

I should point out that the rate at which post offices are closing has slowed considerably. During the period of 2000 to 2010, when Fianna Fáil was in government, 721 post offices closed.

**Deputy Eugene Murphy:** There are not too many left to close now.

**The Taoiseach:** Since the change of Government, in 2011, only 41 have closed. As Deputy Michael Healy-Rae will be aware, under Fianna Fáil post offices were closing 20 times faster than they are closing at present.

**Deputy Timmy Dooley:** How many of them offered to close?

**Deputy Kevin O’Keeffe:** We were building motorways.

**The Taoiseach:** With regard to the social welfare contract, Deputy Michael Healy-Rae did not mention one of the reasons the amount of money coming in from the social welfare contract to post offices has fallen so much is because unemployment has fallen so much. It has gone from 15% to 6%, and that will keep going downwards. There will be fewer people going into the post office to collect social welfare.

On pensioners, as the Deputy stated, I reversed the policy of encouraging recipients to use electronic transfer, but we do give pensioners the right to choose whether they want to go electronic or go to the post office. The reality is almost all of the modern-day pensioners turning 66 today want to get paid into their bank accounts-----

**Deputy Timmy Dooley:** Those are the ones who used to get up early in the morning.

**The Taoiseach:** -----because that is the way they have been paid throughout their working lives. The number of pensioners going to the post office to collect their pension is only going to continue to fall as well. There will be fewer people going to the post office to collect pensions and social welfare. There are also fewer people using mail. If post offices are to survive, they will need to change their business. This is very much the kind of solution the Minister is examining. Things such as community banking services are in the mix, as are things like digital assist. Particularly as Government services go online only, the aim is to use the post office as the portal for those who do not want to use computers or who, for some reason, are unable to do so. They will be able to go to the post office to access the services provided online. The revised business plan is still being worked on.

**Deputy Michael Healy-Rae:** I thank the Taoiseach for his reply, but going back to criticising Fianna Fáil is not a very helpful way to deal with the issue. What I am asking him to do is to study the motion brought before the House in November 2016 and implement it. I have 100% confidence in the Minister for Communications, Climate Action and Environment, Deputy Denis Naughten. His heart is in the right place and I know that he would want to keep every post office open if it was humanly possible to do so. Again, this will require direction and leadership from the Taoiseach, but boasting about how few post offices have closed since Fine Gael came to power is not very helpful. We must ensure more custom is generated for post offices. The Taoiseach spoke about the number of people claiming unemployment benefit, but there are many other services which postmasters are equipped to provide in post offices if only the Government would agree to their doing so. I am pleading with the Taoiseach not to let the opportunity pass. He has a chance to really prove the point that the Government is committed to rural Ireland. He has an opportunity to show that they are not just words, that there is going to be substance behind the talk.

**The Taoiseach:** They are not just words. I spoke about the record in the past because it demonstrates that we are serious. In 2002, 102 post offices throughout the country were closed. In 2003, 193 post offices were closed, but so far this year, under Fine Gael, with the Independent Alliance and Independent Members, only one post office has been closed.

**Deputy Mary Butler:** Ten have been closed temporarily.

**The Taoiseach:** The Deputy can see already that there has been a considerable slow down in the number of post offices that are being closed. It is not a coincidence that things have changed so much under this compared to previous Governments. I am committed to this, too, and it is something on which I will engage with the Minister in more detail in the weeks ahead to try to come up with a plan that will bring new business and modern services to post offices in order that they will be able to stay open. The only way to make them sustainable is to introduce new and modern services to replace those that are inevitably going to continue to decline.

### **Order of Business**

**Deputy Michael Moynihan:** Tuesday's business shall be No. 7, motion re Double Taxation Relief (Taxes on Income) (Republic of Kazakhstan) Order 2017, back from committee; No. 8, motion re Exchange of Information Relating to Tax Matters (Macao Special Administrative Region of the People's Republic of China) Order 2017, back from committee; No. 9, motion re Sectoral Employment Order (Construction Sector) 2017, back from committee; No. 10, motion re Broadcasting Act 2009 (Designation of Major Events) Order 2017, back from committee; No. 11, motion re Statement of Estimates for the Houses of the Oireachtas Commission; No. 11a, motion re Further Revised Estimates 2017, referral to committee; No. 12, motion re Thirteenth Report of the Committee of Selection; and No. 21, Water Services Bill 2017 - Second Stage (resumed). Private Members' Business shall be No. 142, motion re detrimental effect of extension of city boundaries on county areas, selected by the Rural Independent Group.

Wednesday's business shall be No. 21, Water Services Bill 2017 - Second Stage (resumed); No. 22, Legal Metrology (Measuring Instruments) Bill 2017 - Order for Report, Report and Final Stages; No. 1, Criminal Justice (Victims of Crime) Bill 2016 - amendments from the Seanad; and No. 21a, pre-European Council statements. Private Members' business shall be No. 143, motion re correcting pension inequities, selected by Fianna Fáil.

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Thursday's business shall be No. 23, Financial Resolutions by the Minister for Finance, 2018, Resolution No. 4, resumed; No. 21, Water Services Bill 2017 - Second Stage (resumed); and No. 4, National Archives (Amendment) Bill 2017 - Order for Second Stage and Second Stage. Second Stage of No. 40, Medical Practitioners (Amendment) Bill 2017 will be debated in the evening slot.

In relation to Tuesday's business, it is proposed that the motions re Double Taxation Relief (Taxes on Income) (Republic of Kazakhstan) Order 2017, back from committee; Exchange of Information Relating to Tax Matters (Macao Special Administrative Region of the People's Republic of China) Order 2017; Sectoral Employment Order (Construction Sector) 2017, back from committee; Broadcasting Act 2009 (Designation of Major Events) Order 2017, back from committee; Statement of Estimates for the Houses of the Oireachtas Commission; Further Revised Estimates 2017, referral to committee; and Thirteenth Report of the Committee of Selection shall be taken without debate.

In relation to Wednesday's business, it is proposed that:

(1) the Dáil shall sit at 10.30 am to take the Water Services Bill 2017;

(2) pre-European Council Statements shall commence immediately after Taoiseach's Questions and be followed by questions to the Minister for Defence and shall be brought to a conclusion after 1 hour and 25 minutes, if not previously concluded - the statements of a Minister or a Minister of State and the main spokespersons for parties or groups, or a Member nominated in their stead, shall not exceed ten minutes each, with a five minute response from the Minister or the Minister of State, and all Members may share time; and

(3) Order for Report, Report and Final Stages of the Legal Metrology (Measuring Instruments) Bill 2017 shall be taken immediately after Private Members' business and the order shall resume thereafter.

In relation to Thursday's business, it is proposed that:

(1) the Dáil shall sit at 10 a.m. to take Financial Resolutions by the Minister for Finance, 2018, Resolution No. 4, resumed - in relation to the adjournment of the debate on the Financial Resolutions, resumed, where there are no further Members offering, the debate shall be adjourned; in any case, the debate shall adjourn at 12 noon and shall not be resumed that day; and if it is adjourned before 12 noon, the sitting shall be suspended until noon;

(2) the sitting shall be suspended at the conclusion of the block voting for 30 minutes;

(3) if the proceedings on the Water Services Bill 2017 conclude after the weekly divisions, any division demanded thereon shall be taken immediately; and

(4) the Dáil shall sit later than 7.48 p.m., with questions to the Minister for Justice and Equality being taken at 4 p.m. The Dáil shall adjourn following the proceedings on Second Stage of the Medical Practitioners (Amendment) Bill 2017.

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** There are three proposals to be put to the House. Is the proposal for dealing with Tuesday's business agreed to?

**Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett:** Not agreed. At the Business Committee I raised the issue of not debating the double taxation agreements with Kazakhstan and Macao.

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** We are not getting into a debate on the matter. We know what the Deputy is opposed to.

**Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett:** The Leas-Cheann Comhairle does not know because I have not explained it.

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** The Deputy is opposing the proposal because the motions are not included for debate.

**Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett:** I need to explain why. Kazakhstan is, in effect, a dictatorship. The European Parliament has passed four resolutions outlining major problems with human rights abuses, arrests, imprisonments and the seizure of the property of civil society opponents and political opposition figures.

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** We are getting into a debate. I am going to ask the Government-----

**Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett:** The European Parliament-----

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** The Deputy knows the rules. He is opposing the proposal.

**Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett:** We have one minute. That is the rule.

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** No.

**Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett:** We have one minute in which to explain why we are opposing something.

**Deputy Barry Cowen:** It is up to the Ceann Comhairle to tell the Deputy that.

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** Does the Government want to respond?

**Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett:** We should not ignore human rights abuses and the denial of democracy in Kazakhstan. They are systematic and ongoing and have been reported by human rights bodies across the globe. In doing this deal we are ignoring these issues.

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** I am putting the question-----

**Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett:** There is no response. Can we not even ask for one?

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** Does the Government wish to respond?

Question put: "That Proposal No. 1 for dealing with Tuesday's business be agreed to."

<i>The Dáil divided: Tá, 84; Níl, 11; Staon, 0.</i>		
<i>Tá</i>	<i>Níl</i>	<i>Staan</i>
<i>Bailey, Maria.</i>	<i>Barry, Mick.</i>	
<i>Brady, John.</i>	<i>Boyd Barrett, Richard.</i>	
<i>Brassil, John.</i>	<i>Connolly, Catherine.</i>	
<i>Brophy, Colm.</i>	<i>Coppinger, Ruth.</i>	
<i>Browne, James.</i>	<i>Daly, Clare.</i>	
<i>Bruton, Richard.</i>	<i>Fitzmaurice, Michael.</i>	

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<i>Buckley, Pat.</i>	<i>Healy, Seamus.</i>	
<i>Butler, Mary.</i>	<i>Kenny, Gino.</i>	
<i>Byrne, Catherine.</i>	<i>Murphy, Paul.</i>	
<i>Byrne, Thomas.</i>	<i>O'Sullivan, Maureen.</i>	
<i>Cahill, Jackie.</i>	<i>Ryan, Eamon.</i>	
<i>Calleary, Dara.</i>		
<i>Canney, Seán.</i>		
<i>Casey, Pat.</i>		
<i>Cassells, Shane.</i>		
<i>Chambers, Jack.</i>		
<i>Chambers, Lisa.</i>		
<i>Collins, Michael.</i>		
<i>Collins, Niall.</i>		
<i>Creed, Michael.</i>		
<i>Curran, John.</i>		
<i>Deering, Pat.</i>		
<i>Donnelly, Stephen S.</i>		
<i>Dooley, Timmy.</i>		
<i>Doyle, Andrew.</i>		
<i>Durkan, Bernard J.</i>		
<i>Farrell, Alan.</i>		
<i>Flanagan, Charles.</i>		
<i>Fleming, Sean.</i>		
<i>Griffin, Brendan.</i>		
<i>Harris, Simon.</i>		
<i>Harty, Michael.</i>		
<i>Haughey, Seán.</i>		
<i>Healy-Rae, Danny.</i>		
<i>Healy-Rae, Michael.</i>		
<i>Howlin, Brendan.</i>		
<i>Humphreys, Heather.</i>		
<i>Kehoe, Paul.</i>		
<i>Kelly, Alan.</i>		
<i>Kenny, Martin.</i>		
<i>Kyne, Seán.</i>		
<i>Lahart, John.</i>		
<i>Lawless, James.</i>		
<i>MacSharry, Marc.</i>		
<i>Martin, Micheál.</i>		
<i>McConalogue, Charlie.</i>		
<i>McDonald, Mary Lou.</i>		
<i>McGrath, Finian.</i>		
<i>McGrath, Michael.</i>		

<i>McHugh, Joe.</i>		
<i>Mitchell O'Connor, Mary.</i>		
<i>Moran, Kevin Boxer.</i>		
<i>Moynihan, Michael.</i>		
<i>Munster, Imelda.</i>		
<i>Murphy, Catherine.</i>		
<i>Murphy, Eugene.</i>		
<i>Naughten, Denis.</i>		
<i>Neville, Tom.</i>		
<i>Nolan, Carol.</i>		
<i>O'Callaghan, Jim.</i>		
<i>O'Connell, Kate.</i>		
<i>O'Dea, Willie.</i>		
<i>O'Keeffe, Kevin.</i>		
<i>O'Loughlin, Fiona.</i>		
<i>O'Rourke, Frank.</i>		
<i>O'Sullivan, Jan.</i>		
<i>Ó Caoláin, Caoimhghín.</i>		
<i>Ó Cuív, Éamon.</i>		
<i>Ó Laoghaire, Donnchadh.</i>		
<i>Penrose, Willie.</i>		
<i>Phelan, John Paul.</i>		
<i>Quinlivan, Maurice.</i>		
<i>Rabbitte, Anne.</i>		
<i>Ring, Michael.</i>		
<i>Rock, Noel.</i>		
<i>Ross, Shane.</i>		
<i>Ryan, Brendan.</i>		
<i>Shortall, Róisín.</i>		
<i>Stanley, Brian.</i>		
<i>Stanton, David.</i>		
<i>Tóibín, Peadar.</i>		
<i>Troy, Robert.</i>		
<i>Varadkar, Leo.</i>		
<i>Zappone, Katherine.</i>		

Tellers: Tá, Deputies Joe McHugh and Marcella Corcoran Kennedy; Níl, Deputies Richard Boyd Barrett and Paul Murphy.

Question declared carried.

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** Is the proposal for dealing with Wednesday's business agreed to? Agreed. Is the proposal for dealing with Thursday's business agreed to? Agreed.

We have five minutes left for questions on promised legislation. I will take questions from the leaders. I should put it on the record that there have been indications from Deputies Danny Healy-Rae, Collins, O'Rourke, Byrne, Brady, Michael Healy-Rae, Stanley, Brassil, Ryan, Rabbitte, Nolan, Kenny and Ellis. They will get the first opportunity to speak tomorrow, after the leaders.

**Deputy Micheál Martin:** Before I commence, I want to correct the record of the House on the pensions issue and the anomaly of 2012, and the comments of Deputy McDonald in particular. Many groups and parties have consistently raised this issue, not least the Joint Committee on Employment Affairs and Social Protection. The Chairman, Deputy Curran, met the Minister at the committee on 28 September, and the very first question Deputy Curran put to her was about the anomaly. The report of the committee suggested the suspension of 2012, pending the review the Taoiseach alluded to. The motion was, of course, about more than just pensions. It was a much larger and much longer motion. To suggest we voted against the specific issue of pensions is distorting the truth. I have to put that on the record. That is not what happened.

On promised legislation, the programme for Government states that climate change is the global challenge of our generation and requires radical and ambitious thinking. I said earlier that we lack ambition and do not have a radical approach to meeting our climate change targets. In that context, the Minister of State at the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform, Deputy Moran, responded to a question about a national flood forecasting service. We are all very strong in our commendation of Met Éireann in terms of its role in predicting and updating the country on storm Ophelia, but it has been looking for such a national flood forecasting service for a long time. A steering group was established and met on 11 occasions. There has been an initial set-up phase. It is estimated that it could take five years for such a service to be established. Given the length of time that Met Éireann has been looking for such a facility and the emphasis we put on climate change, it is regrettable that we do not have this in place. Perhaps the Taoiseach, or the relevant Minister, will indicate the measures that will be undertaken to accelerate the programme for Government provision and to make sure we have that forecasting service far earlier than the five years indicated, and that full resources will be provided for the recruitment of the 15 full-time staff who will be required.

**Minister for Communications, Climate Action and Environment (Deputy Denis Naughten):** First, it is not the case that we lack ambition. Ongoing negotiations are currently taking place and we are not going to undermine Ireland's position in regard to them while we are in the middle of them. Specifically, in regard to the flood forecasting, this is something about which we are all very anxious. We are looking at ways in which this can be expedited. Met Éireann has been given the capacity, resources and funding that are needed in regard to that. My understanding is that some trials are already ongoing in regard to the predictability of forecasting.

**Deputy Micheál Martin:** One person has been employed.

**Deputy Mary Lou McDonald:** I want to return to the national mitigation plan, which was published in July by the Minister, Deputy Naughten. The Taoiseach said that the consultation

on the national adaptation framework will conclude on 27 October. Will the framework and the proposals be available by 10 December, which I understand is the target date? Is the Taoiseach on track for that? Thereafter, how long will it take Ministers and Departments to produce their own sectoral plans?

**Deputy Denis Naughten:** We are statutorily bound to have this ready for 10 December and we are working to that date. I have been given no indication as to why that will not happen. It is our intention to do that. It would then be a matter for each of the State agencies and local authorities to put their own adaptation plans in place. We, along with the Government, will be assisting them in doing that.

**Deputy Brendan Howlin:** Tomorrow, the European Parliament, the Council and the Commission are due to agree the Interinstitutional Proclamation on the European Pillar of Social Rights. This is an important development, another move to codify social rights at the heart of the European project. I am concerned at some of what I have been hearing regarding Ireland's role in this process. I have been told from European contacts that Ireland appears to have taken the role normally performed by the United Kingdom seeking to obstruct social rights. In doing so, I believe we have aligned ourselves with countries such as Hungary. I believe we have been demanding changes to the preamble to the declaration to water down the obligation of states to give meaning to the social pillar. Can the Taoiseach state clearly his support for the proclamation of the European Pillar of Social Rights? Can he tell us what, if any, amendments his Government has sought in the preamble and can he explain why he would seek such an amendment?

**The Taoiseach:** I cannot answer that for the Deputy. I am not dealing with it personally. Perhaps a parliamentary question tabled to the Minister, Deputy Regina Doherty, or the Minister of State, Deputy McEntee, might clarify that. I can confirm that I will be attending the EU Social Summit in Gothenburg where I expect we will endorse and adopt the EU social pillar. I look forward to having that opportunity but I am not across the detail.

**Deputy Brendan Howlin:** Is there somebody briefing the Taoiseach on it?

**The Taoiseach:** Not yet.

**Deputy Brendan Howlin:** Will somebody tell me what is in it?

**The Taoiseach:** Just to add some clarity to what Deputy Martin said in regard to the 2012 State pension contributory changes, the question, as I understood it from Deputy McDonald, was about whether anyone had raised it personally with me in the context of the budget negotiations, but nobody from any party did.

**Deputy Brendan Howlin:** Can the Taoiseach answer the question I asked?

**The Taoiseach:** However, I absolutely acknowledge that people from other parties, including Deputy John Curran and members of my own party, have raised it in the past-----

**Deputy Mary Lou McDonald:** It is in our prebudget speech.

**The Taoiseach:** -----because it is an ongoing issue.

**Deputy Brendan Howlin:** I asked the Taoiseach a question and he answered a previous question. It is important that this House has some input into Ireland's position. It is not good enough for the Taoiseach simply to say that he does not know and he will not tell me what our

position is. Can he ask the Minister with responsibility for social protection, if she is the lead person negotiating this, to discuss what Ireland's position is before the decisions are finally made?

**The Taoiseach:** I can, but that is a matter for the House surely, is it not?

**Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett:** In regard to the discrimination against pensioners discussed earlier, I and several others raised this issue when the Taoiseach was the Minister for Social Protection, and he acknowledged then that there was problem with the averaging and a problem with people who did not benefit from the homemaker's credit being discriminated against because it was not retrospective. He acknowledged that a long time ago, at least a year to a year to a half ago, in engagements that took place in this House involving Members from both sides of this House. How come it has taken him this long to act on this and when will he do something about it? By the way, in our budget submission, we allocated several hundred million euro for expanding the homemaker's scheme, so we did include it in our budget submission. The Taoiseach said he read them all, so he should know it was in our budget submission at least. He has given no clear commitment as to when he will deal with this discrimination against more than 30,000 pensioners, many of whom are women, although not all, as he said. It is a discrimination and unfairness, nonetheless, which he has acknowledged. He said then that he was going to do something about it but he has still done nothing about it. When is he going to do something about it?

**The Taoiseach:** I will give the Deputy the same answer I gave him at that time. There is a problem with averaging and there is a problem with the homemaker's scheme, but the solution is not to go back to where we were before 2012 because there is a problem with that as well. The proposal that the Department for Employment Affairs and Social Protection has developed what is called the total contributions approach. That will get rid of averaging, it will take into account the total number of contributions a person made over the course of their career - there will be no averaging any more - and it will make provision for a period of homemaking.

**Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett:** The Taoiseach said that previously but when will that be done?

**The Taoiseach:** As I said earlier, the first thing that had to be done was an actuarial review of the Social Insurance Fund because the way it works is that PRSI contributions go in and PRSI contributions go out. That is how the benefits are paid for. That was the first thing that had to be done. That has been done and it went to Cabinet a few weeks ago. The Minister, Deputy Regina Doherty, will be in a position to publish, for public consultation, the new system, which will be the total contributions approach, and she anticipates being able to do that before the end of the year. As I mentioned earlier, none of these changes is straightforward. One needs to understand the costs involved, how they will be funded, how they will impact on different individuals, different groups of people and all those other matters. That is why it is not straightforward. The fact that there are no computerised records prior to 1985 makes it even more difficult because individual records - paper records - will have to be gone through.

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** I will take a final question on promised legislation from the leader of the Rural Independent Group.

**Deputy Michael Healy-Rae:** There is a commitment in the programme for Government regarding the drainage of roads. Surely in light of yesterday's storm that commitment should

also be extended and the Government and the Department with responsibility for the environment, in conjunction with our excellent local authorities, should organise that trees growing on the sides of roads which are in a dangerous condition and could endanger the lives of people passing by should be removed. We have excellent people working in our local authorities and excellent subcontractors who could be engaged in this job of work. The same principle applies to the cutting of hedges. All that maintenance work should be seriously examined. In the interests of road safety, such work should be part of road maintenance-----

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** Okay, Deputy.

**Deputy Danny Healy-Rae:** It is a serious issue.

**Deputy Michael Healy-Rae:** It is very important. This cannot be emphasised enough. If such work were to save just one life, would it not be well worth it?

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** The Deputy said this is a commitment in the programme for Government, but it might be a matter for promised legislation.

**The Taoiseach:** It is a matter that was raised earlier. I will certainly ask the Minister, Deputy Eoghan Murphy, to engage with the County and City Management Association to see what could be done, but he will be occupied with more pressing matters for the next week or so.

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** I have given an assurance that the other Members I mentioned will have the first opportunity to speak tomorrow, after the leaders.

#### **Taxation Order: Motion**

**Minister of State at the Department of the Taoiseach (Deputy Joe McHugh):** I move:

That Dáil Éireann approves the following Order in draft:

Double Taxation Relief (Taxes on Income) (Republic of Kazakhstan) Order 2017,  
a copy of which was laid before Dáil Éireann on 19th September, 2017.”

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** Is the motion agreed?

**Deputies:** It is not agreed.

Question put.

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** In accordance with Standing Order 70(2), the division is postponed until the weekly division time on Thursday, 19 October 2017.

#### **Taxation Order: Motion**

**Minister of State at the Department of the Taoiseach (Deputy Joe McHugh):** I move:

That Dáil Éireann approves the following Order in draft:

Exchange of Information Relating to Tax Matters (Macao Special Administrative Re-

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gion of the People's Republic of China) Order 2017,

a copy of which was laid before Dáil Éireann on 19th September, 2017.”

Question put.

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** In accordance with Standing Order 70(2), the division is postponed until the weekly division time on Thursday, 19 October 2017.

### **Sectoral Employment Order (Construction Sector) 2017: Motion**

**Minister of State at the Department of the Taoiseach (Deputy Joe McHugh):** I move:

That Dáil Éireann approves the following Order in draft:

Sectoral Employment Order (Construction Sector) 2017,

copies of which have been laid in draft form before Dáil Éireann on 22nd August, 2017.

Question put and agreed to.

### **Broadcasting Act 2009 (Designation of Major Events) Order 2017: Motion**

**Minister for Communications, Climate Action and Environment (Deputy Denis Naughten):** I move:

That Dáil Éireann approves the following draft Order:

Broadcasting Act 2009 (Designation of Major Events) Order 2017,

copies of which were laid before Dáil Éireann on 22nd June, 2017.

Question put and agreed to.

### **Estimates for the Houses of the Oireachtas Commission: Motion**

**Deputy Martin Heydon:** I move:

That Dáil Éireann take note of the Statement of Estimates of moneys required in respect of ongoing expenditure for the period beginning on 1st January, 2018 and ending on 31st December, 2018, prepared and published by the Houses of the Oireachtas Commission in accordance with section 13 of the Houses of the Oireachtas Commission Act 2003 as amended by section 8 of the Houses of the Oireachtas Commission (Amendment) Act 2006, section 9 of the Houses of the Oireachtas Commission (Amendment) Act 2009, section 2 of the Houses of the Oireachtas (Appointments to Certain Offices) Act 2015 and section 5 of the Houses of the Oireachtas Commission (Amendment) Act 2015, which was laid before both Houses of the Oireachtas on 4th October, 2017.

Question put and agreed to.

**Estimates for Public Services 2017: Referral to Select Committee**

**Minister for Communications, Climate Action and Environment (Deputy Denis Naughten):** I move:

That, notwithstanding Standing Order 182(1) or (2) of the Standing Orders of Dáil Éireann relative to Public Business and the Resolutions of the Dáil of 15th December, 2016, and 30th May, 2017, the following Further Revised Estimates for the Public Services for the year ending 31st December, 2017, be presented to the Dáil and circulated to members on 17th October, 2017, being a date later than that prescribed for the presentation of Estimates, and that the Further Revised Estimates be referred to Select Committees, as appropriate, pursuant to Standing Orders 84A(3)(c) and 182(3).

Vote 24 — Justice and Equality (*Further Revised Estimate*).

Vote 32 — Business, Enterprise and Innovation (*Further Revised Estimate*).

Vote 33 — Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltacht (*Further Revised Estimate*).

Vote 34 — Housing, Planning and Local Government (*Further Revised Estimate*).

Vote 37 — Employment Affairs and Social Protection (*Further Revised Estimate*).

Vote 42 — Rural and Community Development (*Further Revised Estimate*).

Question put and agreed to.

**Thirteenth Report of Committee of Selection: Motion**

**Minister of State at the Department of the Taoiseach (Deputy Joe McHugh):** I move:

That Dáil Éireann approves the Thirteenth Report of the Standing Committee of Selection in accordance with Standing Order 27F, copies of which were laid before Dáil Éireann on 12th October, 2017, and discharges a member and appoints a member to a Committee accordingly.

Question put and agreed to.

**Ceisteanna - Questions**

**Cabinet Committees**

1. **Deputy Michael Moynihan** asked the Taoiseach if he will report on the newly formed Cabinet committees. [40543/17]

2. **Deputy Gerry Adams** asked the Taoiseach if he will report on the reorganisation of the Cabinet committee system. [41637/17]

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**The Taoiseach:** I propose to take Questions Nos. 1 and 2 together.

I have reorganised the Cabinet committee structure to streamline political oversight and to focus the work through a smaller number of Cabinet sub-committees which are convened as necessary.

The Government has established the following six Cabinet committees, all of which I chair:

Cabinet committee A, dealing with the economy; Cabinet committee B, dealing with social policy and public services; Cabinet committee C, on the European Union including Brexit; Cabinet committee D, dealing with infrastructure; Cabinet committee E, dealing with health, and Cabinet committee F, dealing with national security.

To date each Cabinet committee has met once.

Under this new structure some committees now have broader terms of reference than before and this is reflected in their membership.

Committees may on occasion meet in different formations depending on the agenda, with additional members being invited to attend as necessary.

There is no change in the practice of substantive issues being referred to Government for approval and a report on the work of each Cabinet committee will continue to be submitted to Government annually.

**Deputy Micheál Martin:** It is established practice for the Cabinet committee on the European Union and Brexit to meet the week before a European summit to agree on key changes of Government policy. On a number of occasions in the last two weeks, the Taoiseach has said that the Government is not contemplating or preparing for anything other than a close customs union between the United Kingdom and the European Union. In one of the scripted off-the-cuff replies which the Taoiseach supposedly hates so much, the Taoiseach said that the call for this contingency planning was tantamount to calling for border dogs to be trained. That was an intemperate response last Wednesday. Yet, in Derry on Friday night, the Taoiseach said something completely different. On that occasion he said that we were planning for different contingencies and “we will seek a unique solution for Northern Ireland”. Will he explain why he said one thing in the House last week and then something completely different in Derry? Will he confirm that he is preparing proposals for a situation where the United Kingdom does not have barrier-free access to the European Union?

The Taoiseach has repeatedly spoken of his being open to full briefings for pro-European parties regarding the Brexit talks. We have sought such briefings but from what the Taoiseach said in Derry, it is becoming clear that there is nothing open or candid about these briefings. Is it the position that the Taoiseach has given instructions that certain matters are not to be admitted in briefings if they are not in tandem with what he says in public?

**Deputy Mary Lou McDonald:** On the Cabinet sub-committees, does the Taoiseach believe it is wise or appropriate for Brexit to be put alongside European issues? I understood that international affairs also featured in that sub-committee. Will the Taoiseach clarify this point?

Brexit issues require a singular focus and effort. When we last spoke on these on 3 October, the Taoiseach told us that the previous sub-committee meeting had taken place on 11 September, that is some three and a half weeks earlier. The idea that any sub-committee that engaged

in a serious piece of work, and especially Brexit, would meet almost monthly is ludicrous and irresponsible.

I disagree with how Deputy Micheál Martin has dealt with the threat of a border on the island of Ireland. The Taoiseach is correct to hold firm on the line and the understanding that there can be, and will be, no border on the island. The efforts to secure what Sinn Féin has described as special designated status - it does not matter what it is called, it only matters what it does - in order to ensure that Ireland in its totality remains within the Single Market and the customs union is what is important. I do not believe that it is beneficial or appropriate to debate what the electronic border might look like. The idea of mimicking toll free traffic on the M50 which I think is Fianna Fáil's brainwave-----

**Deputy Micheál Martin:** No; I am sorry, but that is not Fianna Fáil policy.

**Deputy Mary Lou McDonald:** I do not think that is helpful or appropriate.

**Deputy Micheál Martin:** Stop distorting the truth once again. It is asinine commentary.

**Deputy Mary Lou McDonald:** It is the job of the Taoiseach to protect the interests of the country and the island as a whole and it is absolutely and resolutely squarely in the region of having no border. The Taoiseach might answer my question about the sub-committee and my proposition to him that he has a Brexit sub-committee that is in session and meeting all the time, not monthly.

**Deputy Brendan Howlin:** The Taoiseach will recall that in the Government of which both he and I were members there were ten Cabinet sub-committees which were very effective at pursuing the reform agenda in each area of operation, with direct accountability to the Taoiseach, which was good. If there was any criticism of them, it was probably that there were too many people attending each of them, but that was a general complaint. The problem with reducing the number and broadening the scope of each of the reduced committees is that we will have an extraordinarily large number attending. That waters down their effectiveness.

I would like the Taoiseach to answer on two specific issues, one of which is climate action. Should there be a stand-alone committee dealing with the issue if we are to give it the sense of priority to which the House referred during Leaders' Questions? Justice reform was a major part of the reform agenda and most people in the country would still regard it as critical. Where in the six committees the Taoiseach has set out is it housed and how often does the reform committee meet?

On the questions put by the two previous questioners, all of the meetings I have attended on the island of Ireland and in Britain have had far too many generalisms about what we are facing. Bluntly, I would like to have a real debate about the options we have to face because we are galloping towards the edge of a cliff and talking in generalisms and making assertions that something will not happen. It will be too late if we actually reach the edge of the cliff and there is no solution.

**Deputy Micheál Martin:** Absolutely.

**Deputy Brendan Howlin:** We need to have real debate about these issues now.

**Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett:** All expert opinion suggests the formation of hurricane Ophelia was due to rising ocean temperatures which are related to global warming. Does that

not prompt the Taoiseach to think we need a far more seriously focused approach to dealing with climate change, rather than what we are doing, which is engaged in special pleading as to why we should be allowed to continue with increased CO2 emissions and not meet targets and run the risk of fines? The Citizens' Assembly stated we should be global leaders. That is what it recommended to the Government and we are the opposite. The fact that the Taoiseach does not have a dedicated Cabinet sub-committee suggests he is not taking the issue seriously. Should he reconsider after the weekend?

The next issue I want to raise which is of critical importance and requires the emergency response we saw at the weekend from the Government is housing and the need for a special committee to deal with what continues to be a crisis that is out of control. We need an emergency focused, dedicated, all-Government response to the housing and homelessness crisis. It justifies having a special Cabinet sub-committee which the Taoiseach would chair.

**Deputy Eamon Ryan:** I agree with those who have spoken about the need for greater urgency and action to deal with climate change, but those involved realise it also requires us to take many more dramatic steps to protect the environment and the social system in a variety of ways. In that regard, I understand the Taoiseach has abdicated responsibility for implementing the sustainable development goals to the line Minister, Deputy Denis Naughten, but I do not see how that can work. I am interested in this issue as it affects the committees. It is the type of issue that comes in under every committee, in education and justice, as well as dealing with environmental issues. Will the Taoiseach outline what role, if any, his Department has in overseeing implementation of the sustainable development goals? How does it fit across the five Cabinet sub-committees? Does the Taoiseach agree that if, as he stated in the *Time* magazine article, we have to, as a country, be at the centre of the world, in other words, be open to what is going on in it, the biggest hope for it is that this manifesto for the north, as well as the south, the sustainable development goals, which were negotiated by an Irish civil servant shows us the path? That being the case, why is it that I see them nowhere in his or his Department's agenda? Why is it that he is not taking responsibility? Where do they sit within the Cabinet sub-committee system?

**The Taoiseach:** It is important to say the Cabinet held a special meeting in Cork on Friday in UCC to deal with two issues, namely, Brexit and health reform. It is fair to say Brexit took up the majority of the day's deliberations. I did this because it was important to include the Cabinet in the discussion on Brexit, particularly with the European Council meeting coming up this week, rather than just a Cabinet sub-committee. We will have another full Cabinet meeting tomorrow to deal with the Finance Bill. As Deputies will probably see, between last Friday and Wednesday of this week, we will have had three Cabinet meetings, which is reflective of the different approach I am taking as Taoiseach, which is to have the full Cabinet meet more frequently and for longer periods of time in order that we can have genuine collective responsibility, whereby all Cabinet members will be across the big decisions being made. It will be the total reverse of what happened during a previous Government, of which I was a member, when a sub-committee called the Economic Management Council made lots of decisions and informed the rest of the Cabinet of them. That is something I never favoured and was never part of. It is not the way I propose to lead a Government.

Separate to the Cabinet committee on Brexit, the Minister, Deputy Simon Coveney, the Minister of State, Deputy Helen McEntee, and I also meet regularly to discuss European affairs and European policy. Actually holding a Cabinet sub-committee which we can all attend is very difficult. For example, today the Minister, Deputy Simon Coveney, and the Minister of

State, Deputy Helen McEntee, are at the General Affairs Council and the Foreign Affairs Council; therefore, it would be impossible for us to have a Cabinet sub-committee meeting today. On Thursday and Friday the Minister of State, Deputy Helen McEntee, and I will be at the European Council and it would not be possible for us to attend a meeting. Whereas Deputy Mary Lou McDonald may suggest Cabinet committees should meet all the time, in practical reality that is not achievable because we are all coming and going all of the time because of the nature of our jobs. That is why I want to centre more things around the Cabinet and the bilateral and trilateral meetings involving the key Ministers.

On contingency planning, it is appropriate for any Government in office to plan for worst-case scenarios. Some years ago we had a plan for what we would do if the euro fell apart; of course, therefore, Governments have to engage in contingency planning. Doing a desktop exercise and engaging in due diligence on worst-case scenarios are very different from what seems to be Fianna Fáil policy. Perhaps RTÉ misreported what had happened at the Ard-Fheis, but I distinctly read an article about a motion being passed calling for an electronic border with gantries and M50 style tolls. I think that is to what Deputy Mary Lou McDonald was referring. It seems that it is Fianna Fáil's policy-----

**Deputy Micheál Martin:** I think the Taoiseach's position in the past couple of weeks has been-----

**The Taoiseach:** That is what RTÉ-----

**Deputy Micheál Martin:** The Taoiseach knows full well what my position is.

**The Taoiseach:** That is what RTÉ reported, but perhaps it misreported what had happened.

**Deputy Micheál Martin:** To be quite frank, I think the Taoiseach's response is asinine. It does him no justice in terms of his seriousness.

**The Taoiseach:** It also reported comments on "The Week in Politics" that Fianna Fáil would prepare for a hard Brexit. How else would it prepare for a hard Brexit other than by going around the place scoping out sites for customs posts and truck stops and training border guards and dogs?

**Deputy Brendan Howlin:** I would not start to train the dogs just yet.

**The Taoiseach:** That is not the policy of the Government.

**Deputy Micheál Martin:** Neither is it-----

**The Taoiseach:** Those things are self-fulfilling prophecies. If Deputy Stephen Donnelly, as Minister of Foreign Affairs or European Affairs, was to go to London to negotiate with the British authorities the details of how an electronic border might work, he might find soon enough that it would actually become a solution. That is why it would be very unwise to have a Fianna Fáil government in London discussing with British officials what an electronic border might look like, how big the toll gantries might be and where they should be placed. That would be a very unwise political strategy and it is something I absolutely would not support.

Briefings are absolutely open to party leaders. I have given no instruction other than to give people full information.

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Climate action is an important issue. I totally acknowledge that but there are any number of issues on which one could have a dedicated Cabinet sub-committee. We could have one for every single issue for which there is a Department, and then some more, but then we would be back to where we were before, with 15, 20 or 30 Cabinet committees. It is just too many and it becomes unwieldy. Justice reform is dealt with by Cabinet committee B but the Minister for Justice and Equality, Deputy Charlie Flanagan, and I also meet bilaterally. I disagree with the view, often expressed to me on Taoiseach's questions, that if an issue is important, one must have a dedicated Cabinet sub-committee do deal with it. I am not sure that is true. I have seen governments from ten or 20 years ago, and maybe more recently, for which setting up a committee was a way not to deal with something. It was just a consultation exercise or talk-shop exercise. The way one tends to get things done in government is either at Cabinet, where Ministers are all present so one can actually make decisions, or in much smaller groups.

**Deputy Micheál Martin:** The Taoiseach is letting himself down with the asinine comments he made both last week and today on Fianna Fáil's position on Brexit. He was present when I gave my speech at the All-Island Civil Dialogue. I spoke at Cambridge at the British-Irish Association meeting in the presence of the Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade, Deputy Simon Coveney. I have been very serious and constructive about Brexit. The Taoiseach should ask his predecessor, Deputy Enda Kenny, how constructive I have been on Brexit since it was voted for. I have been serious about wearing the green jersey for Ireland. Our clear position has always been to have a special economic zone on the island of Ireland to ensure full trade and no border. Treating Question Time like some smart-ass university debate is not doing justice to the seriousness of the issue.

The Taoiseach said at the outset in answering me that we should engage in contingency planning and that everybody should prepare for worst-case scenarios. The Revenue Commissioners did their work. I was not raising the Revenue Commissioners today. They did serious work. In my humble opinion, it was work that should have been shared with people. I see no rationale as to why it would not have been shared with people. It could have informed public debate, not to become a self-fulfilling prophesy but to warn those affected, including those in SMEs in Ireland and Britain, about the horrendous impact of what Brexit will mean for them in their daily lives, economically and in terms of jobs, for example. It would have been advantageous to public debate. Lest there be any doubt - it is one thing for Sinn Féin to try to distort the truth but I suggest it is something different for the Taoiseach to try to do so - our position has been very consistent, from the referendum onwards, in terms of avoiding a hard border in Ireland. That is why we are putting forward the propositions in all seriousness. I ask the Taoiseach to acknowledge that.

**Deputy Mary Lou McDonald:** I do not believe an M50-type solution to the Border is a serious proposition at all and I do not believe it demonstrates any kind of political nous or understanding of the job that needs to be done. It is a very significant challenge to ensure that not only the economic life of the island but also the political life and the Good Friday Agreement infrastructure are not completely undermined.

On the issue of the report from the Revenue Commissioners, I see no reason it would not be shared. I suggest, however, that there is a deep understanding among SMEs, businesspeople, the agrifood industry and farmers of the massive disruption Brexit potentially represents.

**Deputy Micheál Martin:** Not in Britain.

**Deputy Mary Lou McDonald:** Although the Revenue Commissioners carried out the exercise, I do not believe the exercise was necessary to put what I describe up in lights.

The Taoiseach gave the reasons the Cabinet sub-committee is not meeting as regularly as would be optimal. Given this, he needs to ask himself the purpose of the sub-committee and the effectiveness of its work.

May I ask the Taoiseach about the briefing of other political parties and leaders on these matters? Whatever our differences, I believe we can all work together constructively.

The Taoiseach should not imagine for a second that light debates about what a border might or might not look like would be lost on the Government in London and by others. It would be absolutely detrimental to send out a signal other than the fact that, politically, socially and economically, we cannot and will not entertain any border on the island. That needs to be said explicitly. Nonsensical positions on M50-style toll-free traffic certainly do not assist in that regard.

**Deputy Brendan Howlin:** This House voted by majority to have special economic status for Northern Ireland and to maintain the customs union on the island of Ireland. The Government voted against it. I have done everything I can to explain the consequences of not having both parts of the island in the same customs union, certainly to my colleagues in the British Labour Party. We need reports such as the one prepared by the Revenue Commissioners to underscore that work because there is extraordinary naivete, if not blindness, to this reality among politicians in Britain.

**Deputy Micheál Martin:** Yes.

**Deputy Brendan Howlin:** That is a fact. All of us in this House have to face up to this. In the words of Mr. Michel Barnier, the clock is ticking. If we continue as we are, with Britain saying there will be a soft or seamless border and us saying there will be no border, what will happen when, suddenly in March 2019, we will be in different customs unions? What will physically happen then? Rather than talking around the issue, we need to have concrete proposals. The only solution that works for us is the maintenance of a single customs union on the island of Ireland. I hope that, between Britain and Ireland, that is achievable, but we need to explain the consequences of it not happening.

**Deputy Eamon Ryan:** I am keen to get an answer to the question I asked, on the role of the Taoiseach's Department and his committee system in the implementation of the sustainable development goals, signed off on by this country, along with most others, in September 2015. The goals provide a perfect roadmap for the future for this country. What is the Taoiseach's responsibility and what is the role of the committee system in delivering on the goals?

**The Taoiseach:** On the final matter, the sustainable development goals, the Department of Communications, Climate Action and Environment, is the lead Department. As is the case with all Departments, mine has oversight of its work.

On the solution to the Brexit conundrum, I am in broad agreement with what has been said by others. I believe the only solution that is workable for Britain and Ireland is that the United Kingdom as a whole should remain in some form of customs union. One could call it a customs partnership if one wanted. It should be some form of customs union involving the United Kingdom and the European Union. It is not just about the North and South. The east-west trade is

really important also. If one talks to anyone involved with an SME, or an exporter involved in agrifood, one will realise the trade between Britain and Ireland is much greater than the trade between the North and South. We need to bear that in mind. In my conversations with my colleagues across Europe and on the telephone yesterday with Ms Theresa May, to whom I spoke for 40 minutes, I emphasised my view that the United Kingdom should remain in a customs union with the European Union. If it wishes to call it something different, because the term “union” has particular connotations, it would be the best solution. It could call it a customs partnership; I do not mind. If it cannot be achieved, we then need to consider a secondary, less-favourable solution, but that is one that would involve special arrangements for Northern Ireland. That is what I said to Ms May when we spoke yesterday and what I have said before on many occasions.

Using the term “special status” is not helpful. It is seen by the DUP and other unionist parties as an attempt to diminish the constitutional status of Northern Ireland as part of the United Kingdom. Therefore, using the term actually makes the objective harder to achieve. This is because of the sensitivities around language. Deputy Martin, as a former Minister for Foreign Affairs, will know how unbelievably sensitive people in Northern Ireland can be about language, even in regard to whether a word is spelled with a capital letter. It is not helpful, therefore, to use the term “special status”. Unless one is deliberately trying to undermine and to annoy unionists, I ask that one not use it.

**Deputy Micheál Martin:** I have not used the term “special status”.

**The Taoiseach:** Yes, but the Dáil voted for it. It did not help. It was not helpful in trying to achieve a good outcome for the Irish people that the term was adopted by the “Oireachtas”. The Deputy will know that it is not helpful at a European level more widely. The European Parliament motion using the same language, backed by Sinn Féin MPs, was voted down at European level because other countries saw it as potentially giving rise to regionalism and nationalism within their regions. That is another example of where people pushing agendas for political gain from Brexit did harm to our national interest. It is something I asked Sinn Féin MEPs to reflect on. There is no point in putting a motion to the European Parliament demanding special status for Northern Ireland only to have it voted down. That undermines our case in negotiations.

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** I thank the Taoiseach. I have to move on.

**The Taoiseach:** Finally, I wish to touch briefly on the Fianna Fáil Ard-Fheis. I fully accept that the media may have misreported this.

**Deputy Micheál Martin:** The Taoiseach knows my position.

**The Taoiseach:** I accept absolutely that the media sometimes get these things wrong, but the reports are that Fianna Fáil called for an electronic border with Northern Ireland post-Brexit, similar to the toll system on the M50. The motion suggested an auto-logging system for goods and services traded. If that is Fianna Fáil’s policy, I disagree with that policy.

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** Now, we move to a bit of housekeeping. We ran over time because of the importance of the matter. I can be blamed. We have 20 minutes left. The next question is on Seanad reform and the following question is on political staff and advisers. I want Members to decide which question they want to take, or whether we should give ten minutes to each.

**Deputy Brendan Howlin:** Let us take the first question and see how far we get.

### **Seanad Reform**

3. **Deputy Michael Moynihan** asked the Taoiseach the status of the reform of Seanad Éireann. [40544/17]

15. **Deputy Gerry Adams** asked the Taoiseach the status of the implementation group on Seanad reform. [42740/17]

**The Taoiseach:** I propose to take Questions Nos. 3 and 15 together.

As the Deputy will be aware, in A Programme for a Partnership Government, the Government stated its commitment to pursuing the implementation of the report of the working group on Seanad reform, also known as the Manning report. That report was published in 2015 and it is available on my Department's website. One of the recommendations of the report was the establishment of an implementation group to oversee implementation of the reforms contained in the report.

As my predecessor previously said in this House, he agreed with a suggestion made here some time ago by Deputy Martin that this group should be based in the Oireachtas and should comprise Members of the Dáil and Seanad from all parties and groups, with access to independent expert advice as required. He wrote to party leaders in September last year seeking their agreement to this approach and their intention to participate. I have reviewed matters in this regard and am keen to progress them. I will contact leaders shortly with a view to having the group up and running as soon as possible.

**Deputy Micheál Martin:** I think the Taoiseach has answered the questions that were on all our minds because the dates speak for themselves. Last September 12 months we had a commitment to set up this group on Seanad reform. The Taoiseach's own Department's statement of strategy says there is a commitment "to fully implement the Manning report on the Seanad". Given his comments on the Manning report I am surprised that statement is still on the statement of strategy. The Taoiseach might review that and consider deleting it because I am not so sure it is such a commitment now as it may have been.

The Taoiseach's statement that he intends to be in contact with us has a familiar ring to it. The previous Taoiseach said on numerous occasions over a three-year period that he would shortly be in contact with us in terms of setting up the group. I ask that the group would be set up as a matter of urgency and a chair appointed.

There is a further matter in regard to the referendum on the Seanad that was held many years ago, namely, the issue of amending legislation in terms of extending its franchise. Is that plan now completely on the back-burner?

On the question of referendums, the Taoiseach said on the previous occasion we asked that, given that the holding of referendums is a matter for the Oireachtas there would be consultations with party leaders on the range of referendums the Government felt might take place next year. Could he indicate when that consultation with other party leaders will take place?

**Deputy Mary Lou McDonald:** The abolition of the Seanad is a well-trodden path which

then turned into the reform of Seanad but none of the above has happened. I do not detect any great political appetite or urgency for dealing with the issue. My questions, much like the previous speaker, are around when all of this will be actioned and who will chair the implementation group. There have been 12 separate reports proposing Seanad reform and yet here we are pondering this issue again. If this is something that is going to happen - I believe it should - then we need to see evidence of action and we need to see it very soon.

**Deputy Brendan Howlin:** My first question is in regard to intent. I know the programme for Government and I have the reply to a question by me on 4 October, which I expect is exactly what the Taoiseach has just told the House now, namely, that the programme for Government is committed to implement the Manning report. I am looking at the executive summary and recommendations of the Manning report. Does the Taoiseach support them? In his view is this the blueprint or is it the basis for a further discussion on what the Second Chamber in this Oireachtas should look like? I am interested in hearing his own view. Will the report be implemented? I was not convinced, once the proposal to abolish the Seanad was defeated by the people, that there was really a firm political commitment to have a reformed Second Chamber and what that reformed Second Chamber would look like.

The Taoiseach has a reputation for speaking directly. Perhaps he would very directly say what in his view the Second Chamber should look like and if the Manning report is the blueprint he would like to follow.

**Deputy Eamon Ryan:** I would like to echo that question because although it is difficult to interpret referendum votes, I felt that at the time, when campaigning against the referendum presented by the Government, there was a clear sense that people were not voting to keep the Seanad as is, but they were voting for reform. For us to ignore that, in particular at a time when we are looking at a range of other referendums that we are considering putting forward, would be a mistake. We should have this on our agenda and in the timeline for future referendums in the next two years. I am very keen to hear the Taoiseach very broadly outline what is his position; whether it is abolition, reform or the *status quo*? If it is reform then we can get down to the details of it but if it is one of the other two then at least we will know where we stand. I am keen to hear an answer to Deputy Howlin's question.

**The Taoiseach:** I will set up the implementation group in the next few weeks. It does need a chairperson who would have broad respect and be broadly accepted across the Oireachtas. I have not yet had an opportunity to approach anyone but I intend to do so once I get a moment if I can to do something that is not already top of the agenda in the next couple of days or in the next week or two.

The programme for Government commits to reforming the Seanad in line with the Manning report and I will honour that commitment. I am bound by the programme for Government, just as all my Ministers are and everyone who is on the Fine Gael and Independent Alliance benches and some Independents as well. That is why it is included in the strategy statement.

I will not lie to the Deputy. I will not lie to anyone in this House. Frankly, I do have reservations about the Manning report. The Manning report proposes that there would not be a referendum on the Seanad and that it would be reformed within the confines of the existing constitutional provisions. That requires retaining the panels, which date back to the 1930s, and which to me are archaic. I cannot remember all of them but they cover administrative, industrial and commercial areas.

**Deputy Denis Naughten:** Agriculture.

**The Taoiseach:** Perhaps they do not reflect the Ireland of 2017, never mind the Ireland of 2027. They are corporatist and date from the 1930s. They date from a particular model of Catholic democracy that to me is out of date. What it proposes is re-registering the entire country to vote again because everyone would have to nominate which of those five panels they want to be an elector on, or whether they would prefer to be an elector on one of the two university panels. The first thing we would have to do is re-register the entire country to vote and hold a major educational exercise explaining to people whether they should ask to be on the administrative panel, the education panel or the industrial and commercial panel. Frankly, I am not sure that is the best solution we can come up.

*4 o'clock*

**Deputy Micheál Martin:** That is why I asked the Taoiseach about it. He just said he is committed to it.

**Deputy Brendan Howlin:** Why has the Taoiseach committed to it?

**The Taoiseach:** Deputy Howlin asked me my personal view and I have only just started to give it. I have genuine reservations about the process. However, I fully accept the commitment in the programme for Government. I will honour that commitment and the implementation group will be set up.

**Deputy Micheál Martin:** If the Taoiseach does not believe in it why does he not change it?

**The Taoiseach:** I look forward to the proponent explaining what a great idea it all is.

**Deputy Micheál Martin:** He is an eminent member of the Taoiseach's party - Maurice Manning.

### **Departmental Staff**

4. **Deputy Brendan Howlin** asked the Taoiseach to set out the number of political staff and advisers he has employed; and the role of each. [41631/17]

5. **Deputy Gerry Adams** asked the Taoiseach for details on the political staff and advisers employed by him in his Department; and the name, title, function, salary, terms of employment and location of each. [41636/17]

6. **Deputy Micheál Martin** asked the Taoiseach to outline the policy areas that his appointed advisers have. [41864/17]

**The Taoiseach:** I propose to take Questions Nos. 4 to 6, inclusive, together.

There are 20 politically-appointed staff employed by my Department. Nine of these are advisers, including two special advisers to the Government Chief Whip. Those based in my Department in Government Buildings are Brian Murphy, chief of staff, paid at deputy secretary grade; John Carroll, head of policy and programme implementation, paid at assistant secretary grade; Nick Miller, spokesman and communications adviser to the Taoiseach, paid at assistant secretary grade; Patrick Geoghegan, special adviser, paid at assistant secretary grade; Angela Flanagan, special adviser, paid at principal officer grade; Philip O'Callaghan, special adviser,

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paid at principal officer grade; Jim D'Arcy, special adviser, paid at assistant principal grade; Lisa Tavey, personal assistant, paid at higher executive officer grade; Feargal Purcell, Government press secretary, paid at assistant secretary grade; Catherine Halloran, deputy Government press secretary, paid at principal officer grade – she is principally press officer for the Independent Ministers; Sarah Meade, assistant Government press secretary, paid at principal officer grade; Tony Williams, chief strategist for the Independent Alliance, paid at principal officer grade; Dónall Geoghegan, political co-ordinator for the Independent Ministers, paid at principal officer grade; Mark O'Doherty, who is adviser to the Chief Whip, paid at principal officer grade; Gregory Harkin, special adviser to the Government Chief Whip, paid at principal officer grade; Seosamh Ó Ducháin, civilian driver for the Government Chief Whip; and John McClafferty, civilian driver for the Government Chief Whip.

Those based in the Houses of the Oireachtas who fall under my Vote are Ian O'Brien, civilian driver for Leader of the Seanad, Edward O'Connell, civilian driver for Leader of the Seanad and James O'Grady, personal assistant, paid at higher executive officer grade, who is based in my constituency office. With the exception of Patrick Geoghegan, who is a public servant, all are unestablished civil servants.

The special advisers working in my Department provide briefings and advice on a wide range of policy matters, as well as performing other functions as I may direct from time to time. They also liaise with other special advisers in each Department so that I remain informed on developments throughout Government.

**Acting Chairman (Deputy Eugene Murphy):** I remind Deputies that we have approximately seven and a half minutes left. I want to ensure the three Deputies get to contribute so please be brief. Deputy Howlin is first.

**Deputy Brendan Howlin:** I have actually lost count of the number. Does the Taoiseach now have eight special advisers? Is that right?

**The Taoiseach:** Yes, if we include the Chief Whip and Independent Ministers' staff. They do not actually work to me.

**Deputy Brendan Howlin:** How many actually work to the Taoiseach? I want to get this correct in my head. He has the chief of staff, Brian Murphy, Nick Miller, Angela Flanagan, Professor Patrick Geoghegan, John Carroll, Philip O'Callaghan, the former Senator, Jim D'Arcy, who is an advisor on the Border and Brexit, and Sarah Meade. Is that right? Are they all the Taoiseach's staff?

**The Taoiseach:** They are.

**Deputy Brendan Howlin:** That is eight. Is that correct? Is Feargal Purcell still in place? That is another one. On top of that, we have the strategic communications unit. How many staff are in that unit?

**The Taoiseach:** I do not know.

**Deputy Micheál Martin:** There are six.

**Deputy Brendan Howlin:** Is that six more?

**The Taoiseach:** That is a matter for the Secretary General.

**Deputy Brendan Howlin:** Normally, the Taoiseach would answer questions in the House on the staff. We have done it always over the years. There is a formidable volume of additional special advisers and staff over and above those employed by the Taoiseach's predecessor. Do we have a running cost? I would exclude civilian drivers obviously. How much are the political staff going to cost?

**Deputy Mary Lou McDonald:** I too would like a sense of the costs associated with the Taoiseach's political staff and advisers. The Taoiseach might provide that to us.

Nick Miller is a communications person. Is that correct? There are two press secretaries. What are they doing? What relationship do they have, if any, with the strategic communications unit? Where is the division of labour?

I want the Taoiseach to address another issue. He previously made a claim that the strategic communications unit was cost-neutral. As we know, in the budget the Taoiseach allocated €5 million to that unit. That is hardly cost-neutral. Can the Taoiseach explain that contradiction?

I know the former Senator, Mr. D'Arcy, is the Taoiseach's adviser on the North, the Border and Brexit. Of course it is very good that the Taoiseach has specialist advice on that area. I understand that in a "Spotlight" programme due to broadcast tonight the Taoiseach raises an issue and an objection to the 50% plus one basis for a Border poll or a referendum on Irish unity. I wish to advise the Taoiseach that, although all of us would wish to see such a proposition built consensually and democratically to far exceed a 50% plus one threshold, such is the provision in what is an international legally binding agreement.

**Deputy Micheál Martin:** When a civil servant is put into a quasi-political role or when he is appointed to a position without normal procedures, he is appointed under special adviser legislation. This was the practice followed in the past by all Ministers and taoisigh. It is a practice I followed myself. Can the Taoiseach explain why the top two positions in the strategic communications unit were not appointed in the accepted manner? The Taoiseach conceded to the House last week that he went to the head of the strategic communications unit in advance to check his availability and that then, technically, the Secretary General of the Department appointed him. In my view, in the real world, the Taoiseach decided to appoint him. It is a worrying trend that the rules do not apply to the Taoiseach in respect of the appointment to such key positions.

I would appreciate clarification on the case of the deputy head of unit. I stand to be corrected but our information is that the person was appointed originally from outside the civil and public service to the Department of the Taoiseach by the Taoiseach's predecessor as part of the European Council Presidency. Then, subsequently, he was appointed to promote the Action Plan for Jobs. The Taoiseach might clarify whether that person has ever undertaken a competitive interview to be appointed. Is that person still deemed to be a political appointment? Is the person now an established civil servant, as the Taoiseach has claimed? Can the Taoiseach explain how that progression occurred and how that happened? Does the Taoiseach think it is acceptable to politicise Civil Service positions in this manner? I believe that is the core issue. What we have been witnessing in recent times is a blurring of the divide between civil servants who, since the foundation of the State, have always had a non-political role, with the political objectives of the lead party in government.

**Acting Chairman (Deputy Eugene Murphy):** Thank you, Deputy Martin.

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**Deputy Micheál Martin:** Finally, will the Taoiseach indicate, in respect of the work of the strategic communications unit, why any adverse statistics are released on Friday afternoon? Anything to do with waiting lists, housing lists and so on are released on Friday afternoon or the Friday of a bank holiday.

**Acting Chairman (Deputy Eugene Murphy):** Thank you.

**Deputy Micheál Martin:** Will the communications unit be issuing statements providing us with information that is as clear as it possibly can be about record hospital and housing waiting lists?

**The Taoiseach:** The level of paranoia about the strategic communications unit really is extraordinary. First, it has absolutely no role whatsoever in producing or issuing statistics. Statistics on waiting lists are released by the HSE and the National Treatment Purchase Fund. The Central Statistics Office releases other statistics. The Department of Housing, Planning and Local Government releases other statistics. These bodies have been releasing other statistics long before the SCU was ever created. My Department has no role in telling these bodies when they should or should not produce their numbers.

The top two positions are not political appointees. They are not special advisers. That is why they did not follow the special adviser process. That process is only for special advisers. The head of the SCU was seconded by the Secretary General of my Department. The other position was a re-assignment by the Secretary General of the Department. I did not even know that Ms Pappin was being assigned to that post until after it had happened, which gives a real indication of the extent to which I am involved in these matters.

**Deputy Micheál Martin:** That is inappropriate.

**The Taoiseach:** When it comes to staffing, it is a matter for an office within my Department. Decisions on the number of staff and on the appointment of individual staff members are made by the Secretary General.

**Deputy Micheál Martin:** That is not right.

**The Taoiseach:** I am not going to be interfering with it. The only role I had whatsoever in it was what I have already put on the record of the House, that is to say, I suggested someone for the head of it. I suggested someone who, as we all know, had done a great job already for Creative Ireland, The Gathering and the 1916 commemorations.

**Deputy Micheál Martin:** That is not right.

**The Taoiseach:** I do not agree that it is inappropriate. For example, when we are appointing Secretaries General to Departments we are given a list of names to choose from.

**Deputy Micheál Martin:** We do not give the names. The names are given by the Top Level Appointments Committee.

**The Taoiseach:** There is a much greater political role in the appointment of a Secretary General than there is in suggesting that somebody get a position.

**Deputy Micheál Martin:** The Taoiseach is wrong.

**Acting Chairman (Deputy Eugene Murphy):** Let the Taoiseach speak without interrup-

tion.

**The Taoiseach:** To answer the other questions, since I thought this would come up-----

**Deputy Micheál Martin:** That is not true.

**The Taoiseach:** -----the list of staff I read out includes staff assigned to Independents, to the Chief Whip and drivers. For comparison, that adds up to 20, compared with 23 under the former Taoiseach, Deputy Enda Kenny. I have fewer staff than did my predecessor and the total cost of their salaries is considerably lower than the cost of salaries under former taoisigh, former Deputies Brian Cowen and Bertie Ahern. I spend less and have fewer staff. I hope somebody will report on that since it is a fact.

On the matter of the cost of running-----

**Deputy Micheál Martin:** Does that include the strategic communications unit?

**The Taoiseach:** It is costly. That does not mean it will cost nothing-----

**Deputy Brendan Howlin:** It was six by our count.

**The Taoiseach:** -----particularly when it comes to running campaigns but that is entirely met by existing resources in my Department. The Deputies will know that from the budget book because my Department is one of the few taking a reduction in its budget in 2018.

### **Topical Issue Matters**

**Acting Chairman (Deputy Eugene Murphy):** I wish to advise the House of the following matters in respect of which notice has been given under Standing Order 29A and the name of the Member in each case: (1) Deputy Dessie Ellis - the availability of county council lands in Dunsink Lane for social housing; (2) Deputy James Browne - the position with regard to the application for the new special school at St Patrick's in Drumgoold, Enniscorthy; (3) Deputy Tom Neville - Newcastlewest Garda Station, County Limerick; (4) Deputies Niamh Smyth and Sean Fleming - to consider revision of the pension system to take consideration of family and carer commitments; (5) Deputies Thomas P. Broughan, Clare Daly and Jack Chambers - the difficulties with the Aer Lingus second supplementary pension scheme; (6) Deputy Jackie Cahill - to reconsider the new stamp duty regime on agricultural land transfers; (7) Deputy Michael McGrath - the outstanding claims following the collapse of Setanta insurance in 2014; (8) Deputy Noel Rock - the closure of the Finglas East post office; (9) Deputies Mattie McGrath, Paul Murphy and Mick Barry - the resources available in the aftermath of hurricane Ophelia; (10) Deputy Louise O'Reilly - industrial relations in health sector, section 39 agencies; (11) Deputy Frank O'Rourke - the waiting lists for spinal surgery and assessments at Tallaght and Naas hospitals; (12) Deputy Kevin O'Keeffe - the situation at St. Patrick's Community Hospital, Fermoy, County Cork; (13) Deputy Fiona O'Loughlin - the status of the day-care centre in Monasterevin, County Kildare; (14) Deputy Mick Wallace - the accuracy of the system for recording housing and apartment building completions; (15) Deputy Michael Moynihan - to discuss the liquidation of Charleville Credit Union; and (16) Deputy Eugene Murphy - the status of facilities at Moylough national school, County Galway.

The matters raised by Deputies Dessie Ellis, Frank O'Rourke, Michael Moynihan, Thomas

P. Broughan, Clare Daly and Jack Chambers have been selected for discussion.

## **Ceisteanna - Questions (Resumed)**

### **Priority Questions**

#### **Child Care Costs**

29. **Deputy Anne Rabbitte** asked the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs her views on whether the subsidy levels under the single affordable childcare scheme are sufficient to account for the absence of increases to these levels in budget 2018; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [44019/17]

**Deputy Anne Rabbitte:** My question is to ask the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs her views on whether the subsidy levels under the single affordable childcare scheme are sufficient to account for the absence of increases to these levels in budget 2018, and if she will make a statement on the matter.

**Minister for Children and Youth Affairs (Deputy Katherine Zappone):** I believe that budget 2018 marks another substantial further step forward in supporting families with young children. In recent years, I have secured significant additional investment in the early years sector, focusing investment on different but critical elements of early years care and education. The new measures announced in budget 2018 form part of a trend in continued growth and investment. In budget 2017, I secured a 35% increase in child care funding, following a similar 35% increase in budget 2016.

There has been an increase of 87% in early years funding since 2015. Despite this, Ireland will require many years of significant investment in child care to catch up with our OECD counterparts. The increase in targeted subsidies introduced last month does, however, represent a major step towards accessible, affordable, quality child care. These increases reflect my ambition to support the provision of quality child care services with appropriately supported and qualified staff.

The increases in the targeted schemes introduced last month are considerable, up to 50%. This will significantly decrease the amount of co-payment required of low-income families or parents in education or training. Some families will benefit from as much as €7,500 per child per year. I also introduced a universal subsidy worth up to €1,040 per year. This subsidy is aimed at children not yet in the free preschool programme.

I have used budget 2018 to deliver fully on the commitment in the programme for Government regarding early childhood care and education, ECCE, and to increase investment to support the quality of services.

All of these changes are points towards our goal to deliver affordable, accessible, quality child care.

**Deputy Anne Rabbitte:** I welcome what was delivered in the budget for ECCE. Focusing

on the affordable childcare scheme, will the Minister confirm what she has started with regard to the affordable childcare scheme, and that our ICT system will be in place for September 2018? I am seeking a commitment from the Minister to have a pathway for that to ensure it will be there. How is the legislative framework proceeding to make sure that the Revenue and social protection pieces of the jigsaw related to the affordable childcare scheme will also be in place for September 2018? While I compliment the fact that some families will be in receipt of €7,500, some are missing out and will not even get as much as €12 per week. There are as many as 9,000 not included because of the threshold of €47,500. Was there much uptake of the GP cards or have any of the Minister's staff a reflection on that? That was an avenue to bring more people into the affordable subsidy level in the affordable childcare scheme.

**Deputy Katherine Zappone:** Those are very helpful questions with regard to the Deputy's original question. On subsidies provided for families to ensure that the cost of child care is more affordable, the Deputy's first question asked if we are on track to ensure that the affordable childcare scheme will be able to be delivered in 2018 in light of the ICT issues. As I understand it, that process is continuing within the context of an overall group that is outside of my control and needs to ensure that proper quality and systems are put in place over a period. That is an oversight group, as the Deputy is aware. As I have said before, it is much better to get this right, because it is going to be in place for generations, than to get it wrong. I hope it will be able to be delivered but I cannot absolutely guarantee that now.

I understand that the legislation, asked about in the Deputy's second question, is on track. On the threshold for families, some may have missed out because we do not have the affordable childcare scheme fully developed to be delivered in the way that was originally intended, although we will deliver it. That issue was behind my judgment to ensure that every child is entitled to two full free years of preschool. That will add to the affordability issue for families.

**Deputy Anne Rabbitte:** I ask the Minister about ICT in every session. She has said she hopes that it will be there. Is funding the issue? Is it very complex? Is it difficult for one Department to work with three others? Is it that we are introducing a new system that has never been brought in before? Is the Minister looking at the model with regard to the student universal support Ireland, SUSI, system? I am trying to understand where we are going with this ICT because it all hinges on the ICT. Child care costs cripple parents. None of us will deny that. If this is holding up progress in delivering the affordable childcare scheme, I hope to understand what the hold-up is.

**Deputy Katherine Zappone:** I know the Deputy is aware of this, but it is important to put on record that significant increases to reduce the cost of child care for families are being put in place and have begun to be delivered since September. There is a significant sign-up rate for those various schemes, including the universal scheme for under threes, which was the first time that the Government has put in place subsidies for families for children under three. As the Deputy is aware, a significant additional investment is being made in targeted funding. That is just beginning to roll out. Families are beginning to feel that and there has been a significant sign-up rate for those schemes. It is important to place that on the record of the House.

The Deputy identified the issue of the ICT system. The development of the ICT system is progressing in an oversight group process. This involves a special office of people with expertise in information systems to ensure that what is ultimately delivered will be correct, and will last. That is outside my control. It is a process that involves other systems that are being developed from scratch, as significant as this one in terms of, as the Deputy rightly points out, the

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sharing of Revenue and social protection data that the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform and other Departments have identified needs to be done in order that we get that right. I hope that we can deliver but it is outside of my control. It is in the context of that process that we will deliver the best system for children and families.

### **Child Poverty**

30. **Deputy Denise Mitchell** asked the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs the extra efforts being taken to tackle youth poverty and child homelessness; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [43809/17]

**Acting Chairman (Deputy Eugene Murphy):** Question No. 30 is in the name of Deputy Denise Mitchell. Unfortunately, Deputy Mitchell cannot be here. Deputy Ó Laoghaire is taking the question. I am sure the House is okay with that.

**Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire:** Deputy Mitchell conveys her apologies. The Deputy asks about the extra efforts being taken by the Department and the Government generally in regard to youth poverty and child homelessness, both of which are related, and asks that the Minister to make a statement on the matter and outlines what actions were taken in the budget to deal with this.

**Deputy Katherine Zappone:** The reduction of child poverty and supports for homeless children and families are key political priorities for the Government.

My Department works closely with the Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection which has lead responsibility for child poverty in informing the development of this cross-sectoral priority.

My Department administers a range of funding schemes and programmes to support the provision of youth services to young people, including those from disadvantaged communities, throughout the country. In 2017, I provided current funding of €57.4 million to support the provision of youth services.

Recently my Department operated a youth employability initiative funded under the dormant accounts funding scheme. The programmes assisted over 1,000 young people, aged 15 to 24 years, to build skills that enhanced their employability. A review of the initiative to inform any future linked development is taking place.

During 2016 and 2017, I also gave approval for funding of 14 new youth projects and the expansion of seven others. These sample projects will provide youth services, including those related to homelessness, in areas of need as identified by the local education and training boards across the country.

There are 109 family resource centres currently in receipt of funding from Tusla and I have provided Tusla with resources for an additional 11 centres to be opened. I have also provided extra supports for family resource centres and will be making a significant announcement on this later this week.

In relation to housing, we are working closely with Tusla to provide supports for families in emergency accommodation in order to mitigate the challenges faced by parents and children in

this situation. I have introduced free child care for the children of families experiencing homelessness. Regarding school attendance, Tusla's educational welfare service offers a number of supports to children and families experiencing homelessness and works together with other statutory and voluntary agencies in this regard. Actions taken by Tusla include the provision of funding for child-support workers and the appointment of a homelessness liaison officer.

**Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire:** As the Minister stated, these are cross-sectoral issues and there are many Departments responsible for them. Nonetheless, in terms of the Government as a whole, it is fair to say that the number of children in emergency accommodation, at almost 3,000, is at quite a shocking level at this stage. The related welfare issues are quite serious. There is the issue of food poverty and its implications for them. Generally speaking, there is the question about how suitable some of the emergency accommodation is.

In the first instance, I want to ask the Minister whether she would support, in regard to the homelessness issue, some form of further independent inspection regime for emergency accommodation, in particular for families, and whether there has been any progress in Tusla's engagement with the existing forms of emergency accommodation.

**Deputy Katherine Zappone:** I agree with the Deputy that the number of children in emergency accommodation is unacceptable. I indicated in my speech in response to the budget that the Government could be doing more, particularly in regard to preventive measures, in order to prevent as many people and families as possible moving into the emergency accommodation. One of the difficulties is that many children and families are moving out but, as the Deputy identified, the numbers continue to increase. Many children and families have received some form of a home but the fact that the numbers are continuing to go up is the difficulty. I agree there needs to be, as I said, further preventive measures. The Deputy will be aware that Tusla has worked with others to develop standards on ensuring the safety and protection of children while they are in emergency accommodation.

**Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire:** I am aware the Minister has committed moneys again in this year's budget to the area-based programme on tackling child poverty. The Minister also mentioned the family resource centres, which I would be a strong advocate of. What is the Minister's vision for the area-based projects over the next few years because there are some projects which are the remnants of Atlantic Philanthropies' investments and others that are probably more directly coming from the Department. All of these do good work. Some may have slightly different models of practice. I very much believe that this area-based approach is crucial in tackling poverty as well as some of the Barnardos centres, but I am unclear as to where the Government sees the future of all these centres and projects and what the strategy and roadmap for these projects are.

**Deputy Katherine Zappone:** I thank Deputy Ó Laoghaire for the excellent question. As the Deputy will be aware, I was able to secure funding in budget 2018 in order to ensure the continuation of the area-based programmes that are going on in different places throughout the country. As the Deputy indicated, there are different models being employed in that regard, but they certainly are all focused on prevention and early intervention, and the provision of services in the context of the communities where they are located.

The overall programme is currently being evaluated and reviewed by the Centre for Effective Services. The purpose of the evaluation is to assess the impact of the programme nationally. Work on the evaluation is ongoing but initial indications are positive for improving outcomes

for children in 13 areas of disadvantage. Of course, I will await that report, but I have some views on ways in which we can continue to ensure communities, in the context of encouraging them to participate with children and families, between State and NGO and voluntary bodies, do the best they can to ensure that the children who are able to access those initiatives' services receive the best health, educational and care outcomes possible.

### **Departmental Expenditure**

31. **Deputy Anne Rabbitte** asked the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs the amount of funding that will be ring-fenced for the roll-out of mandatory reporting in 2018; her views on whether this will be sufficient; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [44020/17]

**Deputy Anne Rabbitte:** I ask the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs the amount of funding that will be ring-fenced for the roll-out of mandatory reporting in 2018, her views on whether this will be sufficient and to make a statement on the matter.

**Deputy Katherine Zappone:** I recently announced my intention to commence the mandatory reporting provisions of the Children First Act 2015 with effect from 11 December this year.

It is not possible at this stage to be precise about the amount of funding to be allocated to a specific area such as Children First. Children First mandatory reporting, for example, could benefit from social workers who are dealing in part with other aspects of Tusla's work and also from elements of staff training and IT costs. Exact funding requirements will become clearer as Tusla develops its business plan for 2018. However, I have emphasised to Tusla that mandatory reporting is a critical requirement for 2018 and the agency has committed to taking all actions necessary to achieve effective implementation.

I will shortly be issuing Tusla with its 2018 performance statement in line with the provisions of the Child and Family Agency Act 2013. Tusla will, in response to the performance statement, prepare a business plan for 2018 which will be submitted to me for consideration. The precise level of funding to be allocated for the roll-out of mandatory reporting will be considered by Tusla in preparing its business plan, having regard to the overall level of funding available in 2018.

I am pleased to make additional resources of €40.6 million available to Tusla in budget 2018. It will bring Tusla's financial allocation to just over €753 million in 2018. This level of funding will allow it to recruit additional staff, respond to identified risks and meet increased demands for services, including those arising from mandatory reporting. In particular, the financial allocation will allow Tusla to meet a number of key priorities in line with its obligations under the Children First legislation. It will include ensuring the appropriate internal systems are in place to deal with the intake of mandatory reports by Tusla and that a suite of resources will be available to support and assist all sectors in implementing the legislation.

**Deputy Anne Rabbitte:** I thank the Minister for her response and welcome the €40.6 million in additional funding for Tusla which is to cover the cost of the roll-out of mandatory reporting and the roll-out of the nationwide out-of-hours social work service, as well as a further investment in family resource centres, including the opening of an additional 11 centres. My real concern centres on the fact that the CEO of Tusla, Mr. Fred McBride, said recently at a committee that evidence from other jurisdictions suggested mandatory reporting could increase

the number of referrals to Tusla by 150%. He had sought an additional €38 million to support the roll-out of mandatory reporting. The Ombudsman for Children, Dr. Niall Muldoon, welcomed the Minister's announcement of mandatory reporting and while I wholeheartedly support her initiative, I believe there is not enough funding in place to support it. I would like to hear her views on Mr. McBride's remarks and his business plan.

**Deputy Katherine Zappone:** I am open to correction, but it is my understanding, based on communications with my Secretary General, that Mr. McBride indicated that there could be a significant increase in the number of referrals to Tusla as a result of the roll-out of mandatory reporting. I understood it to be a 50% increase, as distinct from 150%, but we can take another look at that matter. It is Mr. McBride's job to identify where there is the potential for an increase, but at the same time, he is aware - we have had such discussions subsequent to this kind of exchange - that nobody knows exactly what the increase in the number of reports will be or what percentage of them will be substantiated. While potentially the increase could be as high as 150%, I do not expect it to be so, particularly because the Act identifies that, in the context of mandatory reporting, those reporting must have concerns that there is "significant harm" to a child, as distinct from the lower threshold that currently applies in the context of voluntary reporting. Given the raising of the threshold to a concern about "significant harm" to a child, it is my expectation that we are covering many children in the context of the voluntary reporting. There may be some increase, but it is my belief the additional resources I have secured for Tusla are sufficient. I further add that it is not just about resources; it is also about the processes by which Tusla takes in referrals.

**Deputy Anne Rabbitte:** If I were to accept the 50% figure which I am more than willing to do, my other concern relates to the recruitment of staff. It is my biggest concern. The Minister's predecessor, Senator James Reilly, announced the recruitment of an additional 247 staff in 2015, but if one looks at the figures for the past 18 months, one will see that we are struggling to recruit the necessary staff. While it is levelling out a little, the introduction of mandatory reporting will bring about additional pressure. Will we be able to recruit and retain the staff needed to bring forward this very positive change? Tusla has had a very difficult 18 months, with one negative report after another. Mandatory reporting will now be on its table too. While the Minister may have provided enough funding for staffing in Tusla, what does she think about the wider recruitment issue?

**Deputy Katherine Zappone:** The Deputy has asked some excellent questions. In announcing the resources I shared a platform with Mr. McBride and we had a lot of discussions in that regard. He has identified that there are 305 people at various stages of recruitment; that Tusla is in the process of recruiting and ultimately employing the people concerned. In that context, there has been a lot of positive action in the context of Tusla's overall three-year plan to get the numbers it needs. It has been proactive and working extremely hard to recruit the necessary mix of team members and professionals. Of the aforementioned 305 people, 185 are social workers. A lot of work has been done to achieve that number of new recruits. In addition, the resources I am putting in place will ensure Tusla will be able to continue that recruitment to add an additional 300 workers.

### **Child and Family Agency Staff**

32. **Deputy Denise Mitchell** asked the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs the mea-

asures or initiatives being undertaken to ensure the retention of highly skilled social workers within the Child and Family Agency; and the extra resources which will be allocated to recruit more social workers. [43810/17]

**Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire:** This follows neatly on from Deputy Anne Rabbitte's last question. It relates to Tusla and the initiatives being undertaken to ensure, in particular, the retention of social workers, as well as the resources required to recruit more social workers. This is obviously a very important issue. I welcome the additional moneys for Tusla which was one of the priorities identified in Sinn Féin's pre-budget submission. I am glad that the Minister has secured additional funding for Tusla. The question is focused on staff retention but also on the recruitment of staff.

**Deputy Katherine Zappone:** I acknowledge that the recruitment and retention of social workers are among the biggest challenges for Tusla. Working in child protection is one of the most difficult tasks and I welcome the dedication of all professionals in Tusla who undertake this extremely important task.

Tusla has worked hard to retain staff by developing a supportive working environment. Its overall turnover rate for social workers is about 7%, compared with 15% in the equivalent system in England.

As part of its retention strategy, it has implemented an extensive continuous professional development strategy during 2016 and 2017. During 2016 social workers had more than 3,700 training course attendances as part of the strategy which commits to all social workers having a minimum of 21 hours for personal development plans and ten hours for engaging in continuous profession development.

Tusla has also introduced a national transfer policy to facilitate staff who wish to relocate to another part of the country within its services, while ensuring the agency retains their valuable expertise.

Tusla's health, well-being and employee assistance programme has a range of services available to staff, including a critical incident stress management team to support teams and individuals in the event of a traumatic event. The programme has just completed a staff retention survey and the findings will inform part of the new retention strategy for Tusla.

Other supports for Tusla staff include rehabilitation services to support staff who are out of work owing to injury or illness.

In addition to its retention measures, Tusla is putting a huge emphasis on recruitment. This includes an intensive graduate recruitment programme and a rolling programme to attract existing social workers.

Budget 2018 provides for a significant increase in the funding allocation for Tusla. In 2018 there will be €753 million in funding available to Tusla, representing an increase of €40.6 million or 5.7% on the allocation in 2017. Since the establishment of the agency in 2014, its funding will have increased by €144 million or 23.6% in 2018.

**Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire:** I thank the Minister for her response. This is not the first time a response from the Government has compared our system favourably with that in place in Britain or, specifically, England, but I do not think we should compare Ireland with

England. The English social care system is in crisis and almost anything could be compared favourably with it. So many of the issues, controversies and reports in recent years have been related to resourcing, while some have been related to social workers being overburdened with work and having unmanageable case loads. The issues surrounding child protection social workers seem to be particularly acute. The number of child protection social workers leaving the system was quite considerable when we discussed this issue about 12 months ago. What is the current retention rate in that specific category?

**Deputy Katherine Zappone:** I will be happy to supply the Deputy with the details, but I do not have the specific information to hand. Picking up on his point about the system in place in England, I will also be happy to compare this jurisdiction with others, although I do not necessarily agree with him on the matter. The fact is that Tusla has been able to retain social workers. The current turnover rate is approximately 7%, which is very good, although we would obviously prefer it to be lower. Tusla is working on this, with particular reference to the retention programmes I have mentioned.

I understand the reason the Deputy is raising the issue of people working in the area of child protection. I have been encouraging Tusla to show leadership. Yes, we need social workers and to make their working environment more conducive. I have tried to identify some of the ways in which the organisation is supporting its staff in that regard. At the same time, however, we need to move forward plans to ensure the mix of staff working in the area of child protection is the right one in order that social workers, social care workers, administrators and front-line staff are doing the jobs they have been trained to do. That will make the system more efficient.

**Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire:** I take the Minister's point that turnover rate is currently at 7%. When we dealt with this issue 12 months ago, we were talking about losing 150 social workers a year, which was very significant. I would like to pass on some observations made to me by social workers on matters I have previously raised with Mr. Fred McBride at committee level. One was that there previously was a grade of advanced social work practitioner. This issue might perhaps be worth exploring. Another observation is on the centralised manner in which recruitment is carried out. There is a desire that this function be devolved to more local social work operations, with a desire to have more administrative staff. Given that the work involved in child protection is so intense, it might be worthy of its own grade. This issue might be examined in the context of employment conditions and pay. I do not necessarily have a settled view on it, but I am curious to hear the Minister's view.

**Deputy Katherine Zappone:** It is certainly a suggestion that could be entertained and I will be happy to communicate it to Tusla. The Deputy has clearly already raised the matter with the CEO, Mr. Fred McBride. His focus is on considering additional ways by which staff working on the front line with children who have experienced significant harm can be supported, which is good. Some of the questions have focused on how we can attract and retain staff. It concerns the ways in which social workers can see they will be supported and that their status will be accorded. It also concerns their conditions and pay, of course. I am well aware of these issues, as is senior management in Tusla which is looking for ways to continually improve in that regard. I think the Deputy's suggestions are worthy of consideration.

### **Child and Family Agency Funding**

33. **Deputy Sean Sherlock** asked the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs the way in which the additional financial resources apportioned to Tusla announced in budget 2018 will be deployed. [43904/17]

**Acting Chairman (Deputy Eugene Murphy):** Deputy Jan O’Sullivan will take this question for Deputy Sherlock. Is that agreed? Agreed.

**Deputy Jan O’Sullivan:** As storm Ophelia was, unfortunately, quite hard on east Cork, Deputy Sean Sherlock is not able to be here. The question is very much related to the previous ones. It concerns the general way in which the additional financial resources apportioned to Tusla will be deployed.

**Deputy Katherine Zappone:** I am fully aware of the difficulties in County Cork.

I am pleased to inform the Deputy that I have allocated an extra €40.6 million to Tusla for next year. This will bring its allocation to more than €753 million in 2018. It is higher than the extra €37 million allocated in 2017.

I will shortly issue Tusla with its 2018 performance statement in line with the provisions of the Child and Family Agency Act 2013 and it will then prepare a business plan for 2018, setting out its proposed main areas of spending.

I have already indicated to it that among my priorities for 2018 will be: actions to support mandatory reporting under Children First from 11 December this year; addressing the gaps in out-of-hours services; and further investment in family resource centres in local communities that deliver services to families, especially in disadvantaged areas across the country.

I am pleased that the extra funding secured will also allow Tusla to recruit over 300 staff, reduce the number of unallocated cases, improve ICT and advance developments in areas such as domestic, sexual and gender-based violence, adoption, aftercare, and homelessness supports.

I am pleased to be able to support Tusla in this way in a major programme of service development and reform.

A more specific breakdown of funding happens in the process of preparing a business plan. More generally, however, I can say approximately €15 million will support existing services which also concerns recruitment. A further €10 million will be used to build up front-line service capacity and recruit 140 staff in critical areas, including the management of unallocated cases; aftercare and special care services. These are just some of the breakdowns I could offer to the Deputy.

**Deputy Jan O’Sullivan:** Like my colleagues who spoke previously, I, too, am very concerned to ensure a significant number of social workers will be recruited specifically in the area of child protection. The Minister gave the figure of 185 social workers going through the recruitment process. I know that last year the goal of achieving a 60% reduction in cases to 2,700 by the end of 2016 was not, in fact, reached. Perhaps the Minister might give us an indication as to where we are in that regard.

I am not sure if my next question falls under the heading of Tusla or whether it comes directly under the auspices of the Minister’s Department, in which case she may not be able to answer it today. Last year the Department had to step in to assist with ABC programmes because of funding difficulties. The Minister will be familiar with this issue from her constituency. I am

very concerned to ensure the programmes will be able to continue because of the work done in disadvantaged communities, in particular. Will funding be allocated to support children who are homeless? Again, as I am not sure if this comes within the remit of Tusla, I may be straying from the question.

**Deputy Katherine Zappone:** On children living in emergency accommodation, the same supports will be available to them as they move from hotels and bed and breakfast accommodation into family hubs. Tusla does have some responsibilities in that regard. There has been a lot of investment in family resource centres throughout the country. Existing centres will be able to apply for up to €10,000 in additional funding for their work in 2018 and we will also initiate 11 new centres. Part of their focus will be on linking in with family hubs in their areas to ensure there are ongoing ways of supporting children in accommodation in that context, for example by bringing their prevention and early intervention services to them.

**Deputy Jan O'Sullivan:** I do not know whether the ABC question is relevant because I am not sure whether it comes under Tusla. I would be very interested to hear if there are plans to ensure these programmes are protected.

**Deputy Katherine Zappone:** I apologise for not having time to answer the Deputy's question in my previous reply. As I indicated in response to another Deputy, I have secured funding for 2018. The programme is under evaluation by the Centre for Effective Services. I would expect a report to be delivered to me in the near future so I can review the evaluation of the impact of this provision. So far, the signs are positive. If the evaluation is positive, we will review the overall approach to see whether it is something we wish to continue. For example, we will look at the exact locations. We will consider whether we want to open it up and, if so, whether sufficient resources are available to facilitate this. We will think about other ways in which we can support the overall ultimate aim of reducing children's poverty in disadvantaged communities.

## **Other Questions**

### **Early Childhood Care and Education Funding**

34. **Deputy Denise Mitchell** asked the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs to set out the measures being taken to ensure childcare services have the capacity to cope with the expansion of the free preschool year scheme as announced in budget 2018. [43694/17]

**Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire:** Perhaps the Minister can comment on how she has dealt with some of the anomalies and gaps that exist in the free preschool year scheme.

**Deputy Katherine Zappone:** The Department of Children and Youth Affairs monitors the capacity of childcare providers on an ongoing basis. In April 2017, more than 120,000 children participated in the early childhood care and education, ECCE, scheme at peak demand. While pressure on places was high in some areas, the system successfully accommodated all children for whom a place was sought. From September 2018, the structure and entry points of ECCE will change as a result of the additional investment that has been made available to fund a full two programme years. It is estimated that 114,000 children will register for ECCE for the full programme year at that point. As the system was able to accommodate 120,000 children

in 2017, I am confident that there should be no problem accommodating 114,000 children in 2018. The one entry point will reduce the overall pressures on the system and make it simpler for parents to secure places on the ECCE programme for their children.

The Department of Children and Youth Affairs, through the city and county child care committees and Pobal, will continue to monitor issues of capacity and need. The Department is continuing to work with the Department of Education and Skills and the Central Statistics Office to identify the number of children who are eligible for the free preschool years. As it did on previous occasions, the Department of Children and Youth Affairs will make information available to each of the 30 city and county child care committees on the number of children in each electoral division who are eligible for the ECCE scheme. This will enable the committees to support providers and parents in their local areas to ensure sufficient capacity exists. If any future capacity issues are identified, the Department will consider any intervention necessary, such as the provision of capital funding. I am pleased that the funding I have received in budget 2018 means we can provide for a full second year of the ECCE scheme. I believe this will be to the considerable benefit of children and their families. I look forward to working with providers to ensure we have sufficient capacity to meet the needs of all families.

**Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire:** The issue of capacity goes beyond mere places. We have previously discussed issues like capacity and the sustainability of the sector. Does the Minister believe the additional funding that is being provided will lead to improved pay? How does she intend to ensure the many lower-paid people working in this sector, who are overwhelmingly female, will see their pay increase on foot of this additional funding? I have previously raised the sustainability of community childcare facilities, many of which might now begin to focus largely on the ECCE programme because of the more comprehensive nature of the funding available for it. What steps will the Minister take to ensure such providers will be able to provide other services?

**Deputy Katherine Zappone:** I think we are both very committed to the sustainability issue. As the Deputy is aware, €1 million was provided in budget 2017 to ensure the sustainability of certain services. The Department has worked very hard to assist those who have come forward to work with us in this regard. I have secured an additional €700,000 in budget 2018 to continue this work. This will continue to be an important aspect of our efforts to build capacity in these contexts. As the Deputy has rightly pointed out, additional quality measures to support the workforce are part of the building of capacity. I have a number of things to say in that regard. Specifically, I would like to answer the Deputy's question about additional moneys by saying I intend that some of the key measures I have identified for increased funding in budget 2018 will lead to service providers having more pay to offer to dedicated childcare professionals.

**Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire:** As we have sought to provide for early childhood education, not just over the past two years but also over a longer period, much of our strategy has involved the provision of subsidies to the private sector. While that makes sense in the context of this sector as it currently exists, do the Minister or the Department have any sense that we should be moving towards an early childhood care sector that is more substantially publicly provided?

**Deputy Katherine Zappone:** I would have been disappointed if the Deputy had not asked me that question. I know this is part of his vision. Speaking personally, I think much of that vision would make sense in some ways if it were possible. It would take a long period of time

to translate or transfer the early childcare and education sector into something that is a public service in the same way that our schools are public services, if that is what the Deputy is speaking about. A considerable rethink would be needed to move in that direction. I guess I am trying to tackle some of the reasons such a change might be good in the context of the system we currently have. I am providing public moneys to ensure the best possible early-years education and care is delivered for our children and the best outcomes are achieved. In many cases, these services are provided by private providers. In other cases, they are provided by community providers. The ultimate aim is to ensure the best outcomes for our children.

### **Child Protection**

35. **Deputy Clare Daly** asked the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs the status of the 572 adult retrospective reports of abuse that were unallocated by Tusla in June 2017; and if the number of unallocated cases in this category has increased or decreased in the period since June 2017. [43745/17]

**Deputy Clare Daly:** The Minister told me in September that at the end of June, 572 retrospective abuse cases were awaiting allocation. Actions had been taken in respect of just 4% of those cases at that time. At that stage, 70% of cases had been live for at least two months. Does Tusla have any plans for a system-wide approach to change that? What is the status of it now? Are any efforts being made to clear the backlog?

**Deputy Katherine Zappone:** Tusla has advised me that 1,949 historical or retrospective cases were on hand at the end of July 2017. This represented an increase of 51 on the number for June. Of the cases on hand, 1,370 were allocated to a social worker and 579 were awaiting allocation. The number of unallocated cases has increased by seven since June. All of these referrals have been reviewed by a social worker.

As the Deputy is aware, an historical or retrospective disclosure is one in which an adult discloses abuse experienced in childhood. I understand the overwhelming majority of such disclosures are about sexual abuse.

This is a very complex and worrying situation. The safety of children today is my top priority.

It is important to point out that all child-protection referrals which allege current or past criminal activity are referred to An Gardaí Síochána. Tusla's focus is to screen historical or retrospective disclosures for any indication of current risk to children. In cases of urgent risk to a child, the disclosure is acted on immediately.

Tusla is dependent on the person making an allegation engaging directly with it and being prepared for his or her identity to be shared with the alleged abuser.

Tusla has a limited role where there is no evidence of a current risk to children. In respect of an adult making a disclosure, Tusla may assist him or her in accessing HSE counselling services.

I have asked Tusla to report to me monthly on the progress it is making.

**Deputy Clare Daly:** I am concerned. We know One In Four recently criticised Tusla's

handling of cases sent to it and what it sees as a failure to investigate properly. The Joint Committee on Children and Youth Affairs discussed the matter, in particular Tusla senior management in Laois-Offaly in 2015. Given that many serious issues were flagged around 2015, it is concerning that the number of unallocated cases is similar to what it was at that stage.

In September I asked the Minister about a particular report on child protection issues in the Laois-Offaly area which concluded 15 months ago. Tusla said it cannot publish the report, which could contain very valuable lessons in terms of dealing with these issues in the future. I am concerned about the reply on that basis. Does the Minister think senior management is on top of this issue?

**Deputy Katherine Zappone:** I thank the Deputy. She referred to the Laois-Offaly report. As the Deputy is aware, these are very complicated matters. I would be happy to share a table which identifies the number of open, unallocated and high priority retrospective cases for 2017. The number of unallocated retrospective cases is decreasing, although the number increased between June and July. In addition, the figure for another category, the referrals which are being received each month, has increased significantly. The figure was 93 in January, 122 in February and 139 in March. Referrals are increasing.

The number of unallocated retrospective cases decreased, although referrals are continuing to come in. It is important to note that while the number of referrals is increasing there are many months in which the number of unallocated cases is decreasing. Cases are being assigned.

The most important point to note in the table is that cases which were initially assessed as high priority, that is, where there is a suspicion of risk to a child, comprised 177 in January, 160 in February and 120 in March. From that point on, there were none. Tusla is addressing cases and allocating them where a high priority has been assessed.

**Deputy Clare Daly:** That is one way of looking at it. From our dealings with An Garda Síochána, we saw that there was a tendency in some instances to recategorise crimes in order to make them seem less serious than they were. From the point of view of cases classified as high priority, what investigations, if any, have been carried out? I am aware of anecdotal evidence in one or two areas where there was a belief that rather than cases being dealt with, recategorisation took place in order to tidy up records and make things seem less bad. One aspect of this is the management of cases.

Another aspect is the deficit in terms of a legislative framework to deal with these issues. Dr. Geoffrey Shannon, for example, has talked about the lack of clarity in the current legislative framework in terms of dealing with abuse outside the family and has, for example, called for the amendment of section 3 of the Child Care Act so that these issues could be addressed comprehensively.

In responding to the Ombudsman's Taking Stock report, Tusla has referred to a legislative lack of clarity. Are any changes proposed to address the oversight of cases being potentially reclassified and the legislative deficit?

**Deputy Katherine Zappone:** The Deputy's first question was excellent. I have had many conversations with Tusla on the issue of the designation of a case as being unallocated and cases which are of high, medium and low priority. As the Deputy is aware, even though cases are unallocated assessments have been carried out by social workers. It is determined whether a child is at immediate risk and if he or she is a social worker is assigned to him or her. If there

is a suspicion of criminal activity the case is sent to An Garda Síochána. If there is no immediate risk a duty social work team is assigned to the case and monitors it in different ways over a period of time until a social worker can be found.

Even though we are using the word “unallocated” that is not to say that there is no social work oversight. It is erring on the conservative side in terms of ensuring the protection of children. I am as concerned as the Deputy is about the numbers. At the same time, I am somewhat consoled by the fact that there is ongoing monitoring in that regard. In respect of the prioritisation of cases of high, medium and low priority, I am absolutely assured that the system is working and no children are currently at risk in light of retrospective cases which have been declared.

### **Child Abuse**

36. **Deputy Fiona O’Loughlin** asked the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs the resources in place to deal with allegations of child abuse; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [43440/17]

**Deputy Fiona O’Loughlin:** I am conscious that there is some overlap between my question and some previous questions. Many deal with Tusla, which underlines its important role and how important it is that we provide it with the necessary resources. I want to acknowledge that the Minister secured extra funding in the budget.

I wish to ask the Minister about the resources which are in place to deal with allegations of abuse of children and make a statement on the matter, in particular in light of the One In Four report.

**Deputy Katherine Zappone:** I expected several questions on Tusla. It is a primary focus and I feel very confident that we are moving in the right direction.

I am pleased to inform the Deputy I have secured an additional €40 million for Tusla. This is the third year in succession that Tusla has received an increase in its funding, which now amounts to over €753 million.

It has embarked on a significant recruitment programme to deliver the necessary assessments, family supports and care to all children being referred for welfare or child protection reasons.

I wish to assure the Deputy that with the current available staff all urgent and emergency cases are dealt with immediately. These include situations of abandonment or parental ill-health and the need to find an immediate placement or a threat to the safety or life of a child by a third party.

I am very aware of the need for Tusla to recruit more social workers, social care workers and family support workers to deal with the number of cases which cannot currently be allocated.

The additional investment of €40 million in 2018 will allow Tusla to recruit a mix of staff to respond to areas of identified risk and to meet increased demand for services. This includes resources for responding to expected increases in referrals following the introduction of mandatory reporting, as well as the management of unallocated cases and the further development of

aftercare services.

Tusla will also recruit administrative staff to support social workers in their child protection duties.

The extra funding will also be used to establish a single national out-of-hours social work service, providing enhanced joint working with An Garda Síochána, additional on-call social work capacity and a new out-of-hours service for foster carers.

I strongly support the work of Tusla. I am committed to providing resources to meet the growing needs of children and families. The higher increase I have secured for Tusla in budget 2018 means that resources are available to meet the priorities in the years ahead.

**Deputy Fiona O'Loughlin:** I again acknowledge the increase in funding for Tusla and welcome, in particular, the out-of-hours support for foster families and children who are absolutely in need. I know that Tusla operates in an uncertain environment and that its personnel can be uncertain about what has happened previously to children and the impact of further trauma on them. It is sometimes difficult to get a child to speak to a social worker. I acknowledge the great work being done by social workers around the country. The One in Four report referred to particular cases in 2016 where clients chose not to meet social workers. It is very difficult, however, to carry out a full investigation without statements. This support for young people must be absolutely and readily available. I have spoken to a number of abuse survivors who often tell about how difficult it is to make a complaint and continue through the process. Many of them regretted it, which is very much borne out by the figures given to us by One in Four. It is very important, therefore, that extra support be given to the social workers in place. Will the Minister confirm that Tusla will thoroughly investigate all 47,399 referrals received in 2016?

**Deputy Katherine Zappone:** I will address the One in Four report to which a couple of Deputies have referred. There is a key aspect that was most controversial. It is that the report makes it clear that Tusla could not proceed with 79 of 91 cases brought because the victim declined to meet a Tusla social worker. That is implicit in some of the Deputy's comments. Legally and in keeping with fair procedures, Tusla social workers are obliged to meet directly with a victim to validate a statement and they must then provide the alleged abuser with the allegation and the identity of the victim and invite the alleged abuser to meet them. One in Four reported that 12 of its clients had made a statement to a Tusla social worker. As the Deputy states, I acknowledge that this is not easy to do. In three of the cases Tusla was assessing whether the alleged abuser posed a current risk to children. One case was founded, while five were unfounded. The remaining three were closed without an assessment of risk. This can occur where a person cannot be located or has died. This provides a view of the very complicated process that is followed when a referral takes place and the focus of Tusla in the assessment of the current risk to children.

**Deputy Fiona O'Loughlin:** I accept that the process can be very difficult for everybody involved. The Minister mentioned the report. Eight of the 12 allegations made were not investigated or were deemed to be unfounded. There were 91 cases originally. Only one case came back having been found to be founded. That means that in only one case is the sex offender being monitored from the time of referral. That is a concern because Tusla has a legal responsibility to assess the likelihood of a current or potential risk to children. We all need to be sure the resources are in place to ensure safety will be absolutely paramount. I appreciate that things may be better, but will there be a unit in place to examine historical cases? It is very important

that there be capacity to allow a bond to be built between a child and a social worker. This is very important in all of the work done by Tusla. It would allow for better co-operation when proceeding with a full investigation.

**Deputy Katherine Zappone:** I acknowledge the Deputy's comments, but, with earlier questions in mind, I want to make it absolutely and perfectly clear with regard to the report that Tusla followed proper procedures. In following the law it must be fair to all parties. That is why we saw such a result. It followed proper procedures according to law.

Much of the Deputy's questioning concerns how Tusla responds to allegations of abuse. In the first quarter of 2017 it received 13,629 referrals. The duty social worker carries out preliminary inquiries on all referrals. This involves checking to see if a child already receives a service or is known to child protection services. It also involves clarifying the nature of the concern, contacting key professionals such as public health nurses or teachers for an input and opening a case record. Over half of the cases that are subject to a preliminary inquiry do not proceed to a child protection initial assessment as the threshold is not met. A really thorough initial piece of work is done. Although there are concerns and there are many ways to seek prevention and intervention, Tusla believes the work is carried out in that context.

### **Child Care Services Staff**

37. **Deputy Anne Rabbitte** asked the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs her views on whether an increase in capitation payments for early childhood care and education, ECCE, providers of 7% will be sufficient in view of the chronic issues regarding pay and the viability of the sector. [43771/17]

511. **Deputy Anne Rabbitte** asked the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs her views on whether an increase in capitation payments for early childhood care and education, ECCE providers of 7% will be sufficient in view of the chronic issues regarding pay and the viability of the sector. [43782/17]

**Deputy Anne Rabbitte:** I am asking the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs for her views on whether a 7% increase in capitation payments for the early childhood care and education, ECCE, scheme providers will be sufficient in view of the chronic matters regarding pay and the viability of the sector. I ask against the backdrop of childcare providers being expected to complete an ever-increasing amount of paperwork in a continually changing sector. The 7% increase in the budget is welcome, but I ask if it will be sufficient.

**Deputy Katherine Zappone:** I propose to answer Questions Nos. 37 and 511 together.

I am fully aware of the matters regarding pay for early years workers and have been an advocate for improved conditions for many years. That is why I increased the capitation rate for the first time since the ECCE programme was introduced in 2010. I have provided for a 7% increase from September next.

The independent review of costs I have commissioned will provide critical information to guide decision-making on further investment in future budgets. I am pleased to report that my officials met personnel from Crowe Horwath again last week to advance this important work.

The new early years care and education measures announced in budget 2018 form part of

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continued growth in early years education investment by my Department. In budget 2017 I secured a 35% increase in child care funding, which followed from a similar increase in budget 2016. These increases reflect the emphasis we are placing on developing a quality service with appropriately supported staff. Having said this, I will repeat that it will take significant investment over many budgets to enable Ireland to catch up with its OECD counterparts and enable us to value our early years workforce fully.

As the Deputy will be aware, my Department is not the employer of child care workers. I have suggested to the sector that they could apply to the Labour Court for a sectoral employment order, asking the court to make a recommendation on pay for the whole early years sector.

I should also remind Deputies that in addition to the 7% increase achieved in capitation payments, I have also provided €3.5 million towards “non-contact time” for all child care providers who register for the enhanced child care measures introduced last month. This, in addition to the €14.5 million paid to child care services so far in 2017, recognises the administration associated with the ECCE programme and other schemes.

I am pleased to confirm that a full €18 million will be paid in programme support payments in 2018.

I am committed to doing everything I can to help to address the pay and sustainability issues in the early years sector.

**Deputy Anne Rabbitte:** I thank the Minister. The 7% increase which is well intentioned is very welcome and should be passed on to workers. It is a step in the right direction. I am concerned as there are many managers of crèches who, in some cases, may not have taken salaries for a number of weeks. They need to look after themselves. Is this one of the other ways to address the fact that community employment scheme workers were a crutch in the community sector? Is this a way to appease community sector crèches as it might afford them the opportunity to take on the additional staff members required? There has been a major burden on the community sector since last December, close to Christmas, when the changes came about. Is the 7% increase a step towards further announcements in the budgets ahead?

**Deputy Katherine Zappone:** I thank the Deputy. The measures that I introduced in budget 2018 were very strategic and came after much reflection on how, having introduced many measures in budget 2017 which are now beginning to kick in for families, we could focus particularly on quality issues in 2018, as well as looking at ways in which our quality focus can continue to ensure that the cost for families can be more affordable. The increase in the capitation rate, for the first time ever, is clearly income that will go to child care providers. It is there for staff and for other costs, but as the Deputy well knows, the primary cost in the provision of child care is staffing. The Department have made a significant contribution, in the context of the concerns around pay. In addition, the extension by up to four months of the free pre-school for many children also increases the income of the provider. Those are two examples, not to mention the €18 million for programme support, of ways in which I am continuing to invest in the services in order to support the increased pay and conditions.

**Deputy Anne Rabbitte:** I was trying to push the Minister on the issue of the community employment, CE worker and the community crèches. Did the Minister see this as an opportunity for the community crèches to take on the additional staff that they may have lost? I do not want to be disingenuous but I did the sums on it myself and if one was to break it down, the 7%

would not bring their wages up to minimum wage. Does the Minister have plans going into the future as to how we can help and support the community sector after the loss of the CE worker? I still regularly hear about that loss and how expensive it is for crèches to recruit staff. Not only is it hard to recruit, but it is expensive because they are continuously competing. Now they will be competing all the more because they may not be able to afford to take on the extra staff.

**Deputy Katherine Zappone:** I hope that is a measure that would support the community sector in the provision of child care, particularly, as the Deputy has identified, in light of the concerns around community employment. In response to another question, I indicated that there will be an additional €700,000 available to the community sector to help with sustainability and viability issues. I am doing a considerable amount with the resources that I achieved in the budget. In the context of the wider budget and indeed the overall decisions that were being made I believe that I achieved a significant amount for the Department and for the providers. The focus was on quality. I want to say again that I am absolutely determined to support these measures. There was not much movement for sectoral employment orders. I wish there was, but in the absence of those, this is what I am doing.

**Acting Chairman (Deputy Eugene Murphy):** Question No. 38 is in the name of Deputy Ruth Coppinger. I have received her apologies; she is absent due to attendance at a committee meeting. Question No. 39 is from Deputy Mattie McGrath as láthair ag an am seo.

**Deputy Anne Rabbitte:** He is at the same committee meeting.

**Acting Chairman (Deputy Eugene Murphy):** That is fair enough.

*Questions Nos. 38 and 39 replied to with Written Answers*

### **Early Years Sector**

40. **Deputy Niamh Smyth** asked the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs the status of her proposal to provide sectoral payscales for those working in community child care settings. [43465/17]

51. **Deputy Denise Mitchell** asked the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs the measures she is taking in order to ensure wages in the early years sector are increased to a rate to which it is considered a viable long-term employment option for qualified workers. [43695/17]

**Deputy Katherine Zappone:** I propose to take Questions Nos. 40 and 51 together.

Child care workers play a critical role in delivering high quality child care services and they deserve to be recognised, valued and respected for this. My Department acknowledges that pay and conditions are major issues facing the sector and can lead to difficulties in recruiting and retaining staff.

My Department is somewhat constrained in what it can do in this regard as it is not an employer of child care workers. However it is of course a major funder of the child care sector. It is important to note that the most important stakeholders in putting agreed pay structures in place in any sector are recognised employers and employee groups.

My Department is aware that trade unions are active in seeking to achieve a critical mass

of representation on the employee side, and I welcome this move. My Department would also be supportive of any move on the employer side to establish a recognised representative body.

In terms of improving pay and conditions, I have suggested to the sector that it might apply to the Labour Court for a sectoral employment order, SEO, asking the court to make a recommendation regarding pay for the whole early years sector. Under an SEO process, organisations substantially representative of employers and employees come together to agree a way forward and submissions are sought from key stakeholders. While my Department would have no direct role in the SEO process, as a significant funder, and with policy responsibility for quality, it would be well placed to make a submission to the court once it publishes its notice on the application for a SEO for the sector.

In the interim, the last three budgets have increased investment in early years by some 87%. This has helped us to address affordability, access and quality, although I recognise that there is more to be done. This year's announcement of a 7% increase in ECCE capitation is intended to support the workforce. The €18 million in 2017 to support "non-contact time", or the administration burden associated with the scheme, is also intended to support providers and their employees.

**Deputy Niamh Smyth:** I thank the Minister for her reply. I am sure that she is aware, from being out and about in various constituencies, that the bottom line is that child care workers find themselves in untenable positions due to the issue of income versus expenditure and the administrative costs and burdens incurred as part of delivering the affordable child care scheme. We recognise the immense contribution that child care workers are making within Irish society in caring for children. However, we need to invest more heavily in the child care sector. We need more investment for the child care workers and for parents who are under immense strain. Child care can cost families anything up to €1,000 a month. It is a huge extra burden on parents. We are not in a position to deliver on the affordable child care scheme, as we had hoped. ICT seems to be a huge burden on the child care workers and those who administer it. We have 9,000 families who are going to miss out on that scheme as a result of subsidies not being made available. Can the Minister comment on that?

**Deputy Katherine Zappone:** Of course I agree with the Deputy's initial points. I have done a huge amount in terms of trying to identify, with the limited resources available to me, and I got more than others in this budget, where the resources should be applied. I have also indicated that investment into the early years sector in general has increased over the years. I am not disagreeing with the Deputy's point that more investment is required. I understand that. The two main measures that I put forward this year focused on quality, hoping that the investment will get to the workers. In terms of ECCE capitation rates, we used some case studies. A small service with 11 children and a level 6 practitioner will see its income rise from €26,961 to €28,942. That is an increase of €1,881 into that service. An average service with 25 ECCE children with graduate room leaders will see its income rise from €71,250 to €76,237. That is an increase of €4,987. Those are just a couple of examples. I could provide other case studies. We carried out these scenario analyses to see how much more money could get into these different types of providers and services by increasing the capitation rate by 7%. It was directly intended to support the providers and, hopefully, the child care workers and professionals.

**Deputy Niamh Smyth:** I appreciate where the Minister is coming from, but I must continue to dwell on the fact that we need to do more to help the child care providers. I thank Deputy Anne Rabbitte who came to Cavan-Monaghan with me before the Dáil summer recess to meet

those who were working at the coalface. Their experience has been one of hardship in the sense there are such high expectations of them from the Department, and while there is no harm in having high expectations, they are being pulled from Billy to Jack with the huge administrative burden in the sector. There is also the issue of the low salary that workers in the sector earn, the issue of continuous professional development for child care workers, the expectation they would have a level 8 qualification only to be paid the minimum wage and the issue of what career opportunities they will have in the years to come. There is no encouragement for young people coming through third level to go into this profession even though child care workers are badly needed. Access to child care facilities is a major issue for women wishing to return to work and it is important that they would have such a facility on their doorstep.

**Deputy Katherine Zappone:** Those are many of the arguments I brought forward to the Minister for Finance to persuade and negotiate to get the increases that I got. Therefore, I am not at all in disagreement with the Deputy.

**Deputy Niamh Smyth:** I appreciate that.

**Deputy Katherine Zappone:** I expect and hope that the sector understands that. The measures I identified are trying to address those issues. I cited for the Deputy a couple of case studies in terms of the increase in capitation. As she is aware, I have also provided for a measure of ensuring two full years of entitlement to the early childhood care and education, ECCE, scheme and she might ask how will that help. When the ECCE scheme was originally extended from 38 weeks to 61 weeks, it gave the ECCE scheme providers the option of increasing their income by 60% if they had the space and capacity to expand. That is guaranteed State income, paid at intervals by Pobal. In terms of moving it to one entry level and increasing and extending the time of the entitlement of all children to a full two years, that increased income and profit margin also goes to the providers. There is more money going to the providers with that measure, as well it being one that hopefully provides more affordable child care for families.

**Deputy Niamh Smyth:** I hope the Minister will stick to her commitment to come to Cavan to meet those child care workers that we talked about.

**Acting Chairman (Deputy Eugene Murphy):** As Deputy Durkan is not here, Question No. 41 cannot be taken.

*Question No. 41 replied to with Written Answers*

### **Child and Family Agency Funding**

42. **Deputy Mick Wallace** asked the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs if she is satisfied that the funding increase afforded to Tusla in budget 2018 will improve the current functioning within Tusla with regard to its child protection policy and the operations of family resource centres throughout the country; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [43743/17]

**Deputy Mick Wallace:** The Minister for Finance announced €40.6 million extra for Tusla in the budget. Presumably the vast majority of this increased funding will be swallowed up by the effects of the introduction of mandatory reporting of child abuse concerns from January onwards. How much additional funding in reality will be made available to improve the fulfilment of Tusla's child protection policy? In particular, does the Minister, Deputy Zappone, be-

lieve that Tusla is adequately funded to implement Professor Geoffrey Shannon's report? Also, is the additional funding sufficient to meet the needs of the family resource centres?

**Deputy Katherine Zappone:** I am satisfied that the funding increase of €40.6 million which my Department is providing to Tusla, the Child and Family Agency, will bring about positive improvements for vulnerable children and families. Tusla will have available to it some €753 million in funding next year. The additional funding will allow for the recruitment of over 300 new staff during 2018.

With regard to child protection, Tusla is being provided with additional resources to support the roll-out of the remaining provisions of the Children First Act 2015, which will commence on 11 December this year. Under the legislation mandated reporters will be required by law to report serious concerns about child abuse and neglect to Tusla. Tusla also intends to implement its new child welfare and protection strategy in 2018, which is designed to ensure timely responses to children at risk.

The additional funding provided will also allow for the expansion of Tusla's out of hours social work service in 2018. The three existing services will be integrated into one national service with a national contact number and access to a social work service on a 24-7 service basis. This development is most welcome.

I am also pleased to announce that additional funding in 2018 will allow for 11 new family resource centres to be included in the family resource programme in 2018. Additional funding will also be provided to existing family resource centres following the submission of plans for services, and their approval by Tusla. The primary role of family resource centres, as the Deputy is aware, is prevention and early intervention, and I very much value their role in supporting local communities.

I am pleased to be in a position to support Tusla in its work through the targeting of additional resources to services that will impact positively on vulnerable children and families.

**Deputy Mick Wallace:** That sounds good. I hope it turns out as well as the Minister would hope. As she is aware, Professor Geoffrey Shannon was very critical of the lack of serious out-of-hours services. He pointed out that because of the lack of facilities available to Tusla, the private sector was being relied upon, especially during the out of hours period. He pointed out that, especially with respect to children with serious behavioural problems, the private sector was picking and choosing the children it would take. This is something a State body would not do. One cannot tell a private body that it is obliged to take all children. Private sector providers have not done that by all accounts. There are no mandatory rules in place to make them take every child who needs their help. Will there continue to be a dependence on the private sector, given that Professor Geoffrey Shannon pointed out that it is not to be depended on and that the State sector is a more reliable source for these children?

**Deputy Katherine Zappone:** I thank Deputy Wallace. In terms of the Shannon report and Tusla's response to it, the focus is on the extension of out of hours services, particularly in the critical phase of ensuring social workers are available to work with the gardaí in order to ensure that the situation of difficulty or trauma is responded to in the best possible way. There are a number of measures that Tusla has identified that it will put in place to ensure a better way of gardaí working with Tusla in order for that to happen. From my perspective, I would like to see more social workers working with gardaí and available to the wider public beyond just the

gardaí to indicate their concerns in regard to children. I will stop on that note as I know the Deputy has a further supplementary question.

**Deputy Mick Wallace:** With regard to resources, there are five family resource centres in Wexford, namely, in Gorey, Raheen, Taghmon, Ramsgrange and the Southend centre in Wexford town. They are all located in areas where there is significant need. I have been told there is talk of them each getting an extra €10,000. They have said the extra €10,000 would certainly be welcome but it would merely alleviate the pressure the centres are already under in terms of their deficits and running costs. For example, the centre in Taghmon is seeking to set up a Traveller boys group. There is a large Traveller population in the area. It also seeks to set up a youth club and a parent and toddler group. The €10,000 additional funding will not allow it to do that. It is already under serious pressure in meeting the demand for child counselling and is relying on voluntary help in order to make that happen. The additional funding of €10,000 will not be enough. It would be money very well spent by the State to give funding to centres such as the Taghmon centre to do what it would love to do because it would make such a difference to the area.

**Deputy Katherine Zappone:** I cannot agree with the Deputy more in terms of the importance of family resource centres and the ways in which they provide the services that are required by children and families in a manner that is exceptionally efficient and that also truly respects the ways in which communities operate at their best.

In terms of the talk of €10,000 in funding, through my budget negotiations I have made available up to €10,000 for every existing family resource centre. The centres will have to go through an application process and I hope to outline the detail of that by the end of this week. It is the first time in a long time there has been such a significant increase in funding for family resource centres across the board.

I am fully aware that does not cover everything family resource centres intend or desire but the moneys available are also to increase the numbers of family centres. Deputy Wallace said there are five in Wexford and there are three in Kildare, and I could speak about other areas where there are a significant number and others where there are hardly any. It is the first time in several years that we are adding to the number of family resource centres. Some of the funds will go there, and there will be up to €10,000 extra for existing family resource centres, which represents a great start.

*Questions Nos. 43 to 47, inclusive, replied to with Written Answers*

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** We have very little time left. We move to Question No. 48, tabled by Deputy Niamh Smyth, which is grouped with Question No. 58, tabled by Deputy Anne Rabbitte. I will ask Deputy Niamh Smyth to introduce the question and following the Minister's answer, I will allow a supplementary question from both Deputies.

### **Early Childhood Care and Education Programmes**

48. **Deputy Niamh Smyth** asked the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs if her attention has been drawn to the shortages in ECCE places particularly for the second free preschool year in rural Ireland; and the steps she is taking to address this matter. [43464/17]

58. **Deputy Anne Rabbitte** asked the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs if her attention has been drawn to a shortage of ECCE places around the country, particularly in rural areas; and the steps she will be taking to address this. [43772/17]

512. **Deputy Anne Rabbitte** asked the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs if her attention has been drawn to a shortage of ECCE places around the country, particularly in rural areas; and the steps she will be taking to address this. [43783/17]

**Deputy Niamh Smyth:** The shortage of ECCE places is particularly a problem in rural areas and is one of great importance to people in my constituency of Cavan-Monaghan. We must always be concerned that rural parts of the country are looked after as well as urban areas.

**(Deputy Katherine Zappone):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 48, 58 and 512 together.

Following the expansion of ECCE last year 120,000 children participated in ECCE in the peak term, April 2017. The further expansion of ECCE in budget 2018 is expected to see 114,000 children attend for a full two programme years. The fact that 120,000 have already been accommodated in April 2017 suggests that capacity should not be an issue.

My Department, with the support of the local city and county child care committees and Pobal, actively monitors issues affecting child care provision, including capacity.

In addition, my Department continues to work with the Department of Education and Skills and the Central Statistics Office to identify the number of children eligible for free preschool years. As it did before, my Department will make information available in the coming weeks to each of the 30 county child care committees on the number of children eligible for ECCE per electoral division. This will enable the CCCs support providers and parents in the local area to ensure sufficient capacity exists. If any future capacity issues are identified my Department will consider any intervention necessary, such as, for example, the provision of capital funding.

If the Deputy has any specific concerns with regard to a specific area, this area should be brought to the attention of my Department or the local city and county child care committee.

Notwithstanding this, I am keenly aware of the pressures on the sector with regard to maintaining and expanding capacity. My Department provided €8.4 million for its 2017 early years capital funding programme, doubling the €4 million provided under the 2016 early years capital funding programme. This funding has been made available to early years providers under three strands, the largest of which went towards enabling early years services to provide additional child care places.

**Deputy Niamh Smyth:** The Minister's remarks contain welcome news. My understanding from speaking with child care workers is that there is a problem with capacity because there is such demand for places, which is welcome. Many child care providers do not have the capacity or the wherewithal to supply the demand so I look forward to any announcements that the Minister might make on capital funding or infrastructure that might be put in place for these child care providers who cannot provide the places so that parents can access the free preschool year. The Minister's response today is welcome and I thank her for it.

**Deputy Anne Rabbitte:** My remarks on capacity differ little from Deputy Niamh Smyth's. The issues with capacity that I would have brought to the Minister's attention in recent days related to a crèche in Mountbellew in my constituency, and there is another one in Deputy Mi-

chael Moynihan's constituency. These crèches are seeking to expand and are looking to see if a capital programme will be put forward to deal with the problem of capacity they face, where they can cater for the first year but the second year and extension of the scheme will put them under pressure. They need to provide an extra room or portakabin. The money allocated last year was very welcome but there are several crèches, which have been in existence since 2007, that are looking to expand and want to know if there will be funding in the future.

**Deputy Katherine Zappone:** Am I correct that the Deputies' questions refer to crèches or providers that have not previously applied for funding for capital expansion?

**Deputy Anne Rabbitte:** That is precisely to whom we refer.

**Deputy Katherine Zappone:** In the budget, there is money for capital expenditure. We will develop a process to make that available in budget 2018. I look forward to having these conversations with the Deputies.

*Written Answers are published on the Oireachtas website.*

## **Topical Issue Debate**

### **Social and Affordable Housing**

**Deputy Dessie Ellis:** I want to discuss the availability of Fingal County Council lands in Dunsink Lane for social and affordable housing and the positive effects that this would deliver and ask why we have sat on these lands for so many years when there is such a crisis in housing. For many years, I have been concerned at Fingal County Council's lack of action in regard to Dunsink Lane and have raised it consistently. There are approximately 1,000 acres of land in this environ, 300 acres of which is owned by Fingal County Council, 200 acres is part of the old tip head and 150 acres takes in Dunsink Observatory and surrounding lands. The rest is privately owned.

Fingal County Council is currently conducting an overall study of this area, which is included in its development plan. There is potential to build between 4,500 and 12,000 social and affordable housing units on these lands, depending on density. One benefit of developing this area is that it is virtually a greenfield site, of which we do not have many, with a number of Traveller-specific accommodation units contained within it which can also be enhanced, delivering a decent quality of life to all in an inclusive way.

The city centre is only 4 km away. Dunsink Lane also contains vital road links between Finglas and Castleknock. The new Luas is located nearby at Broombridge. Dunsink Observatory and Elmfield golf course are currently not accessible from Finglas as a massive concrete block has been placed across the road, something that should never have happened. This ought to be removed immediately, with a new road built and a new bridge to accommodate it.

Other local amenities and advantages include its proximity to the M50 and to the Royal Canal, allowing the extension of the cycling area. It would also provide access to the Phoenix Park and the Tolka Valley Park, a beautiful new park, which runs alongside the River Tolka on the other side of where this proposed development would be located. Blanchardstown shopping

centre and industrial parks also border on this area.

It is an area that has been neglected for many years. It unquestionably has great potential and would make a considerable dent in resolving the housing crisis. It would also help to alleviate the considerable traffic congestion between Finglas and Cabra and between Castleknock and Finglas. The blocking-off of that road has been an ongoing problem for many years, and has proved disastrous for the whole area. Traffic lines up from Broombridge right into Finglas and a similar problem arises on the other side, at the Cabra end.

This proposed project needs resources and a will to deliver them. There are considerable advantages in doing this. The land belongs to the local authority, Fingal, and if we ever needed a project capable of delivering large numbers of social and affordable housing units, this is it and this is the place where it can be delivered. For many of my childhood years, I lived in this lane and played in these fields. It is a massive place with beautiful surroundings. It has huge potential and I ask the Minister of State to talk to Fingal County Council to see whether we can get a project and money and see whether it is deliverable.

**Minister of State at the Department of Housing, Planning and Local Government (Deputy John Paul Phelan):** I thank Deputy Ellis. I am not as familiar as he is with the land around Dunsink, but I know it slightly. The Government recognises the housing affordability pressures faced by many households, particularly in certain parts of the country. It is for this reason that the overarching objective of Rebuilding Ireland is to increase the supply of new homes to 25,000 per annum by 2020. In particular, the aim is to increase the supply of high quality social and affordable homes from State and privately held lands to buy or rent as quickly as possible in areas where demand is greatest.

Critically, €5.35 billion in Exchequer investment has been secured to deliver 47,000 social housing homes through build, refurbishment, acquisitions and leasing over the period to 2021. This level of national funding to implement Rebuilding Ireland's targets means that funding is available to all local authorities to advance their housing delivery. This year, 4,500 new social housing homes will be delivered through new builds, acquisitions and refurbishments, and a significant proportion of these will involve new construction. Taking the Fingal area alone, there are 912 new homes at various stages of the approval process.

With regard to active land management, the Department, working with local authorities and the Housing Agency, has collated details of local authority lands acquired for housing purposes. To this end, details of 1,700 ha of land in local authority and Housing Agency ownership were published in April on the Rebuilding Ireland housing land map, with the aggregate potential to deliver 42,500 homes nationally. All local authorities, including Fingal County Council, are preparing strategic development and management plans for their housing lands, with particular emphasis on prioritising those sites with the most potential to deliver housing at scale in the short to medium term.

I understand that the site in question at Dunsink Lane is not currently part of the housing land map as it includes the former landfill site, and as such was not acquired by the council for housing purposes. However, as part of the active land management process, local authorities have been asked to confirm that the data published on the housing land map is fully up to date, and to ensure that any additional sites suitable for housing are included. This should be an iterative and live process, and as other lands are identified and become available they should be added to the map.

In its county development plan 2017-2023, adopted in March 2017, Fingal County Council recognises the strategic location and development potential of the lands at Dunsink. However, it also notes significant road, wastewater and other infrastructural constraints that require further detailed investigation so as to inform any future decision to zone the overall Dunsink area for a mixed-use urban area. The council has committed to carrying out a feasibility study to identify the necessary physical infrastructure required to realise the full development potential of the wider Dunsink lands and the Department will, of course, be happy to engage with the council as it progresses this work.

Last week the Minister, Deputy Eoghan Murphy, announced a second round of the local infrastructure housing activation fund, introduced by the then Minister, Deputy Coveney, a number of years ago. Looking at this for the first time in the past day or so, I see the Dunsink area might be a suitable location for some of this infrastructural funding to be spent. I also note that Fingal County Council has not yet brought forward additional sites for development of social housing at scale. However, there is a site at Wellview in Mulhuddart, which is considered to be the most advanced site of scale in Fingal County Council's housing land portfolio as things stand. The council has flagged that Dunsink is an area of strategic importance for its new development plan, and it is drawing up the strategic plan I mentioned. The Department is engaging with it in this process. In fairness to the point made by the Deputy, it is just over four miles from the city centre. It sounds like an area very suitable for development, but there are a couple of hurdles that the local authority and the Department must overcome first before those decisions can be made.

**Deputy Dessie Ellis:** What I find very frustrating in all of this is I have been raising this with Fingal County Council for years and we have had study after study. What we are looking at is a new study to see what is suitable. The Minister of State mentioned Dunsink tip head, but that is 200 acres on the opposite side of the road to where we are speaking about, which is 300 acres. This is bigger than the Mulhuddart site. This is a massive amount of land and it is a greenfield area. It is an area where we would not run into the same problems with lot of residents in terms of trying to get planning. For many years we have ignored it. We also have the potential of putting in a lot of projects there, including in the Dunsink tip head area. We have a horse and pony project. We have also spoken about having a track for bikes on it. A raft of amenities can be put in the general area.

The fact this land is available is constantly ignored. It was acquired a number of years ago through a compulsory purchase order as a result of people settling on the land. It is there and ready for people to take advantage of it. We should be saying the infrastructure fund is there and asking the council what it can do and whether it can deliver on this. Can we speed up the process and look at these lands? In one fell swoop we could clear an awful lot of the problems in terms of housing. The delivery of housing on that site alone would be massive. We would have, hopefully, social and affordable housing and affordable rents on the site because it is ideal. They are prime lands with amenities left, right and centre around the area. There is also access to a lot of facilities. It makes it an ideal site.

**Deputy John Paul Phelan:** I will contact Fingal County Council. I was there a couple of weeks ago in Swords with the manager and senior officials. I will certainly contact them. I was not aware of the full extent of the landholding until this was brought up. There is also, in terms of the planning laws, the necessity for a local area plan to be adopted before the houses can be constructed but that could happen pretty quickly. It is an absolute requirement that local people have a right to have an input into zoning issues in lands in their own area, but that process can

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happen also. I will speak to the officials in Fingal about where they stand at present with the commitment they have given to the Department to carry out the feasibility study to which I referred earlier, and I will get back to the Deputy.

### **Hospital Waiting Lists**

**Deputy Frank O'Rourke:** I welcome the opportunity to raise this issue to the Chamber again and discuss it with the Minister of State. I discussed a similar issue with her last week. It is important that we make progress on these issues. The length of time that patients wait for adult spinal surgery and orthopaedic surgery is unacceptable. Each time we raise this issue in the Chamber we are given a commitment that it will be dealt with comprehensively and that waiting lists will be reduced, but since I raised this issue previously the waiting lists have gone in the other direction. The issues I will deal with specifically relate to Tallaght hospital and the statistics refer to one particular senior surgeon. The figures are not for a multiple of surgeons, and if they were they would be dramatically worse. These are accurate statistics for the outpatient list of one particular surgeon working directly with Tallaght hospital. At present, he has 500 patients on an outpatient list at Tallaght hospital. Of these, 170 need surgery. In addition to this, he deals with referrals from a hospital in my constituency, Naas General Hospital, which deals with north Kildare in particular. He also deals with referrals coming from other hospitals in Dublin and the midlands. If we were to combine all of these other referrals and the other surgeons, we can appreciate the extent of the list, how long it is and the length of time people wait, which is completely unacceptable.

When I raised this in October last year and again in May this year, and looked for the required and requested investment, I was given a somewhat positive response that it would happen but, unfortunately, I am raising the matter again this evening because no progress is being made.

We want to acknowledge the management, surgeons and front-line staff in Tallaght hospital, who are working tirelessly with restricted and limited resources to try to deal with this issue. Its impact on people's lives is very significant, in a negative way. It is affecting their well-being and mental health. The pain and suffering they are experiencing is quite extensive, as the Minister of State can appreciate. It is affecting their ability to deal with everyday life. It is clearly very difficult and it is impinging on them in a very negative way. When people are suffering like this, it results not only in trauma for them and their families, but it also has a negative effect on their contribution to society generally. Owing to waiting, they can do only what they are able to do rather than what they want to do.

Currently, the routine waiting time is 38 months. If one is on a routine waiting list seeking to go to Tallaght hospital to have adult spinal surgery, the waiting time is 38 months. The target is from three to six months. If one's case is urgent, the waiting period is 23 months, and the target is one to two months. At present, Tallaght hospital is hiring or renting theatre space from the Beacon Clinic for one day per week. That confirms the lack of resources, theatre space and infrastructure required in Tallaght hospital. It is an admission that it is not geared up to do what is required. It does not have the theatre space or necessary infrastructure. The crux of the problem is that the required facilities are not in place. I have been asking the Minister for some time to invest in this theatre to deal with the waiting lists and get them under control. There is

a lack of central funding. This funding is urgently needed in Tallaght Hospital so these waiting lists can be got under control and so people can have control and regain quality of life, which they certainly do not have at present.

**Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Catherine Byrne):** I thank the Deputy for this Topical Issue matter. Unfortunately the Minister, Deputy Harris, cannot be present so he has asked me to reply. I will refer to one of the issues he raised in a little while.

Tallaght hospital is part of the Dublin Midlands Hospital Group, and the hospital is the principal provider of elective orthopaedics in the group. The hospital's spinal orthopaedic service provides emergency and elective access for a varying degree of acute and degenerative spinal conditions with a tertiary referral base. No spinal surgery is performed at Naas General Hospital.

The Minister acknowledges that waiting times are often unacceptably long and is conscious of the burden that this places on patients and their families. Reducing waiting times for the longest-waiting patients is one of this Government's key priorities. Consequently, budget 2018 announced a total allocation of €55 million for the National Treatment Purchase Fund, NTPF, for 2018. This allocation more than doubles the 2017 total allocation, which was €20 million.

Early planning for tackling waiting lists in 2018 is key. This funding will enable the provision of treatment for 18,000 inpatient-day case patients across a range of specialties, including spinal surgery, and procedures. The NTPF will work with both public and private hospitals in order to acquire treatment for these patients. Additional funding of €10 million in 2018 will be dedicated to addressing other waiting lists, including for children in need of scoliosis procedures.

Building on the momentum achieved in 2017, planning for 2018 is ongoing by the HSE and the NTPF. The organisations will work together to develop a coherent 2018 waiting list action plan. This approach is to ensure a seamless continuation of this year's work on addressing waiting lists into next year.

It is worth noting that 2017 has seen the HSE and NTPF make inroads into the inpatient-day case waiting lists and they are well on target to have removed 29,000 patients from our waiting lists by the end of October. To ensure the continuation of this strong focus, additional funding in the region of €10 million has been allocated for the remainder of 2017. This will fund patient treatment across a range of key specialties and procedures, such as those for hips, knees and cataracts, and also for ear, nose and throat and others.

Outpatient waiting lists remain a challenge, however. Over 92,000 patients have come off the waiting list so far this year but there remain almost 500,000 patients on the OPD waiting list nationally as of the end of last week. Outpatient waiting lists do not lend themselves to outsourcing initiatives because the full episode of care would have to be outsourced. The NTPF has advised, however, that it will seek to commission treatment on a see-and-treat basis, which could be used to assist with the management of OPD waiting times.

I assure the Deputy that the significant increase in funding to the NTPF reflects the ongoing commitment of this Government to reducing waiting times for the longest waiting patients. Next year will see a continued focus on our longest waiting patients and overall waiting list numbers, including access to spinal surgery at Tallaght Hospital.

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On the Deputy's question on the number of people being referred by the surgeon in Tallaght Hospital, I do not have any information but I will certainly revert to the Deputy. I will ask the Minister whether he will consider specifically the case of the 500 on the surgeon's list, 170 of whom need surgery. I have no specifics on this for the Deputy at present.

**Deputy Frank O'Rourke:** I acknowledge the Minister of State is filling in for the Minister. I met the Minister in June or July of this year and raised this issue, among others. It is disappointing that we are not able to have a full debate on it here. It is not a matter of having the post mortem but agreeing on a strategy to deliver and make progress. With respect, the answer given covered the proposals dealing with outpatients, surgeries and procedures in general but it was not specific to adult spinal surgery or orthopaedics, which represent a massive issue. I am focusing on this issue because it is so urgent and important.

What is required is a €4 million investment. When I spoke with the senior surgeon, I noted this was costed. What the hospital is seeking is a €4 million investment in providing the theatres, the necessary facilities and infrastructure in Tallaght hospital to allow it deal properly, strategically and in an orderly manner with reducing the waiting lists once and for all. That is what I sought 12 months ago and in May and July. That is what I am seeking today. We need a commitment on that because the lack of funding is the problem.

The Minister of State talked about the NTPF. We acknowledge that because putting funding into it in 2017 and increased funding 2018 was part of the confidence and supply agreement. The reality is that, based on how it is being managed or channelled, it is having zero impact on the waiting lists. Figures show that people on the routine list must wait 38 months, yet the aspiration is three to six months. An urgent case - it could be a family member or someone who comes to the Minister of State's own constituency office - must wait 23 months although the target is from one to two months. This is the crux of the matter. It needs to be addressed and we need to bring forward proposals to deliver solutions and results so the people who are suffering can receive the treatment they need and get their lives back on track and so they do not have to wait 36 or 38 months for routine surgeries to make them mobile again and let them have some quality of life.

**Deputy Catherine Byrne:** I have taken note of the Deputy's concerns and I will certainly raise them with the Minister. Maybe my reply was not specifically dealing with some of the issues the Deputy raised. A permanent spinal consultant took a post on 17 September 2017. Some 50% of the consultant's capacity is already dealing with immediate, emergency and urgent spinal cases. Tallaght Hospital is in the process of completing its theatre reconfiguration to facilitate a dedicated spinal theatre and address the question of the future appointment of a spinal consultant in 2018. I will certainly raise the specific issue concerning the surgeon. If the Deputy gives me his or her details, I will certainly pass them on to the Minister and bring to his attention again the urgent needs of 179 patients on the surgeon's list and the fact that they need to be seen to urgently.

**Deputy Frank O'Rourke:** The investment is critical.

**Deputy Catherine Byrne:** I have that down here.

## Credit Union Regulation

**Deputy Michael Moynihan:** I thank the Office of the Ceann Comhairle for allowing me to raise this very important issue of the floor of the Dáil. Just after noon on Friday, liquidators were appointed to Charleville credit union. That was a huge shock to the people of Charleville and its hinterland. We should consider a number of issues in terms of how the liquidator was appointed. The timing is one such issue. The notification came in the early afternoon on Friday when many people would have their wages paid into their accounts on Thursday night and pensioners would have had their pensions paid in on Friday. An entire cohort of people has not been able to access their weekly wages or other funds on the Friday. The powers that be, in this case the Central Bank, should examine the situation and how the liquidation process was executed.

Charleville credit union had been working extremely hard in recent times to try to get out of a very difficult situation. The board of the now former credit union was working extremely hard with the Central Bank. The Central Bank said Charleville credit union was not insolvent. The situation is very difficult for people in Charleville to swallow given that the credit union was founded many years ago and provided an extensive service to people within the community. Many business people told me over the weekend how their funds in the credit union have been frozen. Reference has been made to guaranteed funds but many businesses had to resort to their own resources to keep them going and to provide cash to pay their employees last Friday afternoon. People were told it would take 21 working days before any moneys would be paid out which means people would be starved of access to money for the next three weeks to a month. That is simply not acceptable.

We could have a lengthy debate on how we came to the pass that was reached last Friday afternoon and how Charleville credit union was prevented from expanding or trading itself out of the difficulties in which it found itself. The board and staff of the credit union made significant sacrifices to try to put it in a good place. The question is where we go from here. We have no credit union services within the town and hinterland of Charleville. The credit union had 12,000 members. Today is 17 October. What plan is in place? Are the liquidators now going to wait for 21 days before giving money back to people? That would starve the community of resources in the shape of their own funds. As Councillor Ian Doyle said this morning on the radio many small and medium businesses and small traders will be adversely affected and the town of Charleville will be devastated. Will the Minister of State outline the plans of the Department and the Central Bank to make sure there is a functioning credit union in Charleville in the short term? I am not talking about the long-term future.

I am a major supporter of the credit union movement and the work it has done in every community, urban and rural, especially in Charleville. In the run up to the very busy Christmas period if we leave a void in terms of the credit union in Charleville we will force people to resort to moneylenders and all of the negativity that surrounds them. What are the plans of the Department and the Central Bank to deal with the situation?

There is a meeting in Charleville this evening to allow local people to air their concerns. People are right to be worried. If the Minister of State will pardon the pun, we need to see the colour of his money at this stage. We want to see what is envisaged for Charleville and its environs.

**Deputy John Paul Phelan:** I am responding to this issue on behalf of the Minister for Finance who wishes to thank Deputy Michael Moynihan for raising it. This is primarily a matter for the Central Bank but the Minister is fully aware of the strength of feeling locally about the

situation in Charleville credit union and the restoration of credit union services. In terms of credit unions, the role of the Minister for Finance is to ensure that the legal framework for credit unions is appropriate for the effective operation and supervision of credit unions.

The Registrar of Credit Unions at the Central Bank is the independent regulator for credit unions. Within his independent regulatory discretion, the registrar acts to support the prudential soundness of individual credit unions, to maintain sector stability and to protect the savings of credit union members. Where issues arise within individual credit unions, the Central Bank gives them time to implement remedial actions, including potential mergers. In the case of Charleville credit union the Central Bank has been engaging with it over a number of years seeking remediation of the weaknesses in its financial position. As the Deputy is aware, Charleville credit union had been exploring a number of different options in recent years and has explored merger discussions which have not been successful.

The view of the Central Bank is that the inability of the credit union to address its reserve position, despite previous receipt of external funding, has resulted in it being necessary to apply for the winding up of the credit union. As the Central Bank, acting as independent regulator, is closest to the detail of this case it would be difficult for the Minister for Finance to second guess its expert opinion.

The Central Bank of Ireland made an *ex parte* application to the High Court on 13 October 2017. The High Court approved the appointment of joint provisional liquidators, David O'Connor and Jim Hamilton of BDO, to Charleville credit union. The Central Bank took this action in order to ensure the protection of members' funds. In presenting its assessment to the court, the Central Bank outlined that it believes all feasible options available to Charleville credit union to raise and maintain its reserves at the levels required by law have been exhausted. The joint provisional liquidators will oversee the closure and wind-down of the credit union pending a final decision of the court. The credit union will not reopen and all issues relating to the wind-down of services will be managed by the joint liquidators.

The Minister for Finance can advise the Deputy that the deposit guarantee scheme, DGS, has been invoked and that members' savings are covered by the scheme up to €100,000 per member. Compensation payments will automatically issue by cheque to all duly verified depositors. The payments will be made as early as possible within the statutory deadline of 20 working days.

The Minister for Finance can further advise that the Central Bank is conscious that there is a demand for the services of a credit union in the local area and will examine what arrangements can be put in place to provide specific credit union services in the Charleville community in the future. The Central Bank is keen that credit union services are available to the people of Charleville. In some cases members may currently be able to avail of services in another credit union in the area as the common bond may extend into their locality or through their place of work.

The Government recognises the important role of credit unions as a volunteer co-operative movement in the country and while the roles of the Minister for Finance and the Central Bank in relation to the credit union sector are distinct, they are both working to protect members' savings and maintain the financial stability and well-being of credit unions generally. The Government is absolutely determined to continue to support a strengthened and growing credit union movement into the future. I will try to ascertain from the Central Bank what specific proposals

it has and a timeframe for them in relation to the establishment of new credit union facilities in Charleville.

**Deputy Michael Moynihan:** I know what is in the reply. We could debate for the entire night why we have come to this position and whether the approach taken was heavy handed, but at this point what people are discussing tonight in Charleville is what is the future of a credit union service in Charleville. Saying the Government supports the credit union movement will not cut it. I seek a meeting with the Department of Finance tomorrow and I will also seek a meeting with the Central Bank to discuss how we will fill the void in Charleville, and how we will have a functioning credit union service available to the people there who have supported the credit union since the very start.

Could the Minister of State go back to the Department and the Central Bank? He accepted that there was a demand for a the services of a credit union in the local area and will examine what arrangements can be put in place. I would have thought the Central Bank would have examined what arrangements could be put in place to provide credit union services prior to putting the credit union into liquidation. I accept that there is a commitment that something will be done but that should have been done prior to last Friday. We need to have a functioning credit union within the Charleville area. A period of 21 days is not acceptable. I cannot see why this cannot be done in two, three or four days. Everything is computerised to the absolute limit and all the facts are available. People's cash – their hard-earned money – is tied up. People need money to survive in their day-to-day lives. It is not acceptable to have pensions, salaries or anything else, whether belonging to individuals or small traders, tied up within the liquidators. I appeal to the Minister of State to give the matter the serious consideration it needs. To be honest, the people of Charleville and its surrounds deserve better. They deserve to have their money and to have a functioning credit union.

I appeal to the Minister of State not to leave a void in respect of other lending services having to come in and deal with the aftermath of this in three, four, five or six months' time. When will there be a service in place? When will the cash be delivered back to its rightful owners? I am seeking a full meeting with the Department of Finance tomorrow or Thursday morning to ascertain what is happening. This is far too serious.

**Deputy John Paul Phelan:** I was writing the questions down as the Deputy asked them. I will endeavour to get answers to those questions, which are reasonable enough. However, I would point out that, in the first instance, it is the responsibility of the board of the credit union to operate its activities and to operate within the law.

The Central Bank took a decision on this question after several years of engagement. I do not believe it was a decision that was taken lightly. However, I understand the Deputy's point. I have had no direct contact with the Central Bank on this issue in respect of whether it made definitive plans on what credit union facilities would be available in Charleville. The first responsibility of the Central Bank is to protect deposit holders and the actions on Friday were on foot of that. However, I will do my best to ensure that we get a response to the questions the Deputy has put before we leave on Thursday.

17 October 2017

## **Pension Provisions**

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** The next topical issue is in the names of Deputies Broughan, Clare Daly and Jack Chambers. Each Deputy has one minute.

**Deputy Clare Daly:** I know Deputy Chambers cannot be here, so can we have two minutes each? It would only be the same as the length of the Minister's reply.

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** I will give you a minute and a half each.

**Deputy Thomas P. Broughan:** Last Wednesday, my colleague, Deputy Clare Daly, hosted a briefing by members of the Aer Lingus supplementary pension scheme, known as the second scheme, to discuss the serious issues that have emerged relating to the wind-up of the scheme. I attended the briefing. I understand that up to 2,500 workers and pensioners are entitled to a share of the €106 million pension fund, known as Pot B or the Second Scheme, that is currently being wound up.

Members of the scheme raised concerns when they began receiving letters detailing their allocations. They soon realised that there did not appear to be any rhyme or reason to the method of distribution of funds. The distribution had been decided without consultation by the trustees, Irish Pensions Trust.

The second Aer Lingus supplementary scheme was in operation from 2007 to 2014. Aer Lingus paid 4% of pensionable salary on behalf of employees and employees paid 2% in all. Additionally, the Government provided €34 million from the sale of Aer Lingus. It is striking to note the decline in the value of the fund by €2 million to 31 March 2016 and the fact that administrative expenses increased by over 100% between 2015 and the wind-up. When the wind-up was mooted, members believed they would receive their allocated contributions and a fixed percentage of the performance of the scheme, but that has not happened. There has been a total lack of consultation with members. The proposed distribution seems erratic, inconsistent with the principles of the scheme and totally unfair on many members. Deputy Daly gave several examples when she raised the matter with the Taoiseach some days ago.

On behalf of constituents I am calling on the trustees and the regulatory authorities, the Pensions Authority and the Pensions Ombudsman, to investigate the distribution of the second scheme and to explain why no other options were afforded to members, as is usual in many other schemes. Moreover, I want them to explain the accounting and actuarial basis on which the distribution calculation is based. I call on the Minister to ensure such an investigation takes place.

**Deputy Clare Daly:** I know Deputies Chambers and Darragh O'Brien were keen to be here today. They would be singing very much from the same hymn sheet as us on this matter.

This is urgent because the wind-up of the financial interest of the scheme is under way. The scheme was in existence for eight years. As Deputy Broughan has said, workers paid in an average 6% per head, including the employer contribution. A further €34 million was put into the kitty beforehand. The benefits objective was discretionary and there is no requirement for the method that is being used by the trustees now to be implemented. Moreover, there is no impediment to the trustees changing their minds.

What has really aggrieved people is the unilateral decision making. It means every group

of people involved in the scheme is being affected. For example, for 394 current pensioners of the scheme, the average weekly benefit comes to 45 cent per week. The trustees propose to buy annuities for this group of pensioners out of their interests. However, annuities are exceptionally pricy at the moment. It would be far better for them to have the purchase of approved retirement funds.

In the case of deferred members, the trustees want to buy pre-retirement bonds, most likely, with one of the big insurance companies. The trustees have advised that if a member wants to transfer out of the pre-retirement bonds that the trustee has chosen, there will be a fee to opt out. There have been no discussions whatsoever.

As we discussed last week, there has been incredibly unfair distribution of the financial interest. People of a similar age who have made similar financial contributions will be subject to major differences in returns. As I said last week, one class can put in €10,000 and get back €12,000, while another can put in €22,000 and get back €84,000. There is a method in place, but it is an unfair method. We urge and hope the Minister and the Department can intervene with the Pensions Authority in respect of these matters.

**Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection (Deputy Regina Doherty):** I thank the Deputies present and those Deputies absent as well. I know it is a particularly rife issue in the environs of Aer Lingus and the constituencies that touch it.

I wish to outline that the trustees of any scheme have duties and responsibilities under trust law, other relevant legislation and the Pensions Act 1990, as amended. The duties of pension scheme trustees include administering the trust in accordance with the law and the terms of the trust deed. Consequently, any decisions made by corporate or individual trustees of an occupational pension scheme are governed by the relevant legislation.

Trustees have a basic obligation to carry out their duties in accordance with the law and the terms of the trust deed and rules. Most important, they are obliged to act in the best interests of all scheme beneficiaries, whether deferred, active or those receiving a pension - this is probably what is most relevant to this case.

An active member who is elected as a trustee has to act in the best interests of all members. If there is a conflict of interest, then the person's duty as a trustee must take precedence over other interests. If it is considered that benefits due are not being paid in accordance with the rules of a pension scheme, the member concerned can invoke the dispute resolution process and procedures that the scheme is obliged to operate. If the member is still dissatisfied, she can bring the complaint to the Pensions Ombudsman or the Pensions Authority.

I trust Deputies appreciate that, in my position, I cannot comment or intervene directly in the pension arrangements applying to a particular scheme. However, where issues that cause concern relating to a particular scheme are raised with me, as in this case, I can notify the Pensions Authority and ask those responsible to intercede. I wish to confirm for the Deputies present and absent that the matter relating to this particular scheme has been raised with my Department. In turn, we have raised it with the Pensions Authority, which has agreed to examine it and come back to us with a report. The Pensions Authority will assess if there has been a legal breach of obligations and take any necessary action if such a breach has been found.

Although the Pensions Authority is under the aegis of my Department, it regulates pension schemes entirely independently of the Department. Therefore, I am not in a position to influ-

ence or comment on the matter, the process or the length of time it will take. I can say that when this concern was brought to authority officials last week they were happy to intervene and address the concerns to the trustees. We await a response. I hope that clarifies the matter for the Deputies.

**Deputy Thomas P. Broughan:** I welcome what the Minister has said in respect of the Pensions Authority. The Taoiseach gave a commitment to Deputy Clare Daly that the Minister would organise a meeting with her and the other two interested Deputies as well as others to see what we could do within the current legal situation. Will the Social Welfare, Pensions and Civil Registration Bill 2017 address some of the problems which have arisen with the administration of funds, such as the second scheme with Aer Lingus? Is there any conceivable way that the ambit of that legislation could be utilised on current wind-ups? It was disturbing to hear from ordinary members that they did not receive annual benefit statements. People seem to be uncertain about how additional voluntary contributions, AVC, are operated. There was no consultation whatsoever on the wind-up. I hope the Minister and the Pensions Authority take action on this and ensure there is not a recurrence in any other scheme and that the current problems are addressed.

**Deputy Clare Daly:** I welcome the Minister's response. She is right that the trustees have huge power in this area and that is where it really rests. That is a legislative shortcoming and I welcome the Taoiseach's remarks last week that the area is under review and that the Pensions Authority is going to look at making sure that trustees behave in a more accountable and transparent way. I welcome that the Pensions Authority has agreed to examine this area.

I have a word of warning on that, since we are never happy. This scheme has been delayed in its wind-up for a number of years. Millions of euro have been bled out of it while the trustees waited to decide what to do. The resources were in cash and were effectively losing money. It consumed €2 million between 2015 and 2016 in professional fees and so on, just by sitting there. A further delay runs the risk of that situation. Members are very keen to have the financial interests distributed, but they want them to be distributed in a fair way where staff have options and a way of addressing the matter. That is my word of caution. Hopefully, the intervention by the Pensions Authority will be timely and measured but it is important that we go back to the drawing board on it because while there is a method of distribution, it is one of madness and needs to be changed.

**Deputy Regina Doherty:** I was not aware the Taoiseach had promised a meeting so I apologise. I do not know if there is a need for it now but if there is, I am happy to organise it with the relevant people in my Department. I hear what Deputy Daly said. It is not within my gift to put a timeline on the request but I can certainly convey to the authority the details the Deputy has just outlined.

To respond to Deputy Broughan, although the information provided has caused me concern, that does not necessarily mean that anything that has happened is wrong or illegal. Therefore, it would probably not be helpful if I was to concur with the Deputy that further legislation is needed. I will express the concerns regarding the timing to the authority and whatever the outcome of this is will be reflected in any future legislation. The Deputy is aware that our legislation is coming back on 9 November. I am not sure whether we will have it back soon enough to address the issues but I can guarantee the Deputy that, as long as I am sitting here, whatever issues arise, if there are any, from the treatment of this pension fund will be addressed in future legislation.

**Water Services Bill 2017: Second Stage (Resumed)**

Question again proposed: “That the Bill be now read a Second Time.”

**Deputy Brian Stanley:** The approach taken by the previous Government and the current one to the establishment of Irish Water and how we run water services in this country is a lesson in how not to do it. It has been a difficult campaign for many people, in both conducting the campaigns and trying to face down the efforts to impose what was, in effect, double taxation. An issue which concerned me greatly, and I am on the record of the House pointing it out on many occasions, was the cost of establishing the utility. It was really set up to provide a billing structure. There was speculation that part of the idea was that the structure could be privatised. I introduced a Bill four years ago, under which we would have a referendum to ensure that it would not be privatised and I still think that is worth doing. I welcome that the Labour Party, which rejected it at the time, has now changed its mind on the matter and thinks that we should do it.

According to Irish Water, 49% of the water supply leaks out of the network. The wasteful installation of meters could have been better spent. I pointed out a number of times, as did some of my Sinn Féin colleagues, that we should have a neighbourhood or district metering system. That has been floated and I notice it has been taken on board in a more mainstream way in the last year or so and that is to be welcomed. The cost of metering every house and maintaining these meters has not been taken into consideration enough. The life of these meters is quite short and trying to maintain them is costly, and their purpose is questionable. I pointed this out many times to the then Minister, Phil Hogan. There should have been no introduction of domestic water charges and we still should not have any through the backdoor. With the ministerial power proposed in this Bill, we do not want a future Minister to be given the power to create a charging regime.

Water is a basic source of life and it must remain in people’s hands. Such a basic human need is important for health and hygiene and cannot become an economic commodity. It was established that Irish Water was a company to trade water as a capitalist commodity. I firmly believe that was the eventual intention. All its structures were geared towards that end, including billing and other components. With the responsibility for water being taken away from the local authorities and given to a company, it would have been easy to sell off to the highest bidder. One can look at what happened in Britain. One cannot ignore the catastrophic effects of that and the way householders are being charged huge prices for a basic water supply.

I introduced a Bill in 2014 regarding public ownership and a referendum to decide on that. Fine Gael and the Labour Party voted against that. The then Minister, Deputy Alan Kelly, rejected it and said there was no need for it. The Fine Gael Minister of State at the time said: “I would not consider it an appropriate approach to amend the Constitution to provide for a prohibition on the privatisation of a utility company.” That was it and it is still seen by Fine Gael as a utility that trades as a commodity which can be bought or sold. This is key. If one sees water as a commodity and not as a service, then the logical extension of one’s ideology is the potential to sell Irish Water. We need that referendum. We have had referenda on less important matters in the past and this is one we should have and which should be prioritised. Later, another Bill was passed on Second Stage by this House to achieve public ownership but that now languishes on Committee Stage. Sinn Féin and other Deputies involved in the Right2Water campaign also submitted amendments to this Bill to ensure public ownership.

The structure of Irish Water has been inefficient in its functions. Local authorities still provide the service but it is now taken away from local practice to bureaucratic workings elsewhere. The argument for an overarching body responsible for water may be taken as a given, particularly for cross-county matters, but if it is in place, it must be efficient, working, accountable and cost effective. The waste of money in Irish Water has scandalised us. The public is outraged by what went on. It has had a polarising effect in this country.

The Government in the past played the game of pitching rural against urban. I refer to those who are connected to group water schemes. Many rural dwellers are Irish Water customers. Before one walks in through somebody's gate in many rural areas, for instance, in the constituency I represent, one will see the Irish Water meter. The argument does not stack up from that point of view. Many of those schemes have been taken over by the local authorities and are now in the hands of Irish Water. There are tens of thousands of people in rural areas who have an Irish Water connection.

In relation to the group water schemes, my party provided in its budget submissions in the past for an increased subsidy for the group water schemes to ensure that those involved are treated fairly. I would also point out that there is a scheme for private wells through the local authorities that works well. One can avail of it for the upgrading of wells also. That scheme needs to be protected and we need to look at how we can enhance that.

In the few seconds I have left, I will refer to the potential for future charging. The Minister, as I understand it, will have the power to change the 1.7 times normal usage provision. From the point of view of my party, as part of the Right2Water campaign, we will oppose any attempt to try to introduce domestic water charges through the backdoor. We support the concept of commercial charging. In my household, we pay a commercial charge because of a small business we have. I have no problem with that because it is used for commercial profit-making purposes. However, we cannot go back to double taxation on domestic water.

**Deputy Mick Barry:** Fianna Fáil, in government, agreed water charges in principle. Fine Gael and the Labour Party, in government, implemented them. Privatisation was clearly on the agenda - get the charge in, make water potentially profitable, then flog the service off to a private utility. Threats and pressure were used but this agenda was defeated. This Bill provides for water charges, as they were, to be abolished, arrears to be written off and refunds to be organised for those who paid.

What made Fine Gael and Fianna Fáil change their minds was people power - the 250,000 plus who marched the streets, the 1 million plus who refused to pay in full or in part, and the two thirds plus of the population who voted for parties in the general election who pledged to abolish the charge. It is to those people who took part in that magnificent people power movement that our congratulations go tonight for achieving this victory.

At the same time as we celebrate a victory, we must also issue a warning because this Water Services Bill tries to build a back door for the return of water charges. It does this through the mechanism of the excessive use charge. The excessive use charge was inserted in this Bill by Fine Gael with the support of Fianna Fáil as a Trojan horse to facilitate the return of water charges in future. Fine Gael and Fianna Fáil deny this. They say that this is a Ronseal charge - it only does what it says on the tin. They say it is for excessive use only. It is for those who use 1.7 times the average amount of water, for so-called "water wasters". Only 8% will be hit, they say.

What Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael do not highlight is that this legislation states that the threshold can be lowered by a vote of the Dáil in five years' time. What Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael do not say is that the excessive use charge will saddle tens of thousands of ordinary four-person households with water charges in less than two years' time. How is that the case? The legislation factors in average household size as 2.75 persons. Average household usage for households with between one and four members is 2.75 persons multiplied by 1.7 times the average usage. This means that a household with four members - by the way, these include many households with adult children who are forced to live at home with their parents because of the housing crisis - using more than 1.2 times the average amount of water will be hit under this legislation for excessive use charges. In other words, there will be water charges by another name in less than two years' time.

These two examples, one, building in a mechanism for lowering the excessive use charge threshold in five years' time and, two, attempting to slap tens of thousands of four-person households with water charges in less than two years' time, show the true intentions of Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael to leave a backdoor open for the return of water charges in the not-too-distant future. I will conclude my introductory remarks by issuing a warning to the Fine Gael Party and the Fianna Fáil Party that if they seriously attempt to go down that road and levy water charges by the backdoor on increasing sections of the people, they will face a movement at least the same size as, if not greater than, the water charges movement which has forced them into such major concessions that we are debating in the Bill tonight.

I will expand a little on some of my introductory points. I stated that Fianna Fáil in government agreed water charges in principle. The *Irish Examiner*, using a freedom of information request about Cabinet meetings in September of 2010, has shown conclusively that Fianna Fáil put the issue of the water charges on the agenda before any other party did and agreed to them in principle. It is a matter of clear historical record that Fine Gael and the Labour Party implemented them a number of years after that. Privatisation would have been inevitable had they got away with this. Leaving aside European Union legislation which would force the Government to go down that road, if one changes water from a service one day into a commodity the next, with a price tag on it and the potential to realise a profit, of course, the big multinational corporations that trade in and profit from water would be banging down doors in this State to get their hands on that valuable commodity, "blue gold", as it has been called by many commentators.

I mentioned that threats and pressure had been used. There were the threats of penalties. There were the threats of court actions. There were the threats of the former Minister, the Commissioner, Mr. Phil Hogan, who stated that failure to pay water charges could result in one's water supply being reduced to a trickle. What a threat to make to the households of single parents, pensioners and those who live on low incomes within society, that the Government would reduce their water supply to a trickle. What a contrast with the debate that we are having tonight because that attitude, approach and agenda has been defeated. Water charges, as they were, are to be abolished, arrears and the penalties are to be written off and refunds organised for those who paid.

It is clear that this has come about not as a result of a change of heart on the part of Fine Gael Ministers or the Fianna Fáil Party, but as a result of people power. It was as a result of working class people, ordinary people. People power forced this change. I said earlier than more than 250,000 people had joined the marches. On the first big march in Dublin in October 2014, there were 100,000 or 150,000 participants. On the second day of action called by the Right-

2Water campaign there were protests and demonstrations in cities, towns and villages across the country in which there must have been at least 200,000 involved. I mentioned that more than 1 million households had refused to pay, in full or in part. That was an incredible boycott. Had it been seen before on any issue in the history of the State? I also said that in the last general election more than two thirds, probably more than 70%, in fact, had voted for political parties which had pledged to abolish water charges. I do not think there is any question or doubt as to whom the victory belongs. It belongs to the people of Ireland who marched, refused to pay and voted for change. Their struggle and campaign and people power forced this major climb down.

At the same time as we celebrate this victory we also issue a warning. We said in the debate that took place before the summer recess that Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael were attempting to build a back door to allow for the return of water charges in the future. In fact, if one looks at the Bill in detail, one will see that they are actually trying to widen that back door a little and their weapon of choice is the excessive use charge. It is the Trojan horse to facilitate the return of water charges in the future, although Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael deny this. The argument being made is that we cannot stand over the wastage of water, that 8% of households are using more than 1.7 times the average amount of water and that the excessive use charge is for them and them alone. However, what we are doing in this debate is highlighting the real agenda which can be seen in two examples.

First, the figure of 1.7 times average usage is not to be set in stone in this legislation. The Bill does not fix that figure forever and a day. It allows the Dáil the possibility of lowering it, but to what? To a figure of 1.6, 1.5, 1.4 or 1.3? The Dáil can do this within five years. The legislation allows for the possibility that households that use far less than 1.7 times the average amount may be penalised.

The second example is what the legislation plans to do, not in five years' time or even in two years' time but in about a year and three quarters, to ordinary four-person households. There are many four-person households in the country. In fact, there are probably more such households today than there were yesterday or the day before, given the housing crisis. There are many families with children in their late teens and even their mid-to-late 20s who previously would have been purchasing their own property or at least renting from a landlord who can no longer afford to do so because of the chronic housing crisis. What is the story with this legislation *vis-à-vis* these four-person households? They will not be penalised if they use 1.7 times the average amount multiplied by four; rather, under the terms of the legislation, they will be penalised if they use 1.7 times the average amount multiplied by 2.75. In other words, they are to be penalised not if they use 1.7 times the average amount but if they use more than 1.16 times the average figure. Therefore, a four-person household which uses marginally above the average usage level is to be hit with Fine Gael's and Fianna Fáil's so-called excessive use charge in 21 months' time. Clearly, it is an attempt to hit the families in question, the first tranche of families, with a new, returned water charge which can be levied on others if the Dáil so decides five years down the road.

It is difficult to concentrate with all of the talking that is ongoing in the Chamber.

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** Please, Deputy Cowen.

**Deputy Barry Cowen:** My apologies.

**Deputy Mick Barry:** No problem; apology accepted.

The legislation allows the Dáil in five years' time to lower the threshold and bring more and more people into the loop as time passes. That shows the true intent of both Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael with this legislation. They have had to accept defeat through gritted teeth because the people power movement forced it upon them. However, before they let this issue go, they are keen and determined to leave the back door open for the return of water charges in the future. That is why we issue a warning to Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael. The people power movement has beaten them once and will beat them again if they attempt to use this opening to drive through water charges again down the road.

Previous speakers made reference to the attempt being made by the Government to wriggle out of the commitment to organise a referendum on the keeping of water services in public ownership. The House has passed a motion which indicates clear support for going down that road. However, in mealy-mouthed fashion, Government spokespersons are now saying that with the changes being introduced in the Bill, abolishing water charges as we knew them, scrapping the arrears, organising refunds and so on, a referendum on keeping water public services in public ownership is not as important as it once was; therefore, it is not a priority for which the Government intends to legislate. Who are they coddling? The aim of a referendum to keep water services in public ownership would be to strike a blow against water charges and the privatisation agenda. The Government's attempt to escape from that commitment is an attempt to keep that agenda alive. Ask those who marched to defeat water charges, who refused to pay their water charges or who voted for change on this issue in the last general election and they will tell us, quite clearly, that they, with their friends, neighbours and families, support the holding of a referendum to keep water services in public ownership. It is a real indication of the intent, in the medium to long term, of the two parties to try to wriggle out of their commitment on water charges at this stage.

Previous speakers also referred to the issue of leaks in the water network. Incredibly, reports indicate that up to 50% of treated water in the State is wasted; it leaks back into the ground. The leaks are not mainly on the household side of the boundary wall or stopcock; they are on the street and the responsibility of the local authorities and the State. The greatest waster of water in the State is the State.

Instead of wasting hundreds of millions of euro on metering the homes of ordinary householders in order to facilitate an agenda of water charges and privatisation, every red cent of the money should have been invested instead in improving the network and stopping leaks for the fixing of which the local authorities and the State are responsible. We are not saying it is a pity that was not done; rather we are saying it should be done now. An investment of €600 million a year in water infrastructure is not enough; we need an investment of €1 billion a year. That is crucial. The infrastructure should be funded, not through further crippling taxes on the PAYE sector, working people and the middle class, but rather by those who can afford to pay: the corporations the super-profits of which in the State are sky-rocketing and the upper echelons in terms of income, that is, those earning more than €100,000 a year per person as opposed to per household.

The water charges campaign has demonstrated people power and the power of protest. I hope it is an example that will inspire and encourage others to take a similar stand. I hope everyone in the country who is outraged by Government policy and the lack of action in dealing with housing and homelessness will take inspiration from this campaign and understand people power can also force a shift on this issue. I hope every worker who has had little or no pay increase for the guts of the past ten years and is forced to hear about economic recovery every

day on the radio, every night on the television and every time he or she opens a newspaper will now insist that his or her family needs a share of it. They cannot afford to pay their rent; they need pay increases and a recovery for working people. They can fight and win. They can look at the water charges movement and draw inspiration from it. It is a powerful example and it was a pleasure to have been involved in it.

**Deputy Seán Canney:** As a Deputy who represents a rural constituency, I, too, would like to talk about people power, the positives it can produce and how people in communities can work together. Much has been said and written about the water charges issue, how we deal with it; the cost and leaks. Anybody and everybody can now claim to be an expert on water services. Through the whole debate, however, the real experts have been forgotten about. They are the people who, through people power, generated what we now know as the group water schemes. These experts are the volunteers up and down the country who, when there was very little else going on, took on the task of creating the schemes and providing water for houses where there was no water supply before. This is not something that happened years ago. I did not have piped water in my house up until about ten years ago when the group water scheme provided it for me. Up until then I had to pay for it; I had to sink a tank in the ground and pay the costs. Thankfully, the group water scheme took me on and provided me with a water connection.

The people concerned have spent many years working day and night developing and putting the schemes together. They have given of their time freely and offered leadership in communities, in providing potable water for their neighbours up and down the country. When Deputies talk about the hundreds of thousands who went out to protest, I can talk about the hundreds and thousands who worked together to generate the means through which they could obtain water. They got up on their feet and did something for themselves - they got up and made sure they could deliver for themselves. They brought their communities together in taking on the responsibility to provide water. The members of these schemes got involved, in turn, and became the owners. Believe it or not, they actually paid for the privilege of having a water supply and were delighted to be able to do so for the simple reason that they had never had water piped to their houses before then.

We have now decided that people should not pay for water, unless they use it excessively, a decision that has been made to give people with access to public water supplies free water. As we do this, however, we cannot just leave those in group water schemes to one side and forget about them. We have to treat everybody in the country equally. We have to have equality in the provision of services and the way we pay for them. My constituency of Galway East is full of group water schemes: up and down back lanes; with ten, 16, 150 and hundreds in a scheme. That is how water is supplied in most of rural Ireland. What are we going to do about these schemes? First, we need to fully recognise the fact that the people concerned have paid for water for a long time. We also have to give recognition to the people who set up these schemes, some of whom are no longer with us, although their legacy lives on. We cannot treat them any differently from the rest of citizens. They have to be treated equally. If water is to be paid for out of general taxation, this principle must apply to all.

Group water schemes have taken on many additional challenges since they were first brought forward. Their officers, chairpersons, secretaries and treasurers have taken on additional regulations, standards and responsibilities. I express my sincere thanks to everyone involved in every group water scheme in the country who has worked so hard and free of charge to improve people's lives. The Minister has indicated that he fully understands the group water scheme issue. I look forward to seeing his proposals to ensure we will treat people equally.

**Deputy Barry Cowen:** It is included in the recommendations and the legislation.

**Deputy Seán Canney:** I ask the Deputy to please let me finish. I welcome the Minister's recommendation that group water scheme subventions be put back in place, to be applied retrospectively. We also need to make sure we will honour our commitment to those involved in the schemes that they will no longer have to pay for water because the subvention will cover the cost. That is important. There has been so much publicity about the water charges issue but very little about group water schemes. It is time we gave them the recognition they are due. I look forward to seeing the Minister's proposals.

**Deputy Barry Cowen:** It is all included in the recommendations. There is duality. Fair is fair.

**Acting Chairman (Deputy Bernard J. Durkan):** I call the Deputy to order. The next speakers are Deputies Michael Healy-Rae and Danny Healy-Rae who will be followed by Deputies Catherine Murphy and Eamonn Ryan and then Deputy Eamonn Fitzmaurice.

**Deputy Seán Canney:** Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice.

**Acting Chairman (Deputy Bernard J. Durkan):** I also have Deputy Dessie Ellis listed. If he wishes to proceed, he may do so now.

**Deputy Dessie Ellis:** Ba mhaith liom a rá go bhfuilimid i gcoinne an Bhille seo. This legislation is another debacle in the long and sorry water charges saga. As we all remember and Fianna Fáil would like us to forget, the water charges fiasco began with it and its inability to stand up to the troika. It accepted almost every ridiculous, divisive and debilitating demand from it. It agreed to impose water charges at its request. The demand for such charges was a clear commentary on the atrocious legacy of successive Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael Governments in underfunding vital utilities like water services.

Up until now, most of the narrative around the justification for the establishment of Irish Water involved blaming local authorities for the condition of the country's water infrastructure. It is unfair to blame local authorities entirely for the issues that have bedevilled the provision of water for Irish households and businesses. Many local authorities did Trojan work to maintain the water infrastructure and provide clean drinkable water for houses, even though they were restricted by under-investment by central government.

Previous Governments, just like the current Government, could have used additional targeted funding to provide for the additional capital infrastructure required to improve and upgrade water infrastructure. We can imagine what could have been accomplished if the enormous sums spent on consultants to Irish Water and the hugely expensive water metering project had been allocated for investment in the maintenance and upgrading of water infrastructure. The establishment of Irish Water and the transfer of assets and personnel from local authorities were other huge costs which could have been avoided and should never have happened.

Sinn Féin and the Executive in the North ensured a major package was made available in the North for investment in water infrastructure. Such investment meant there was no need to introduce water charges in the North. On the other hand, Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael were clearly committed to the introduction of water charges in the South. This was demonstrated by Fianna Fáil in its agreement with the troika and by Fine Gael in its manifesto commitments. The tens of thousands of people who came onto the streets to oppose water charges clearly showed that

these parties were on the wrong side of history and what was right. Have they not learned anything?

The Bill before the House raises a number of concerns. I am concerned about what it says and does not say. As I will set out shortly, there is a lack of clarity on some important issues. I am concerned that this complex legislation is being rushed through the Dáil without proper scrutiny. The wording of the Bill seems to disregard some of the recommendations made by the special commission on water. There are no references in the legislation to some of the key recommendations made in the committee's report. The Bill does not refer to the conservation measures recommended by the commission.

I am concerned about how the Government will decide to calculate what it regards as "excessive use" and about the allowance that will be available to households. The way the Bill is framed raises a real concern that over time, the Government will reduce the allowance and the threshold for it. The Bill makes provision for the recalculation of the threshold amount. I am concerned that the multiplier to be used in calculating the threshold amount cannot exceed 1.7. I envisage a real difficulty as a consequence of the restrictive nature of the ministerial powers set out in the Bill. It seems that the Minister will have the power to reduce the threshold amount multiplier from 1.7 but not to increase it above 1.7. There is a real possibility that households could be paying significantly higher amounts after five years for usage regarded as being above the allowance determined by the Minister in reducing the threshold. It can be argued that the effect of this is to leave the door open for a return to water charges by stealth in the future. Is the Government being mischievous or duplicitous in restricting the Minister's powers in this respect? I suggest the legislation has been framed to allow a future Fianna Fáil or Fine Gael Government to increase charges.

The Bill does not make a distinction based on the number of people in a household. A household can have three or four children or teenagers. It would not be beyond one's imagination to deduce that a household with three or four children or teenagers could reasonably use significantly more water. A family could be severely disadvantaged if its allowance does not reflect the everyday realities of having a house full of young children or teenagers. They could pay heavily for any imbalance in the perception of what constitutes an ordinary household. Families will also be penalised as a result of the decision to base charges on household usage rather than on individual usage. The related problem of how to tell how much water a household is actually using arises in this context. Certain households are metered, while others are not. Given that just 42% of households have meters, how can the Government determine the average household's use of water? I am not arguing for the metering of houses but pointing to a flaw in the logic behind the Bill. One cannot get a true or accurate average figure with limited information. The skewed average figure the Government will work out could adversely affect a household's threshold and allowance.

Fianna Fáil and the Government are happy to accept the false idea of excessive water usage. I would like to see evidence of the level of water wastage about which Fianna Fáil and the Government speak. I do not believe they have evidence of water wastage. It simply does not happen. Irish Water's figures show that the level of Irish household water consumption is one of the lowest in the OECD, but what did logic and data matter when Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael were determined to introduce water charges? The sad fact is that they did not have to introduce them. Ireland's exemption in the water services directive could have got them off the hook. If they had wanted to do so, they could have funded water charges directly from general taxation. I remind the House that in the American city of Detroit water was used to put people out of their

homes. It is like the new gold in the way it is being used.

There is no doubt that people power forced the Government to backtrack on some of its more excessive ideas about water charges. I was a member of a local authority when bin charges were introduced with the support of Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael which looked for waivers for senior citizens. Where are these waivers now? Where are the promises politicians make? The problem is that politicians come and go but the rules change. What is the reason for the fear of a referendum to keep water services in public ownership? Surely that would send a strong message that the Government has never intended to privatise water services. Many people think differently.

Táimid i gcoinne an Bhille seo. Tá inní orainn go bhfuil táillí uisce ag teacht isteach tríd an gcúlthoras.

**Deputy Michael Healy-Rae:** I welcome the opportunity to speak to the Bill. I never like to be personal about anything, but when I look back over this debacle, I am reminded of the arrogance of the former Minister, Phil Hogan, who behaved in a condescending manner when dealing with people who had dared to voice objections to what he was proposing. The actual charges being proposed at the time, before the then Government started to climb down, were outrageous. I calculated that families with a number of children living in their houses would be facing the imposition of charges of €600, €700, €800 or €900. It was going from nothing to that level. It was no wonder that the people took to the streets. It was no wonder that political organisations rallied against what was being proposed. In County Kerry, I marched with people who were opposed to what was being proposed. I made many great friends on those marches. There were wet, bad and cold days. I tried to be out as much as possible with them because I believed what was being proposed was wrong.

The funny thing is that if the Government had addressed the issue in a different way, and had been more reasonable, there could have been a different outcome. I am not one to apportion blame, but I remember when a former Minister sat in the Taoiseach's seat. I was debating the abolition of town councils, something to which I was totally and vehemently opposed. I did not care whether people were in Fianna Fáil, Sinn Féin or any other political party. Our urban councillors played a vital role in our democracy. I believed that at the time and still believe it passionately. Town councils should not have been abolished.

When I was debating the issue, the former Minister, Mr. Phil Hogan, was in the House and I spoke about Fine Gael town councillors, in particular, whom I knew and were very upset about the abolition of town councils. When I finished making what I would call a plea on behalf of those councillors and town councils, the former Minister stood up and said I could go back to those people - I was speaking about his people - and tell them he was quaking in his boots. That was the same as telling me where to go. We are at this juncture because of that type of arrogance.

I welcome the fact that what I would call the swagger and arrogance of the previous Government is not present in the current one. I recognise Deputy Cowen. The input of Fianna Fáil means that the Government does not have a massive overall majority, which was the worst thing that ever happened. The Government of that time thought it could stand back from the people and tell them it was going to do whatever it liked. That hurt me a lot.

How this issue was dealt with at that time was beyond belief. That is why we are discussing

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the Water Services Bill 2017 and why approximately €179 million has to be repaid. Nobody could have foreseen that this would be the outcome. The previous Government drew it all upon itself through its actions. I applaud the people who made their views known, stood out, argued, fought and won the day.

One has to do things right. I wish to make a declaration. I am a person who could have a perceived conflict of interest in terms of the Bill because of a person to whom I have a connection, work and all of that. I want to put that on the record so that nobody can say I was neglectful in my duty in declaring that.

I refer to people who help to ensure the delivery of water to homes, businesses and farms throughout the country. When I refer to these people I have to speak about Kerry County Council. I refer to it because there are great people in many sections working in our local authority, including housing and planning.

People in office jobs or what I call water men who repair water leaks for Irish Water do great work. Before the creation of Irish Water, they were employees of Kerry County Council. I want to put on the record my admiration for and total confidence in the great work they do. They work on Christmas Day and New Year's Day. I spoke to a water man recently and asked how he was getting on. He told me they had a late night fixing a water leak and did not finish until 12.30 a.m. They ensure water keeps flowing through pipes and gets to houses.

On a personal note, I wish to acknowledge my late father-in-law, Jack Lyne, who was a very respectable man and went about his work diligently all his life. He was very proud of the fact that he worked for the water services division of Kerry County Council. I want to acknowledge my uncle, Dan Rae, who worked for many years driving a digger to dig holes and expose pipes to ensure water kept flowing. It is always nice to remember people who have gone.

I wish to acknowledge the great work of men such as the two I have named and all the other people who dedicated their lives to their work. They were very proud of their work and the fact that water services might service a single house, an entire town or a community. As I said, they would tear at the work in all weathers and at any hour of the day or night. It is only right and proper that those people should be remembered today.

I find those currently working in Irish Water to be extremely diligent and good at their work. It is often a tough job to get water going again. Sometimes pipes can be very inaccessible and they work in all types of weather. It is not an easy job at times. The Minister of State and Government should always acknowledge the vital role those people play.

With regard to the Bill before us, nobody could have foreseen that we would be where we are today. It is a problem created by the Government and one which it has to sort out. I listened very closely to previous speakers and very valuable and important contributions were made because of the importance of this issue. People are wondering what way this is going to pan out and how money will be refunded. People are fearful about the talk of excessive use. As others have said, we have to be very careful that a future Government does not use a window of opportunity to try to do something similar to what the last Government did.

If something sensible had been introduced at the beginning, we could have had a completely different outcome. Given the charges which were proposed and the excessive use charges imposed, people were not going to accept the regime in any shape or fashion.

We have to remember a very important group of people who have always paid for their water, namely, the farming community. Farmers and businesses have paid for water. I have paid water charges for over 30 years. I am very grateful for the service and continuity of supply I receive. However, that is in a business context. Many farmers who are unable to connect to mains water have to provide their own water. People set up group water schemes. I was very glad over many years in County Kerry to have helped to assist community groups and individuals come together in this way. A group scheme could be two, three or 103 people. I was always very glad of the co-operation I received from Kerry County Council when those group water schemes were set up. There is always a cost for those schemes and a cost for individuals. When speaking about people providing their own supply, water does not come from nowhere in that people have to drill, fit pumps or have a gravity-fed supply from streams or rivers. There is always a time cost, even if people use their own labour; time and expense is involved with all of it.

Ultimately, every house, business and farmer needs water. We do not want to see a scenario where the provision of water could be privatised. When Irish Water was set up, I saw it as a possible vehicle for the privatisation of the water supply so it could be sold by the State. I was in the Dáil when this was raised and people made vocalised concerns. I was concerned about it and I would like to be sure about what future Governments do. One does not know what will happen in the future but we can never allow such a vital supply as water to our homes, businesses and farms to fall into the hands of private groups or investors. That is something the people of Ireland would never stand for. It is one of the reasons there was such a backlash from the general public, leading to protests by thousands of people who marched week in, week out, whether it was a small group in a small village or town or the monster rallies, as I would call them, which occurred in cities like Limerick, Cork and Dublin. People mobilised because of a fear of privatisation. In certain sectors there is room for privatisation but with an essential service like this, we should never go down that road. We do not want to go down that road.

I am glad this Bill is before the Dáil and we are all getting a chance to debate it. There are sections I welcome very much and, as I outlined, there are sections about which I am worried. I am concerned about the way these will be interpreted, although not necessarily now, as it is clear enough what we will vote on and either support or not. Members will make up their own minds. I am worried about the way this could be viewed by future Governments. I hope they will have learned a major lesson, which is that we must listen to the people. Ultimately, we must listen to what is said by county councillors, members of the public and elected Deputies in this House. The last Government was completely wrong in failing to listen to the people. Some of the biggest mistakes ever made were the way it handled Irish Water, abolished the town councils and closed Garda stations. It was all part of the package of arrogance, with an attitude that it could do whatever it liked. I proved on the record of the Dáil that it cost more to keep a particular Garda station closed than to keep it open. There was no way one could get this through to the Ministers or the many of the officials who thought they could do what they liked. That is wrong and we must listen to the people.

I am so humbled by the idea of being a representative of County Kerry and I know that the day one stops listening to people and representing their best interests, it is the day one becomes a very poor politician. That is why I was so exercised by the charges as they were proposed at the time. Both then and now, young couples struggle with mortgages and face massive costs trying to run a home, educate children and send them to college while dealing with medical and other matters. They must balance budgets and we must recognise all of that any time a new

charge is proposed, whether it is for Irish Water or increases in energy prices. We saw the massive increase in ESB bills over the past ten years and this can be combined with the high cost of insurance, for example.

Ministers speak about the recovery but it is not real for people with a medium to low budget. They are finding it impossible to cope, and the Minister of State and his Government should keep that foremost in their minds. Young people are not feeling the benefit of the recovery. They struggle every week to pay mortgages and their bills. I have highlighted the main costs in their homes, including straightforward items they cannot do without, such as power going to their homes. Those costs have risen enormously. I have clinics every week and the most common problems are faced by struggling families or elderly people. Pensioners are getting a fiver of an increase to their pensions but will not get it until March next year. An increase on something goes on at midnight but a person must wait five or six months to get an extra fiver per week, which is an outrage. People with disabilities were hoping for a real increase, which would have been approximately €20 per week to be paid immediately. Unfortunately, the Government had a choice but it chose to leave people like that behind and offer them a fiver next March. It is not much of a solution to the tough times faced by people with a disability or young struggling families when they must try to balance their budget. It is not much of an answer or help to them.

I am grateful for the opportunity to speak on this very important matter. The subject of water and water charges will never go away, as the cost of providing water to people's home will always be there. I want to be sure that people will have water and a proper and pure supply. We should put our shoulder to the wheel to ensure our pipes can be upgraded and waste is brought to a minimum. We can only welcome that. There should never again be a big stick approach to water supply or associated charges. I am thankful for the opportunity to speak this evening.

**Deputy Catherine Murphy:** It is probably a bit surreal that we are still in this Chamber speaking about the same matter, as it seems to arise every single year. It was in 2012 or 2013 that it began. On occasions, because the Government had such a big majority, it essentially rammed through legislation. I remember one particular occasion, just before the Christmas recess, when the entire Opposition walked out to try to highlight the inadequacy of the legislation, but the Government was so arrogant that it would not take the message at the time. It could do whatever it wanted to because of the scale of its majority. It was fundamentally flawed legislation, which has been demonstrated over time. Many members of that Government still sit in this House, but there is now a minority Government, which means that legitimate concerns have a better chance of being heard. The arrogance displayed at that time has ensured that the last three or four years have been fraught with tension surrounding Irish Water. It is no exaggeration to say this was a doomed enterprise from the get-go. I hope lessons have been learned from that time.

While it is welcome that the enormous public outcry and determined and sustained complaining have culminated in the abolition of the water charges, I still have huge concerns about the costs involved, including the contractual obligations which may supersede best spending practice or decisions. One example is the metering programme. If we look at the leakage rates around the country prior to the introduction of Irish Water, County Kildare had one of the lowest, if not the lowest, in the country at the time. It was the first county selected for metering. It did not make sense to say metering was about conservation. As the methodology used for calculating it has changed since Irish Water was established, it is not easy to carry out a like for like comparison.

The lifespan of meters is between 15 and 20 years, yet we are continuing to install them on the basis of contracts that were agreed rather than on the basis of what makes sense. From the outset of the water charges controversy I have been clear on the need to recognise the importance of conservation, but Irish Water was never about conservation. We saw the leaked PR memos which referred to “turning citizens into customers”, but that was firmly rejected. It was about borrowing off balance sheet, money which had to be paid back, and a full cost-recovery model. People understood exactly what that meant; it meant additional taxes on top of the cuts they were seeing in their incomes. It was a very real political issue.

That every house requires a meter to guarantee conservation is not true. The very fact that County Kildare had such a good system prior to metering speaks to this. It had achieved a figure 7% below what the 20-year objective was for Irish Water before any meter was installed. That was because there was a very good telemetry section in the county council. There is much criticism of the county councils. However, I had reason to ring a county council last week. A constituent had contacted me to try to find out when a large burst pipe was likely to be fixed. I rang Irish Water and obtained some information, but then I rang the county council and got much more. That the county councils and the 34 local authorities were going to disappear and that a big entity would be placed on top has turned out not to be the case because the county councils were to be contracted to do the work. It is self-evident that the pipes are where they are.

The Scottish Water officials who presented to the Committee on the Future Funding of Domestic Water said the same about the roll-out and the huge cost of the metering programme, which will be replaced in 20 years’ time. That has to be questioned. Is this a prudent way to spend money? There is no doubt that a very significant investment is required to repair some pipes which were laid in Victorian times. A community-type metering programme, rather than individual meters, might well be a more prudent way to spend money. It seems that we are going to pay to buy and install more meters. Then we will pay to maintain more and to read them. We will also pay somebody for the administration of the billing system and we will have to have a helpline in case there are disputes. It seems that an awful lot of money will be shelled out and it is important that the Government give us some indication of how it has gone about costing this process and where the cost-benefit analysis falls on a different type of programme that would probably result in something very similar.

One of the main concerns people had about Irish Water was related to the awarding of contracts, some to high profile names who have benefited from them. Unfortunately, this legislation does very little to assuage such concerns. A major issue with it is the lack of a specific mention of the now changed entity that is Irish Water and the changed financial reporting structure inherent in this. When it was established, it was proposed that domestic charges would fund it, in addition to charges on businesses and farms. The Bill makes Irish Water a fully funded public entity; thus I have tabled an amendment that would ensure the Comptroller and Auditor General would be given full power to examine it. This year alone €753 million has been earmarked for Irish Water. That is in addition to development contributions, agricultural and commercial water charges. There is a very sizeable amount of money that requires oversight.

My amendment reads as follows:

Recognising that Irish Water is a fully State funded entity, Irish Water shall be required to report, as required, to the Comptroller and Auditor General, and to be amenable to all reporting guidelines, and inspection and audit powers of the Office of the Comptroller and

Auditor General, as provided for in the Comptroller and Auditor General (Amendment) Act 1993.

This issue has come up at the Committee on Public Accounts. When items of correspondence have come before us from Irish Water, it is not at all clear where oversight lies. There is a clear gap because of the way the utility was set up. It was intended to be a semi-State commercial company, but it is no longer a semi-State commercial company and it requires oversight.

I want to reiterate the point about household size. It would be quite an administrative burden to have to obtain all of that information and it would cost money to obtain it. I question whether this is the way to go. Part of the reason people wanted to have it enshrined in the Constitution that Irish Water would not become a utility that would be sold on was there was a lack of trust. This legislation probably reinforces that lack of trust more than anything else. While I am keen not to insert amendments into the Constitution that we do not absolutely require, there will continue to be a concern about this issue until it is put to the people. The Social Democrats believe oversight is critical. Its omission from the Bill is serious. Given this, I sincerely hope the Government will accept the proposed amendment to the legislation.

**Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice:** I welcome the opportunity to speak to the Bill. The debate on whether we should pay or not pay for water in the public system appears to be over. A decision has been taken democratically and that is where the issue stands. However, people need to understand that, whether the money comes from the right or the left pocket, it will come from some pocket to provide the €10 billion or €12 billion in funding that will be required in the coming years for the infrastructure which has been neglected during the years.

I have worked in water services and say to people who have not worked in that area that it is good that we have had a debate on water services and that a new body is in place for the simple reason, as anyone who works in the area will be aware, that the issue of wayleaves has not been sorted down the years. There are major problems in rural areas. In places a meter was installed. Perhaps two further meters were installed down the road on the same pipe and ferocious discrepancies were found. That problem was not being solved. We might like to give out about Irish Water and there were things wrong with it from the day it was set up, but any public representative who engages with and contacts it during the day or at night will receive a response. Even today I contacted it about the supply of water in ten areas. An electricity outage can occur, but people can telephone straightaway when they have no water supply. In fairness, Irish Water brought supplies to areas that were fairly difficult to get to during the years.

We have come a long way from the day when youngsters waited for the milk can to be delivered from the creamery in order to go to the well to bring water home. Many years ago great people got together years in different parts of Ireland. With only the assistance of bad machinery, they put pipes into the ground to bring water to houses. They should be remembered and respected in this debate for the work they did. We can criticise the pipes now that they are busted, but they laid those pipes in the 1960s and 1970s when people gathered in houses as there were no community centres and decided to get water flowing.

At the time, water was brought from a well from which cattle could also have been drinking, but now we have EU water quality regulations. Water comes from the sky into the soil. Depending on its depth, it seeps through the rock and comes up through a spring in some places and boreholes in others. Because people's immune systems are not strong as they were in the past, we have to treat water. We have to chlorinate it. If it does not meet certain standards,

it will require ultraviolet treatment to deal with cryptosporidium. We also have to ensure the quality of water supplied to the last house and that the chlorine residual value is no higher than 0.20 mg/l. That illustrates the difference and the costs involved in the provision of water services.

There is a plan to provide certainty in the provision of water services throughout the country. If water is to be brought from the River Shannon to where it is needed in cities such as Dublin, we will have a constant supply and a source that could be treated. We could use the machinery required to bring it to the standard people require.

In following the debate I have heard people talk about having meters here, there and everywhere and about counties that do not need as many meters as others. My group water scheme was using 960 cu. m a week. It is a small scheme. When we installed meters, we reduced the volume of consumption to 350 cu. m. The value of meters, regardless of whether people want to believe it or pay for water, is that within four years they will pay for themselves in terms of the cost of electricity, chlorination and all of the different processes used in the provision of water. The matter needs to be put in context. There is no point in directing water down into the ground where people looking for leaks will not find them. If one installs meters and loggers - this is scientific detail for those who want to shout about the issue - one will end up finding leaks along any part of the line.

I am concerned about those participating in group water schemes. I do not want those who have to pay for water in their local schemes to go out to work and also pay their taxes just like anybody else. In my book that is double taxation. I ask the Minister of State and the Dáil to make sure the subsidy being paid to group water schemes is increased to ensure those participating in them who use water for domestic purposes will be given the same facility as those connected to the public water supply. This has to be done before the end of the year. We cannot have apartheid in the water system, depending on whether one is in a town or wherever else. One could have two people living in a village, one of whom is participating in a group water scheme functioning on one side of the village, while the other is connected to a public water supply on the other and there would be two ratios.

We need to bear in mind the costs involved. Anybody who understands water services will be aware that, as one comes to the end of a line, a 4 in pipe is brought down to a 3 in pipe which, in turn, is brought down to a 2 in pipe. If those involved in group water schemes give up on them because of the way they are being treated and if the public supply has to be joined to the supply to their homes, laying new pipes, including the use of a 4 in pipe to ensure a sufficient supply, will cost way more than it would to make sure we treat the people concerned right. This issue urgently needs a Government response. The Government should allay the fears of those participating in group water schemes, of whom there are probably 300,000 or 400,000. There are also people who live along byroads who have no access to a public supply of water or a group water scheme and who have spent €4,000 or €5,000 in employing somebody to sink a well. A grants system needs to be put in place every four or five years, either to replace a person's pump or install a UV treatment system to ensure the water quality is to the required standard.

I agree that those who paid their water charges should receive a refund. When this debate is over, they should get their money back. It was paid in good faith and they deserve to get their money back.

8 o'clock The other aspect about which no one seems to have spoken is that the water one drinks ends up in the sewerage system somewhere else. Ironically, it costs more to treat sewage than water because pipes have to be laid and a treatment plant is required. One must make sure raw sewage is 95% to 96% perfect when treated. We need to make a massive investment in every town to deal with raw sewage. Common sense must also prevail. I am aware of a situation where two or three Environmental Protection Agency reports have been produced and there is talk of raw sewage in a special area of conservation. In fairness to Irish Water, it has put money aside to deal with the issue. It has stated it will do the work, but some of the geniuses, instead of going 100 m into the lake with 96% or 97% water, are talking about a distance of 6 km or 7 km with the same pipe.

Debate adjourned.

### **Local Authority Boundaries Review: Motion [Private Members]**

**Acting Chairman (Deputy Bernard J. Durkan):** I call Deputy Michael Collins to move the motion. He and his colleagues have 20 minutes between them.

**Deputy Michael Collins:** I move:

That Dáil Éireann

recognises that:

— there is an attempt by agencies in the private sector and State bodies to encroach on county boundaries;

— the National Planning Framework document seems to imply that changes in county boundaries are a distinct possibility;

— the reform of Cork City's boundary is the most significant reform of local government structures in the history of the State;

— the National Planning Framework is put in place to ensure Ireland has long-term economic, environmental and social progress in all parts of the country, however, further recognises that this plan will do the opposite for rural areas;

— the economic imperative of enlargement would represent a substantial increase in commercial rates to fund development in Cork City Council at the expense of Cork County Council's rural areas;

— an extension would also raise the population of Cork City which would improve its ranking, meanwhile decrease the population in the Cork County Council area;

— there are potential challenges in implementing the National Planning Framework, including geography, scale, historic administrative boundaries, administrative structures and European Union reporting requirements; and changes to administrative boundaries may not always consider the issues that a planning framework seeks to address;

— in relation to Cork City Council, affluent areas are being brought in under the new boundary, for example, the very small village of Killumney is included in the proposal, the

most obvious reason being that Dell EMC is located in this area and would provide a lot of revenue through the collection of its commercial rates;

— groups and individuals are objecting to these new boundary proposals;

— a change to boundaries would be detrimental for Cork County Council, with an estimated loss of €80 million, which comprises of losses in rates and property taxes;

— residents and farmers living in the countryside would now be regarded as city dwellers;

— businesses in the Cork County Council areas would have to become Cork City Council ratepayers;

— the Cork Local Government Implementation Oversight Group has now commenced its work; the Group has, however, indicated that it is not in a position to accept any alternative proposal that would be regarded as running contrary to the proposed broad boundary adjustment as set out in the ‘Mackinnon Report’;

— county councils are already stretched, if they are to lose more revenue they will not be able to function;

— the election of five councillors from Cork City Council and five councillors from

Cork County Council, as well as independent persons to a board serving for five years to champion the project is too long a sitting period and also means that other elected 2409 representatives will be ineffective if the board members are the decision makers;

— the detail in the compensation package on how Cork City Council plans to pay back Cork County Council is vague with no definite plan on the loan repayment;

— such plans have caused a division between Cork City Council and Cork County Council;

— no proper consultation has taken place between Cork City Council and Cork County Council, and the public; and

— the amalgamation of areas results in a decrease in services and expenditure, and also creates excessive workload on officials and elected members; and

calls on the Government to:

— ensure that these boundaries, which are the essence of who we are as a people, are protected;

— seek definite answers to what is proposed;

— examine if it is necessary to reform governance structures so that necessary services can be delivered;

— assign an independent person from abroad to facilitate and oversee negotiations between both parties;

— examine the vague compensation package offered to Cork County Council;

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- explain how a ten year compensation period could be considered a sufficient time-frame;
- provide immediate clarification on the plans to protect rural areas, as there is already limited funding and future funding would be non-existent;
- explain how the National Planning Framework could be beneficial for the people living in rural Ireland;
- explain how the National Planning Framework will regenerate rural Ireland;
- assess the impact such an implementation would have on local communities;
- explain if the authors have practical knowledge of how local government services are best delivered and if such a plan would work in reality; and
- explain if an assessment has been made on the implications on service delivery or financial and resource implications.

I am very happy to be able to propose this motion and I thank my colleagues in the Rural Independent Group for supporting me in doing so. A review commissioned by the Department of Housing, Planning and Local Government was published last April. The report of the Expert Advisory Group on Local Government Arrangements in Cork - the Mackinnon report - was tasked with looking at the various options for the future geography for local government in Cork.

The report proposed that Cork City Council's boundary be extended; this reform would be the one of the most significant reforms of local government structures in the history of the State. It would see the population of the city nearly double to 225,000. These changes, if implemented, would have a detrimental effect on Cork County Council areas that would now be moved into and considered as city council areas.

Through this motion, I call on the Government not to accept this Mackinnon report into the draft national planning framework for a number of reasons. First, this change will give rise to an estimated loss of €80 million to Cork County Council through commercial rates and property taxes. Cork County Council's funding is already very stretched and this loss will leave constituents of the county council further deprived of essential infrastructure, whether roads, services and even the reduced amount of public representatives for the respective areas.

This is not a party political issue but there are considerable divisions within parties between those in favour of implementing this report and those against. This will cause a further urban-rural divide within our county councils when we should be working together. If this change was to go ahead, it would be considered as a Cork Brexit. Its consequences are not yet known and will not be fully known until it is too late. It is proposed that the county council will receive a compensation package from the city council in return for this change, but all suggestions of any possible loan repayment are far too vague to be accepted or even considered. It is sad to see that my local authority feels that the only way to negotiate any changes to this report is through the courts as the city council and the local government implementation oversight group have so far refused to accept any alternative reports or recommendations to the Mackinnon report.

In recent years, rural Ireland has been hit time and again through loss of services, facilities and its general identity. Cork County Council and its residents have lost Garda stations, post

offices, social welfare offices, local court services, local pubs and businesses, the list is endless. Rural towns and villages are struggling and, if implemented, this report would have an even more negative effect in these areas.

Does the Government really want to be responsible for this? Is it not the case that in its programme for Government it promised to put in place “measures to revitalise all of Ireland so that the benefits are felt inside every doorstep and in every community.”? How does the Minister think that accepting this boundary change would go in any way to reach or fulfil that promise? It is absurd that some people who have grown up and farmed in their rural areas will now be moved and considered as city dwellers. They are proud of their background and heritage and feel this proposal is a further attack on their livelihoods. Would this change even go as far as changing local GAA teams from county divisions into the city division?

This might seem like a small change but it would have a huge impact on community spirit. I have been told by Cork people, both from my own constituency of Cork South-West and from the areas on the other side of the city who would be affected by the proposal, that they are not happy. This negativity is felt on both sides of the boundary. For instance, one Glanmire resident told me that she is now represented by the county council but will be thrown into and considered as a city council resident. She was extremely concerned for the future of her beloved Glanmire and raised the issue of businesses now being hit by increased commercial rates and insurance when they are already crippled by this industry. Not only would this have a detrimental effect on the local businesses in Glanmire and similar areas but the support that these businesses give to their local communities through sponsorship of community groups would also be diminished because more of their income will go towards paying increased rates that they cannot afford.

These residents have been hit on numerous occasions by Government measures and these people feel that the Government does not like rural Ireland. Another concerned citizen that would be affected by the boundary changes was fearful that communities that receive contracts through Tús for maintenance of rural areas, effectively top-up grants for community groups, will no longer receive these contracts as their areas would no longer be considered rural areas, but rather urban areas.

Will the Minister say if such funding and contracts would stop because of the Mackinnon report if it goes ahead? The same can be asked about the town and village renewal scheme under the rural development section in the programme for Government. Will the rural areas around Ovens, Carrigtwohill, Rathpeacon and Carrigrohane now be exempt from potential funding if they are considered urban or city residents?

This is a “Yes” or “No” issue. Does the Government, Fianna Fáil, Sinn Féin and the other Independents want to see the Mackinnon report implemented in Cork or not? The amendments tabled by both the Government and Fianna Fáil are not clear. Do the rural Deputies from both parties support the implementation of the Mackinnon report or not?

I urge all Members to remember that the Mackinnon report applies to County Cork at present, but similar approaches could follow in any other rural county in the future. The amendments tabled by Fianna Fáil and the Government support the implementation of the Mackinnon report through the back door, while Sinn Féin’s amendment is blatantly supporting it.

If Fianna Fáil was to make an amendment along the lines of the Bill proposed by its own

Deputy, Eugene Murphy, which comes before the House this Thursday, and which seeks to have a plebiscite prior to any boundary changes, at least it would go some way towards giving democracy to the people of rural Ireland, something they feel they lost a long time ago. Proof of this was the abolition of town councils and the disbandment of community voluntary forums and local Leader groups which is now in disarray.

This is why I believe the Mackinnon report belongs in the bin.

**Deputy Michael Harty:** I also speak in favour of this motion.

This is an issue which is not confined to Cork. It also relates to boundary changes in Waterford and Kilkenny regarding Ferrybank, Roscommon and Westmeath regarding Monksland, and also in Clare and Limerick. In the last case it proved a very contentious issue in 2011 when Limerick city proposed to annex a portion of south east Clare into Limerick city. A committee chaired by Denis Brosnan proposed to incorporate Shannon Banks, Westbury and the parts of Limerick University which lay on the Clare side of the river into Limerick city, including the parishes of Meelick, Parteen, Ardnacrusha and Clonlara.

Anyone familiar with Clare hurling will know that most of our senior teams which have been successful in recent years come from that area. I am sure people in those areas would not swap the saffron and blue for the green of Limerick, although I am originally from Limerick myself. These are the issues that are important to people when a boundary change is proposed and they are not to be underestimated.

Such was the opposition to this proposal that it was not politically possible to pursue it and the then Minister, Phil Hogan, decided not to act on the annexation proposal. A group called Clare Against the Boundary Change campaigned on the matter for several years and on one occasion had a rally attended by 10,000 people. That was democracy in action, when people successfully voted with their feet to oppose boundary changes. Recently the matter was proposed once again by a Sinn Féin councillor but I hope that will not happen as I had assumed the issue had been finally but to bed. This is an issue which will arise in many areas in future. It may be the areas to which I have referred, but other areas may have boundary extensions imposed upon them. There are historical, sporting, cultural and social reasons for our existing boundaries. Boundaries should not be interfered with lightly by technocrats and bureaucrats who do not understand the significance of place in Irish society. These factors are very important to people who live in these areas. On Thursday next, I understand Deputy Eugene Murphy will introduce a Bill, the Local Government (Amendment) Bill 2017, which aims to ensure that local communities have a final say in any proposals for a county boundary change, which effectively happened in Clare six years ago. It would place a requirement on the Minister with responsibility for local government to hold a plebiscite on any boundary change that would require a majority to decide on whether a boundary change should take place. This Bill deserves close scrutiny.

Boundary changes are usually proposed by bigger authorities to annex profitable areas of smaller authorities, of course under the guise of better administration and governance. Quite often, such changes are marked out with a ruler and take no account of parish, townland or natural boundaries. This is the case as it pertains to the proposal to annex Monksland in Roscommon to Westmeath. This is counter to the ideals of balanced regional development, which is proposed and promoted in the Programme for a Partnership Government. The main impetus for boundary changes is, of course, financial and relate to commercial rates and property tax. They take from the smaller authorities, which further reduces their ability to provide services, roads,

housing, infrastructure and amenities.

The justification for such boundary extensions are not well founded in many cases. I believe an alternative solution is available. Adjoining councils should work in partnership if it is to the mutual benefit of both councils in terms of service delivery and regional development. It should not be to the detriment of one council over the other. In the case of Clare County Council, annexation of south-east Clare would not in any way enhance Clare to reach its full potential. If urban expansion is at the expense of rural communities then it is against the ideal of balanced regional development. Annexation should not be an acceptable model. Meaningful co-operation and engagement would be a far better and more productive method of dealing with boundary issues, rather than annexation, and it should observe the democratic will of the people. Boundary changes are another demonstration of how the dismantling of local government removes democracy further away from the people. We should have a return to the local government structures that were dismantled in 2014. Then we could have some meaningful democratic dialogue on boundary change.

**Deputy Danny Healy-Rae:** I am glad to have an opportunity to speak on this very important motion. As we look at it, it would seem it only affects Cork city and rural Cork but, by extension, if it goes ahead it will also affect people in the county I represent, because the people of south and west Kerry and the people of east Kerry have a lot of interaction and financial dealings with the people of Cork on either side of them. This is a blatant attempt to pauperise the people in rural Cork, and areas in south-west Cork and north-west Cork, and likewise in Kerry. One of the parishes I represent, and have represented for many years, is Rathmore. Parts of this great parish are actually in the county of Cork, namely, Rathduane, Knocknaloman, Hollymount, Caherbarnagh, Carrigaline and Nohoval. I would be letting down the people of that parish if I was not to support the motion.

I do not blame Mr. Mackinnon, who wrote the report, and I do not know him. I blame the people who hired him and thought of this idea to take funding away from areas that are already under savage pressure to retain their identity. The people from places like Ardgroom, Eyeries, Urhan, Allihies, Cahermore, Castletownbere itself and Adrigole and, indeed, all of Berehaven are much the same kind of people as the people I represent in Kerry. I know what they have to go through and what they have to endure to get funding. If we are to take this funding stream of up to €80 million from rates, with no account of how much property tax they will be denied, we will see more devastation and roads falling apart.

I have to say if we go from the Top of Coom to the mouth of the Glen and down into Ballingeary and Inchigeela on the way to Dunmanway, and from Toonsbridge back to Kealkill and back to Bantry, many of the roads are the very same as the day when Michael Collins was shot at the monument. Things have not improved since then and it is worse they will get if this is allowed to go through. I call on all of the Members in Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael, because they will do a massive wrong to the people they represent if they allow this to go ahead. I ask them to disregard the Mackinnon report and also show fair play to the people of north-west Cork, including Rockchapel, Ballydesmond, Knocknagree and Cullen, and in between we have Cúil Aodha, Ballymakeera and Kilnamartyra and, like I said, Reananeree, Kealkill and the Borlin Valley. All of these places are neglected enough as it is, but if the Government is going to do this and take this funding stream away from them, it will be what I would call the height of blackguarding.

Already we are seeing in a battle in Dublin as they are regretting giving any funding outside

of the Red Cow, and that is a fact. We had them on the television the other night. My colleague, Deputy Mattie McGrath, was making his case for Tipperary, and like that, I want to make our case for Kerry and Cork, and the rural parts of the west. We hear there is no problem in the world in giving €132 million for a glorified footpath in Dublin, when the total expenditure we will get for the county of Kerry is no more than that. We are asking for fair play, and we are looking for fair play, and that is what we want, because the people that we represent are entitled to fair play and up until now they have not been getting it.

It is a battle and a fight every day to get any of the services that fall into place in urban areas. There are two places where it seems to happen no bother, because every morning when we wake up there are another 100 jobs in Dublin and 200 jobs in Cork and *vice versa* every second morning. All the urban areas seem to get favour but whatever is wrong, whether it is IDA Ireland or whatever other groups are supposed to be helping people in rural Ireland, it is not happening. I am asking the Government not to take this funding stream or this money that these people depend on. They are only getting a very small amount. The Minister of State can travel the areas I am speaking about, through Berehaven and mid-Cork, which is totally neglected as well, because we do not have the jobs and we cannot keep the people there. Likewise there are the poorer areas, from Cullen through Knocknagree and Ballydesmond and up into Rockchapel. Who thought of taking this away? That is the question I am asking. Who thought of this brilliant idea to hurt rural Ireland further? I want those people to give their reasons for doing it. It will be very interesting to see who will vote for what when this motion is going through because this is one of the worst attempts I have seen that will hurt rural areas in west, south-west and north-west Cork. By extension, the people of Kerry will suffer, as I said. There is interaction by people back and forth over our own little border, as we call it. The only time we disagree may be around the first or second Sunday in July, when we are in competition with each other, but we are 100% together when it comes to defending our rights and ensuring rural areas are kept intact. This report, by Mr. Mackinnon, is a disgrace and it should be disregarded. I am not blaming the man himself because the people who put him at it and paid him to do it are the people I am angry with.

**Minister of State at the Department of Housing, Planning and Local Government (Deputy John Paul Phelan):** I move amendment No. 3:

To delete all words after “Dáil Éireann” and substitute the following:

“recognises the need to put in place effective and sustainable local government arrangements in Cork and notes the action being pursued to achieve this, and further recognises the need for a National Planning Framework to set an overall long-term strategic planning framework for growth and change in Ireland, including our rural areas, building on the Action Plan for Rural Development and based on a core objective to reverse decline and create new opportunities for rural and small town growth, in terms of people, jobs and infrastructure.”

I am glad to have the opportunity to speak on this issue. I thank Deputy Michael Collins and his colleagues for raising it. We have not had an opportunity before in a plenary session of the Dáil to discuss this matter.

I compliment the local authority staff in Cork city and county, and indeed throughout the country, on doing such a fine job yesterday and today and who are doing so tonight as we speak - before, during and after Storm Ophelia. It is often only when things go wrong that local gov-

ernment gets coverage. In this case, however, the local authorities have done a fine job and I compliment them on their work.

On the issues raised by Deputy Michael Collins and his colleagues, I assure the House that I am not personally in favour of such things as land grabs or money grabs.

**Deputy Mattie McGrath:** Close enough.

**Deputy John Paul Phelan:** The proposals contained in the Mackinnon report are now part of a process put in place by the Minister, Deputy Eoghan Murphy. An implementation group is in place and it involves representatives of Cork city and county councils.

I am interested in the motion in that this is the first time I have heard public comments from any group to the effect that the local government arrangement in Cork should remain as it is, and that the *status quo* is desirable. Half of the city of Cork is in the jurisdiction of Cork County Council. For the provision of services at local authority level and to be representative of the communities they serve, the *status quo* cannot remain in place. That is not to say some of the issues raised here are not legitimate concerns. Deputy Collins raised the issue of funding committed and asked whether it will be honoured. Yes, it will. Deputy Harty raised the possibility of other boundary extensions. There is no current proposal on Limerick and Clare. The Deputy mentioned Ferrybank, an area with which I am acutely familiar. Reference was made to the Waterford-Kilkenny boundary. Roscommon was mentioned, in addition to Louth-Meath and Carlow-Laois, where resolutions will be brought in the next few weeks in light of the result of the Mackinnon review group, which we are discussing tonight.

In my role as Minister of State, I welcome the opportunity to have this discussion. The Government's Putting People First - Action Programme for Effective Local Government, which was the platform for the wide-ranging reform programme for local government implemented in 2014, set out an ambitious vision for local government to be "the main vehicle of governance and public service at local level - leading economic, social and community development, delivering efficient and good value services, and representing citizens and local communities effectively and accountably". There is scope for improvements to the new structures in light of the experience of the past five years, however. In accordance with A Programme for a Partnership Government, the Department is preparing a comprehensive report for the Government and the Oireachtas on potential measures to boost local government leadership and accountability. This report will comprise a number of elements, including proposals relating to local authority structures and governance. This will address the issue of boundaries, having regard to the various reviews that have been undertaken in recent years. I assure the House that the report to the Government and Oireachtas will address various issues that are touched on in the Fianna Fáil counter-motion, including the question of metropolitan governance, which is the substantive matter underlying the concept of an office of directly elected mayor.

Work on the development of proposals for the report to the Government and Oireachtas is well advanced, and one important module of the document is already the subject of consultation with the Association of Irish Local Government and the County and City Management Association. This deals with municipal governance and the issues of local electoral areas and town councils, as referred to in the programme for Government. The Department is arranging for discussions with the Association of Irish Local Government with a view to finalising the consultation process on this aspect at an early date. Other elements of the draft report will be issued for consultation very soon.

On the specific issue of boundaries, it is important to bear in mind that the decision on the alteration of any local authority boundary rests ultimately with the Oireachtas, either through confirmation of an order under Part V of the Local Government Act 1991, after the procedures set out in that Act have been complied with, or by enactment of primary legislation, as appropriate. Deputy Collins stated Cork County Council has spoken about taking the legal route. It has also taken the 1991 Act route. That process is under way, in addition to the Mackinnon process. That allows for neighbouring authorities to agree themselves on a boundary. Furthermore, Cork County Council has actually made a submission to extend the city boundary into the county area. Therefore, it is not as if the legal route is the only show in town, as implied in the Deputy's comments. What I describe is actually being considered by Cork County Council and it has made a very definitive proposal in that regard.

A process of engagement with the other local authority concerned must be undertaken, following which application may be made to the Minister for an order altering the boundary, which, unlike most statutory instruments, requires the positive approval of both Houses of the Oireachtas by the passing of a resolution by each approving the draft order.

Regarding the boundary between Cork city and county, I would like to make clear that no final decisions have been made at this point. Deputies will be aware that a local government committee was established in 2015 by the then Minister for the Environment, Community and Local Government to carry out a review of local government arrangements in Cork, and to make recommendations as to whether the boundary between the city and county should be altered or whether Cork City Council and Cork County Council should be unified. The committee recommended, on a majority basis, amalgamation of the two authorities, accompanied by measures such as devolution of functions to a unified Cork authority and strengthening of municipal district functions, in preference to extension of the city boundary, which was proposed and recommended by a minority on the committee.

In view of the lack of consensus on the issue, a Cork local government expert advisory group was established by the former Minister, Deputy Coveney, to advise on relevant options in regard to future local government arrangements for Cork, having regard particularly to the 2015 review. It recommended, in April 2017, the extension of the city boundary rather than local authority merger, while acknowledging the merit of a unified authority, including efficiencies potentially in the order of 2% to 5% over time. An oversight group was established in July 2017 to oversee arrangements for the alteration of the boundary, in light of the advisory group's recommendations, in accordance with a detailed implementation plan to be formulated by the group.

Subsequently, Cork County Council exercised its entitlement to initiate a proposal for the alteration of the boundary under Part V of the Local Government Act 1991. As this proposal is the subject of a statutory process, which may lead to an application for ministerial decision, it would not be appropriate for me comment on the boundary alteration proposals. However, it is reasonable to record that there is general agreement that retention of the *status quo* in Cork local government structures is unsustainable. Indeed, both the minority and majority groups in 2015 were at one on this point, while recommending different solutions. I emphasise, however, the key role that the two local authorities in Cork must play in agreeing boundary proposals. In conveying the terms of reference of the Cork oversight group to the chief executives of the two authorities, the Minister, Deputy Eoghan Murphy, specifically pointed out that it would fall to them to develop detailed and comprehensive proposals for the boundary alteration. I do not regard the non-statutory role of the oversight group as conflicting with the process under the

1991 Act. Indeed, the work of the group could support the operation of that process by helping to achieve agreement on boundary proposals that could be progressed through the 1991 Act process.

There has been a lot of speculation in the media about financial consequences arising from a possible boundary change. As already stated, I cannot comment on specific aspects of the alteration proposals for Cork. Let me make it clear, however, that any boundary change must be predicated on sound financial due diligence and arrangements in order to ensure that no local authority would be left in an untenable position in the event of a boundary alteration. The approach taken in the various previous local authority boundary alterations has been to make provision for arrangements designed to achieve a broadly neutral outcome in terms of resources. I would also like to dispel any concern that the national planning framework might lead to any changes to local authority boundaries in Cork or anywhere else. The impression in that regard, which seems to be conveyed in the motion, is completely without foundation. The motion also seems to portray the national planning framework as anti-rural, which is entirely erroneous. The draft national planning framework, which is to be considered by the Joint Committee on Housing, Planning and Local Government, will support the future development of the country as a whole, both rural and urban areas, in an integrated manner.

I thank the Deputies for raising this matter. I will take note of the input of Deputies as we progress the report on local government under the programme for Government. I look forward to future engagement with the House in that regard. I am sure such engagement will take place. However, it would not be appropriate to pre-empt consideration by Government and the Oireachtas of various local government matters in advance of formal submission or to prejudice in any way the statutory processes which are under way in Cork. It is for this reason that the Government has proposed an amendment. I will conclude by reiterating that the most important factor in achieving effective and appropriate local government arrangements in Cork is the exercise of leadership and goodwill on the part of both local authorities, working to achieve an outcome that will be in the best interests of Cork and its communities - in the city and the county - which, no doubt, is the desire of all concerned here as well.

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** We move now to the Fianna Fáil slot. There are 20 minutes. Deputy Shane Cassells will commence and then, I understand, there is an internal arrangement. In such circumstances, the relevant speakers must exercise self-discipline. Is that agreed? Agreed.

**Deputy Shane Cassells:** I join the Minister of State in praising the staff who worked so tirelessly in recent days. He is correct in what he said. County Meath was not as badly hit as some other counties but the staff were exceptional nonetheless and I praise them for that.

Local government is an issue that is extremely close to my heart. It is of great importance to me, as spokesperson, and to my party because of the positive impact proper local government can have on people's lives. The fact that there have been debates on different aspects of local government by means of motions and Bills is very positive and is to be welcomed. I pay tribute to the Rural Independent Alliance for bringing forward this motion because all of the signatories are those of men of conviction and substance who know the value and importance of proper local government in this country.

The biggest problem is that we do not have proper local government in this country. We do not have a fully accountable local government system, certainly not one that anyone in Europe

or the United States of America would understand. I know that from welcoming many European local government public representatives to County Meath. They simply cannot get their heads around the overarching reach of central government, the power of the Customs House and the powers of county and city managers over our system. That is no slight on the work of any civil servant, public servant or county or city manager - these people are the finest of men and women - it is a comment on the system, which bestows such an amount of executive power on individuals who are not elected by the people they represent, and the fact that communities in towns and counties throughout the country are expanding. I find that totally against the very essence of good local democracy. If anyone can tell me that I am wrong, he or she would want to have a long hard look at himself or herself. That is the system we have and that we persist with, and we call it democracy.

I spent 17 years as a councillor and I saw a lot of positive advances in the system. I entered local government in 1999, when Deputies were no longer allowed to be councillors and when there were powers available. It is one of the greatest disgraces that the so-called reforms introduced by the former Minister, Phil Hogan, did nothing but undermine the local government system. We set the clock back even further. We moved democracy even further away from the people we represent, destroyed town councils and spread electoral areas into constituencies that resemble Dáil constituencies in size. That is not democracy. I do not like to hear people defend those electoral areas, particularly as they have no statutory powers when it comes to the setting of rates, no statutory town budgets and no ability to raise the type of finance they could raise in the past when town councils ran surpluses. Now, counties are running up debts. The powers to which I refer are those that define whether there is proper local governance.

I despair of the current system. We should seek to bring proper local government back into place so that, as the Minister of State said, when things go right, as well as wrong, we can have people to praise as well as to criticise. Unlike the position in Europe or the US, people do not have a central port of call in which they can have confidence in terms of an administration they can call their own. People in France and Italy can immediately tell me the name of their local mayor, who has the power to appoint a mini-cabinet for the running of his or her town. If one asks a similar question as one walks around a town in Ireland, people do not know the name of the county or city manager - an individual who has so much power. One can use that as a litmus test as to whether we have a democracy that is fully accountable.

The motion before us relates to the detrimental effect of the extension of city boundaries on rural areas. However, when one reads through it, one can see that it primarily relates to Cork. The motion refers to the national planning framework and how it seems to imply that changes to county boundaries are a distinct possibility. I agree with those who proposed the motion because I fully believe that the national planning framework could end up serving to make things worse, not better, for areas of the country outside Dublin.

Deputy Danny Healy-Rae spoke about how 200 and 300 jobs are being created in urban areas every day. That is not the case in my county or in many others. This is primarily happening in Dublin rather than in the large urban settlements that have developed in other parts of the country. Half of the population of County Meath is commuting to Dublin city centre each day, which is making matters worse in terms of infrastructure. The overall situation is getting worse. I had meetings with IDA Ireland earlier today and I have met enterprise boards and others in an attempt to redress matters but the capital plans are fighting against us. We are not being given a chance to try to redress the situation. The national planning framework is working hand in glove with the capital plan whereby one will inform the other so that we will not get the kind of

proper infrastructural development, on the basis of a critical mass, that will allow areas to grow and realise their potential. The lack of rail infrastructure or health facilities in my county tells me all I need to know about the failure of the capital plan to deliver for my county.

I have looked at many of the boundary issues that have arisen, including that in Cork, which we are discussing, and the one in Galway. I have spoken to people on all sides. I am totally against the amalgamation of city and county councils. However, I do think Cork city should be allowed to grow. We need to strengthen bases to ensure that there is proper local governance. I am an advocate of proper local governance and I feel just as strongly about the position in Galway. I have looked at the issue there in terms of enterprise zones, roads, etc. I have also spoken to the executives in the county. The amalgamation of local authorities and the changing of boundaries have the potential to undermine local democracy. However, there are opportunities there as well that need to be examined.

Fianna Fáil has put forward reform policies under a local government regulator to oversee the reforms, make recommendations and provide independent comparisons. Our representatives in Dublin have called for directly-elected mayors to champion city areas similar to London, New York or Barcelona. The Minister of State is aware of my proposals on town councils. I was disappointed to hear his comments to the effect that he will not seek to reintroduce town councils. Such councils are the only way to have proper, full local governance. We have an amendment which we will be pressing. I refer to amendment No. 2. I will allow my other colleagues to speak on the matter now.

**Deputy Aindrias Moynihan:** I join my colleagues in acknowledging the tremendous work that council staff have been carrying out throughout the area yesterday and today in cleaning up and working with people. It is phenomenal work and I wish to acknowledge that. Teastáionn uaim labhairt faoin rún tábhachtach seo toisc go bhfuil an oiread sin baol ann go gcuirfear isteach ar Bhaile an Chollaigh agus ar cheantair in iarthar Chorcaí nuair atá an teorainn á shíneadh amach.

I believe an arbitrary decision to force the areas around the edge of the city into the city is not the solution to address the challenges facing the city and the county. This is a concern for people around the edges in Ballincollig and Ballinora and Ovens, for example, as well as further west in Ballygeary, over to Coolea and right back throughout west Cork. In these areas people believe that they would not have these resources stripped away from them if the edge of the city and its rate base was not part of the county.

However, it is vital to recognise the *status quo* is not going to stay. Both sides need to sit down and come to an agreement because we are going nowhere at present. This is undermining both city and county and the current hiatus is a threat to Cork. The sooner the Minister of State gets people from city and county working towards a solution, the better. The implementation group is clearly ignoring the need for consensus. Although the city council and departmental officials seems to be treating the Mackinnon report as the only show in town, the county council has acknowledged there will be a boundary change and has put forward its own proposal. To be fair, there is widespread consensus throughout the county that there should be some change. The Minister of State needs to look more closely at the county council's proposed changes.

There should be public consultation too. People believe strongly that their views need to be taken into consideration and there is great concern at the lack of consultation.

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I understand that the Cabinet visited Cork only last week. It was a major missed opportunity not to avail of the occasion to meet people locally from right around those areas and to hear first-hand their concerns. I will leave it to my colleagues now. There needs to be discussion.

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** Nine minutes remain in the slot.

**Deputy Kevin O’Keeffe:** I will be brief. I will make one point regarding the motion. The first line should be amended. It states: “there is an attempt by agencies in the private sector and State bodies to encroach on the county boundaries”. Academics should be included in that list. Members will be aware of where I am coming from with that comment with regard to some of the proposed changes in Cork city and county.

I served for a number of years in local government. I will be honest: I was happy with the original proposal from Phil Hogan for the abolishment of town councils. I thought it was a step in the right direction, because I believed that in rural Ireland and in towns there was a discrepancy with regard to the balance of power and spending. The Minister destroyed all the positive aspects of that when he diluted the representation in the areas. Now, we have little representation.

As I said earlier, I have a parochial issue that is totally at odds with the Mackinnon report. It is a total reversal of the original Smiddy report. I believe the process has gone from a democratic process to a political one. There is no logic or thought-out plan. We do not know whether a rugby ball, a cricket ball or a sponge was used to draw the line around Cork city.

**Deputy John Paul Phelan:** It was a sliotar.

**Deputy Kevin O’Keeffe:** For example, Cobh is a major town in east Cork. I remember a colleague going on about how the only access to Cobh was by the Fota road, which is badly in need of an upgrade. Under the proposal to add Carrigtwohill, Cobh would become more isolated. It was an insult to the people of Great Island in east Cork. I hope the Minister of State will give serious consideration to the whole process. He should conclude fairly that Cork County Council has always functioned efficiently, economically and for the good of housing and economic development.

I would go so far as to say that I am disappointed. We have seen some of these troubles elsewhere in Europe, where airports have been taken from us. I believe it is a form of sedition, when we see airports being taken from the rural hinterland of Cork and put into the city. I am disappointed to see all these places taken from us. I still consider myself to be a loyal former member of Cork County Council. I admit its role has been diminished through local government reform throughout the years. I will leave it to the rest.

**Deputy Michael Moynihan:** I welcome the opportunity to speak in the debate because I believe it is of vital importance. This issue has created a major divide within Cork city and county. Major challenges have surfaced to try to bring an agreed solution. The *status quo* will not remain but what will be put in its place? How effective will the new plan be to serve all the citizens of Cork city and county?

I come from a rural part of Cork. We have seen some of the discussions, announcements and plans relating to Cork and so forth. It is all built around the major city of Cork and its environs. I live 46 miles from the city and such areas have a major contribution to make to Irish society in future. The planning laws and regulations in force at present are responsible for the

difficulties people have in trying to set up home in these places. Their fear is that all the power and population will be sucked into the greater hinterland around Cork city and one sees the divisions that have been created in this regard. Lines are being drawn without any consultation. Surely to God, in 2017, we are not going to impose a division between Cork city and county without an agreement or as much agreement as is humanly possible for the greater good of the citizens of Cork city and county.

We have seen many of the discussions in recent months and the acrimony and challenges that arose. There is a bright future for all parts of Cork city and county if this is properly planned. All we see at the moment is a drive to plan the greater metropolitan Cork area while leaving the rural areas aside. What will happen if we allow these plans to go ahead? What will be left? We saw the plans that went into the great expansion of Dublin. Let us consider the areas one hour outside Dublin, for example, Athlone or Carlow. They are within a one-hour drive of Dublin. They have been hollowed out of business because the businesses have been sucked into the capital. This is the concern I have in respect of growing a massive city in Cork. Are we going to hollow out towns like Mallow, Kanturk, Millstreet, Newmarket or Charleville? Are these places going to be completely forgotten? What happens if we go through with the same policy as that used for Dublin and suck the life out of the places around the city? Is that what we are now doing in Cork? We need to be careful as we proceed. Surely to God in 2017 we are not going to impose a division between Cork city and county that does not have the agreement of the vast majority of the citizens of the county. It is high time that proper arbitration was put in place to try to get an agreed settlement.

**Deputy Michael McGrath:** I thank Deputy Michael Collins and his colleagues for putting down this motion, which is particularly timely. The overall point I wish to make about Cork is that every effort should be made to reach agreement between the two authorities. I welcome the comments of the Minister of State in that regard.

Sometimes politicians forget that people are far more concerned about services than boundaries. Equally, I accept and support the need for the boundary of Cork city to be extended. There are clear anomalies already in Togher, Douglas and Rochestown, areas that are contiguous with the city and that are altogether urban and built up. They need to be within Cork city. However, I believe the extension of the city needs to go beyond that and provide scope for further development of Cork city in the years ahead. There is a need for the overall strategic decisions that have to be made for Cork city and the greater Cork city area, metropolitan Cork or whatever one might call it, to be worked on jointly by both authorities on the key issues of economic development, long-term planning, having a tourism strategy and also the prioritisation of transport projects. There is often not enough work done on a joint basis. The Government needs to formalise that and ensure it is done. Both authorities are going to have to be willing to compromise if this is going to work out. We need progress on this and we need it quickly, and we need to have buy-in from both authorities ultimately because, when all of this is over and the dust settles, both authorities in Cork will have to work together in the spirit of co-operation into the future.

I disagree with my good colleague, Deputy Kevin O’Keeffe, about town councils. I was a member of Passage West Town Council for eight years. It was a former town commission as opposed to a former urban district council so it had very little power but it brought a focus to the town and ensured that every month, issues were raised, senior officials had to attend and they had to come back and account the following month for what they did or did not do on those issues. Some of the municipal districts we have are so large that quite large urban centres get

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lost as part of that process. Democracy should operate at as local a level as possible and, in my view, the restoration of town councils, though in a reformed, more modern and meaningful way, would be a great enhancement of the local democratic structures in this country.

I thank Deputy Michael Collins for tabling this motion. Time is of the essence for Cork because there are many existing councillors and prospective candidates who want to start planning. I urge them to come together, be willing to compromise and reach an agreement.

**Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire:** I am sharing time with Deputy Pat Buckley. I join the Minister of State and my colleagues in paying tribute to the staff of Cork County Council and Cork City Council for the extraordinary work they did and are still doing in very difficult circumstances. I firmly believe that they have been doing extraordinary work with very tight budgets over a number of years and they certainly deserve our thanks over recent days. Ordinarily, it would be something of a luxury to have two hours to discuss a Corkman's favourite subject, which is-----

**Deputy John Paul Phelan:** Cork.

**Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire:** -----Cork. Unfortunately, on this occasion, it clashes with Cork City Football Club potentially winning the league, so it is a pity that Deputy Collins could not have-----

**Deputy Jan O'Sullivan:** It did not manage it the last time.

**Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire:** -----arranged a better occasion for this debate.

First, I want to address the sense in some media commentary and debates between city and county that there is an enormous dissonance between the city and county. I do not believe there is. I believe that a solution is possible. I believe that the amendment I tabled, on which I consulted my Sinn Féin county and city councillor colleagues as well as our other two party Deputies from the county in developing it, and which is to a broad extent what is outlined in the Mackinnon report, is a basis for progress. It is worth setting the context here that we were dealing with this issue two years ago. It is ongoing, and while I am entirely for resolving it through dialogue, it is worth noting that dialogue has not resolved this issue over the past 15 years. It is not a new issue and has been ongoing for some time. It is only now that I think we are beginning to realise the importance of this decision.

We were dealing with a merger proposal. I said when I was a councillor on Cork County Council and I say it again here that the merger proposal would have been disastrous. It would have constrained the growth of the city and it would make no sense whatsoever for a major city like that not to have independent local government of its own. The districts such as those that Deputy Collins represents, including Schull and Adrigole, would not have benefited either from an enormous so-called local authority for a population of 500,000 that would still, even in an unfocused way, have been driven largely from the centre. That proposal was wrong and I still believe it is wrong. We are now in a space where two things are very clear for me and two things are agreed between local authorities. The first is that there should be a two-local-authority solution. That is absolutely the correct model. It is in the interests of the city, rural areas and our county towns to have independent local government. I also believe, as has been stated by the Minister of State and some Fianna Fáil Deputies, that the *status quo* is utterly unsustainable and, frankly, madness.

I grew up in a neighbourhood called Togher. I went to primary and secondary school in the city. I played GAA in the city and soccer in the county and I was elected to the county council. I represented probably the most urban county council district in the entire country, perhaps, outside of the three in Dublin. It is an overwhelmingly urban district. There is no sense in the vast bulk of that being in a county council. It was a complete anomaly. There were county councillors there who, until I was elected, did not even realise that Togher was in the county. The *status quo* is utterly unsustainable and needs to be addressed. It dates from a time when Rochestown was a sleepy village on the way to Passage West. It is 50 or 60 years old and clearly needs to be addressed.

The manner in which the city and its suburbs will develop over the next 30 or 40 years is already relatively clear. We already have a fairly clear sense of what it will involve. I want to emphasise suburbs. The towns outside the city, as they are properly called, are clearly under urban influence and I believe they can and must retain their own identity within an urban and metropolitan council. It is clear that for the city, its suburbs and its outlying towns, the major development that will happen will be to the west of the city, towards Ballincollig, Carrigrohane, Blarney and Tower, and to the east of the city, towards Carrigtwohill. Those communities need to be consulted, but whatever local authority is governing those areas, they will develop enormously and be transformed, and the county council will do that just as well as the city council. They will be transformed beyond recognition and I hope it will be in a positive way, but that will not be any different, whether it is city or county. The most important thing is that they are well planned and planned in a co-ordinated, sustainable way that is in the interests of those communities. That is the shape of the region regardless of whether we keep the *status quo*.

There are issues to address and I recognise that. Our amendment proposes that the Cork economic development and planning board needs to take in the whole county. It is currently only talking about the metropolitan area, so if we are talking about co-operation between two local authorities in a new era of efficiencies and good co-operation, then why not do that over the whole county rather than just the metropolitan area? It needs to be more democratically representative. There is also the issue of finance. This is the key and is central to everything, including the point of services as opposed to specific boundaries. The concerns expressed by representatives in west Cork, east Cork and north Cork can be met if the financial package that is agreed can be done properly. I suggest what is contained in our amendment. An economic development and planning board that would be responsible for the whole county would have a permanent function for the redistribution of finance throughout the county. That is the fairest model to ensure those rural parts of Cork and major towns outside the city area can be financially sustainable and have the services they need delivered to them. It is important also that the city council, whatever the boundary may be, develops a strong strategy for recognising and developing towns and villages, including villages within its existing boundary, such as Blackpool and Cork.

It needs to take on that job.

I recommend the amendment. We need to move forward on the basis of dialogue, but also on the basis of a long-term vision for Cork. It needs to develop as a significant counterbalance, although complementary, to Dublin. To do that, we need to make the right decisions now for the next 20 to 40 years.

**Deputy Pat Buckley:** I thank the Leas-Cheann Comhairle for the opportunity to speak tonight.

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We might get Deputy Healy-Rae a Cork passport. I have one - they were given out a number of years ago. It goes to show how big is Cork county.

I acknowledge that Cork city has long outgrown its 1965 boundary. I also acknowledge, however, that a merger of both the city and county councils would not be in the best interests of the city, the county and the peripheral areas. It is a no-brainer. It will not be possible.

It seems many issues have got lost in the media over the past number of months. One of these issues was the possibility of changes to the city boundary. Deputy O’Keeffe mentioned Cobh, and Carrigtwohill was also mentioned. The boundary has never been drawn because there has been no dialogue on it.

As Deputy Ó Laoghaire stated, the main issue is that it has to be brought forward on the basis of a two-local-authority model. In addition, Cork City Council and Cork County Council will have to sit down together, have a meaningful discussion on this and ensure that both councils are financially sustainable. They must also ensure that this is done, as the Deputy stated, on a permanent basis. We do not need compensation for ten years. It is fantasy. It must go on all the time.

Another issue is that more power must be given to district councils. It is shameful that the town councils were abolished because it killed local democracy. Now we are looking at a model of oligarchy - government by a few - and that is not good.

It is time that both the city and county councils sat down together and did the right thing for the whole county. It is not about pitting the city council against the county council, as some of the media reports suggest, rather that it is just not working. We have to ensure that the whole county, as the individual county of Cork, is the economic driver where both councils work in tandem. This means Cork city, east Cork, west Cork and north Cork pulling together and promoting the one Cork brand.

**Deputy Jan O’Sullivan:** I also pay tribute to my local authority, Limerick City and County Council, for the work it did dealing with Hurricane Ophelia, in particular, getting the river defences up the day before to prevent water coming into various parts of the city.

The debate tonight reminds me of a former Fine Gael Deputy from west Cork, P. J. Sheehan, who made a famous speech here one night where he named every single townland in west Cork. Many great places have been named tonight in this debate, which I suppose goes to show how tribal we all are. With due respect to the former US President, Bill Clinton, who told us today when he was getting his honorary doctorate that we should not be as tribal, we are such in Ireland. That is just the reality.

**Deputy Mattie McGrath:** There is nothing wrong with that.

**Deputy Jan O’Sullivan:** This stirs up strong feelings.

**Deputy Michael Healy-Rae:** Bill Clinton was not always right.

**Deputy Jan O’Sullivan:** I cannot support the original motion because of the first sentence, which calls on the Government to “ensure that these boundaries, which are the essence of who we are as a people, are protected”. Cities grow; they do not stand still. I will tell a story, which may be a myth, but it is a commonly known story in Limerick about a fellow called Seán an Scuab. He was a chimney sweep - Deputy Harty probably knows this story - and somebody

was stupid enough to say that the next person to come in from Clare over Thomond Bridge would become mayor of Limerick. The first person to come over the bridge was this chimney sweep called Seán an Scuab. The reason I tell this story is because the boundary of Limerick at that time was Thomond Bridge. If anybody knows where that is, the boundary has extended a couple of times way beyond that since then.

We recently went through the same process as Cork is currently going through where the city proposed extending the boundary and the county opposed it. Clare also opposed it. One point in the motion about bringing in an independent person probably is a good idea because although one might not call him totally independent, Denis Brosnan was brought in and he eventually proposed a merger of Limerick city and county, but with Clare left out. Incidentally, that was not my position. I wanted an extension of the city, but with a plebiscite for the Clare part of it. The decision was to merge Limerick city and county, but I accept that Cork is very different. It is a much bigger county than Limerick. I was not in favour of what was proposed in Limerick at the time, but it has worked fairly well. There was co-operation and people worked together for the greater good once the decision was made. As an aside, I wish Deputy Ó Laoghaire well tonight in winning the league but I am pleased that Limerick stopped them from winning it two weeks ago.

Deputy Michael McGrath and others made the point that there needs to be dialogue and some kind of financial discussions about what would be appropriate. There also needs to be discussion, as others have said, about where the boundaries should be because it is probably right to say that they should not extend to the separate villages and towns that are outside the greater urban area.

My main point is that cities simply cannot stay the way they are forever. They grow and they expand. In Limerick, suburbs such as Raheen, Dooradoyle, the UL university hospital, the University of Limerick itself and Castletroy - the biggest suburbs around Limerick - were all in the county until the merger happened. That just was not sustainable. Cities have to be given the possibility to grow. There will always be differences, but I hope they can work out something that is agreeable to people in Cork. Not everyone will agree, but there has to be much more discussion.

I agree that there should be a sub-county tier of local government that is different from the municipal authorities. That issue certainly needs to be revisited. It cannot be what were the old town councils. In my area, there was no town council in Limerick, despite having large villages and towns such as Newcastle West, Abbeyfeale and Castleconnell, whereas there were much smaller places in other counties that had town councils. However it is done, it must be in a way that includes a definition of a town. That cannot be as arbitrary as it was in the past. This is something that needs to be revisited.

Regarding the importance of the expected national planning framework, drafts have been published and there have been discussions, but it is important for the country that we have proper planning and that we rebalance Ireland. We must ensure that the rural parts of Ireland are looked after as well as the urban parts. The rebalancing, in particular, between Dublin and the rest of the country, has to happen. This does not get a significant amount of debate but it really needs to be thoroughly discussed.

In the context of rebalancing the rest of the country with Dublin, I welcome the announcement last week about the M20 between Cork and Limerick. It is very much needed. The only

question I would have is that the sum mentioned was only for the next phase of planning. Significant amounts will be required, particularly for land acquisition and then for the full construction of the road, the cost of which has been estimated at anywhere between €800 million and €1 billion. I do not know exactly how much will be in the capital plan, but we need a commitment from the Government that this will not just go through the planning and design phase and there will be real cash on the table to progress it further. If the second and third cities of the Republic are not properly connected, we will not see the kind of rebalancing of the country that we require. If this road is completed, we will have a link from Cork to Limerick to Galway, and further on up along the west, that I hope will be a proper motorway to allow economic and social development. I look forward to seeing the full detail of the capital plan and to debating it here. I hope we will devote as much time to debating the national planning framework as we have done to some other issues that we have debated here, week after week, because it will make an enormous difference to the future of the country. It is a debate in which, where possible, all political parties should engage without involving any partisan politics.

I am grateful for the opportunity to contribute to this debate. The Labour Party cannot support the main motion before the House but there are certainly very good elements in both it and the various amendments that have been proposed to it.

**Deputy Mick Barry:** I start by thanking the staff of Cork City Council and Cork County Council who have been involved in the clean-up operation following Storm Ophelia. They have done tremendous work. I wish to note on the record of the House that it is very important councils are compensated, euro for euro and cent for cent, for the work they are doing and that central Government does not leave them to dig out funds from their own budgets for that work. I will be watching that one very carefully.

I welcome the fact that this issue is being debated in the Dáil tonight. It has played out as a local dispute but it is, of course, a national issue. First and foremost, this is not about Cork city and county; it is about Dublin and the rest of the country. Our capital has a population of more than 1 million but the next largest city, Cork, has a population of approximately 125,000. This massive imbalance is very unhealthy for the country as a whole. The imbalance will not be resolved by one boundary change, or even three or four changes for that matter. We need to have proper regional development backed up with investment. That said, a boundary change which would increase the population of Cork city from 125,000 to 225,000 is a positive step towards redressing the massive imbalance in the country. It is also a recognition of reality.

There has not been a boundary change for Cork city for more than 50 years, since 1965. As the current lord mayor of Cork city has pointed out, what has developed in the absence of a boundary change for more than 50 years is a necklace of suburbs and satellite towns around the city which are outside the city limits but, in effect, are part of the city itself. These satellite towns and suburbs, including places like Blarney, Glanmire, Little Island, Donnybrook, Douglas, Grange, Frankfield and elsewhere, are part of the Mackinnon proposals for an expanded city with an expanded boundary. These are areas which have far more in common with the likes of Turners Cross and Dublin Hill than they have with the likes of Drimoleague and Kanturk. That is just the reality and what Mackinnon does is simply recognise that reality and act on it.

The debate has focused, in large measure, on lines on maps, boundaries, territory and so on and there has been an absence of political and social content, which must change. Certainly that is something that Solidarity would seek to do. The key issue for people in Cork city and county, as it is in most of the rest of the country, is housing and the housing crisis. That crisis is at its

sharpest in Dublin city, where rents and levels of homelessness are highest, but it is also acute in parts of Cork county and it is increasingly acute in Cork city too. Big employers, including multinational companies, are complaining publicly about the fact that when workers are drawn into the city to work in their enterprises, there is a major problem with finding basic accommodation at the moment. A senior official of Cork City Council, Mr. Pat Ledwidge, appeared before an Oireachtas committee recently and spoke about the scarcity of development land within the existing city boundaries. That fact is sometimes used by the bureaucrats in Cork City Council and the establishment parties within the council as an excuse for not acting on housing when there are things that could and should be done, even as things stand. Leaving aside the land in the control of the port authority, there is land in the docklands area in the hands of other State and semi-State bodies on which 3,000 houses could be built. I am referring to the likes of the old Ford site, some of the former ESB lands, the site owned by Iarnród Éireann, Howard Holdings land and so on. Some of these sites are in the direct control of NAMA. The State should charge NAMA with building social and affordable housing and put the necessary finance at its disposal. That being said, there is a scarcity of development land within the city boundary and one of the main positives of the extension is that it provides more land that can be used for housing in an expanded city. That is something that is clearly very much needed at the moment.

There needs to be a realistic and serious tone to this debate but many of the opponents of the changes are using wild and hysterical language. Councillor Bob Ryan of Fianna Fáil said recently, “If this document was produced under British rule, it would have brought about a revolution, and it should.” Deputy Michael Collins has spoken about the decimation of rural communities and suggested that the extension would have consequences that are every bit as far-reaching for rural Cork as Brexit is for Ireland. It does not----

*(Interruptions).*

**Deputy Mick Barry:** It does not come anywhere near Brexit in terms of consequences and the fact that exaggerations of that kind are thrown into the debate is an indication of the weakness of some of the arguments being made.

I am a supporter of strong social services in rural communities. I have been completely opposed to all the cutbacks, unlike some of the Deputies who are proposing the motion. I believe that what the county loses in terms of rates support and other income sources should be compensated for, euro for euro and cent for cent, and even more than that. The areas that are to be ceded to the city generate €86 million in local property tax and commercial rates, with €46 million spent in those areas. That is a €40 million gap and the proposal is for €40 million, year on year, for the next period of time. On top of that, in both Cork county and city, we should see a reversal of all of the cuts of recent years so we do not just defend and maintain the services that are there but are in a position to expand and develop them further.

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** Just before I call Deputy Fitzmaurice, in an effort to unite the Corkonians, I would like to inform the House that the result is nil all.

**Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice:** I welcome the opportunity to contribute to this debate. I remember when there was talk of Galway city and county coming together and, at first, I thought it might be a good thing. Then I went trawling through the different ups and downs, the changing of borders in different areas and so forth, and I changed my mind. County councils in most counties are struggling for money. They are starved of funds and every time we give another bit to the golden goose, that is, the city, the county council suffers more. Unfortunately, that is

the reality. I speak as someone who comes from the periphery of a county, an area that straddles two county borders. Sadly, the councils in the cities tend to forget that people in these areas even exist. I understand that cities will expand, and there is no point saying that they will not. There is no reason, however, that city and county councils cannot work together on planning matters, which are obviously the most important thing here. There can be joined-up thinking on this while allowing each side its own identity.

On the subject of cities expanding, Galway city needs a ring road. There have been objections, the whole thing has been brought to the European Court and the city has been stalled. Every city needs to look at the amount of land within the city itself which is idle and not being built on. I see this in Galway, for example, out at the back of the train station and in around the docks. There are several places, and Deputy Grealish will be familiar with them, that have not been built upon even as people talk about having to go further outside the city limits. Economically speaking, the first thing that needs to be done is to use the land nearest the city centre and then work out. When it can be shown that every single perch of ground has been used, then different ideas can be considered. Not one city in this country, including the one we are in now, has done this. They have all gone sprawling out and new suburbs were built, but the reality is that hundreds of acres have been left idle in most of our cities with nothing happening on them. It is a sad thing.

Revenue is also a huge worry. Like every other Deputy, I often talk to those in the county councils about roads and so forth and I saw recently that Galway County Council passed a motion that Oranmore would get 25% of the funding. This money will probably never come, but whether it will or will not, Oranmore is being given priority. It seems to be that it is okay to have good roads in and around the city, but that out the country, a person can get a puncture or get buried in a pothole and what about it. This is not the way it should be. People from all different parts of the country should have proper access to proper roads. This includes ring roads for every city, which I am fully in favour of, proper infrastructure and proper public transport. This should all be catered for rather than jumping the gun, having everybody driving in all directions and not tightening up the city. We found out one thing and we should learn from our past experiences. When we decided to let some of the lovely fancy shops that came into this country establish themselves outside of towns, we saw the drastic effect it had on the SMEs, the small shops and businesses, in the middle of towns. That is the first thing we should learn from.

One thing I forgot to mention earlier is that while we are good at giving out about things, yesterday, in fairness, council workers were out working hard in every county in Ireland. I might question why they were not let out earlier, of course, but that was a health and safety matter. Whatever people's opinions might be on the water services, their staff did the same. What the ESB achieved in dealing with yesterday's problems, which arose through the fault of nobody, is a credit to its staff. We need to recognise the work of the front-line service staff who went out yesterday and are still out today in the aftermath of the storm.

Politicians are jumping the gun on this and coming out with report after report about the things we are going to do. We are going to amalgamate city and county councils, we are going to move the boundaries out, or we are going to do x, y and z. Let us look at Dublin, which has powered ahead of the rest of the cities in this country. The first thing we have to do is put infrastructure in place. I welcome the €20 million that has been promised to the Cork to Mallow road. It is needed because, as another Deputy pointed out earlier, it will also join up Limerick and Galway, and this is a good thing. There are other parts of the country, however, on which there is no loudspeaker. The west is one such example. Castlebar needs a road to Mullingar

as there is no point bringing people up through every small town in the countryside. Galway needs its outer ring road, the N59. These are not in our areas. This is not parish pump stuff. We need a new road from where the motorway finishes up to Knock airport and then on to Donegal. We need this now more than ever before because anyone heading out of Tuam at the moment will hit the motorway if they need to take a plane and this, I believe, will cause Knock airport to suffer. We need to bring not lopsided development, but balanced regional developments to every part of this country. There is no point in being delusional about this. It will certainly cost money. If we are cute enough, however, we could borrow upfront. Building a new road is an investment for 100 years and not for five or ten or 20 years like a mortgage. This is what should be done.

I welcome the motion and I will support it.

**Deputy Seamus Healy:** I express my sympathy to the families of the three people who so tragically lost their lives yesterday, each of them very well regarded in their own local communities. Claire O'Neill from Aglish in County Waterford, not far from the Tipperary border, was a cancer support co-ordinator. Fintan Goss from County Louth was a father of two and very much involved in St. Patrick's, his local GAA club. Michael Pyke, a 31 year old from Ardfinnan in my own constituency of County Tipperary, was a member of a very old and well-respected family that is very well-known in the Ardfinnan, Cahir and Clonmel areas. He has been described by all who knew him as a gentle giant and was doing a good deed for elderly neighbours at the time of his death. He was also a student at the Limerick Institute of Technology and a very well-respected one at that, so much so that flags flew at half mast in the college today and a book of condolences has been opened in his honour. Ar dheis Dé go raibh a n-anamacha dílse.

I welcome the debate on this subject which is, of course, not just a matter for Cork alone. Cork City, incidentally, has just won the League of Ireland Premier Division title with a draw against Derry City this evening. In debating this matter, we have to go back to the then Minister, Phil Hogan, when he effectively destroyed local government in this country. The abolition of borough and town councils undermined local democracy, local government and local services. Local services should be provided as close to their users as possible. Successive Governments' whole way of thinking on this has been all about centralisation, be it in local government, in health or in whatever else, and the idea that big is best. Big is not always best. Certainly in the case of local government, services and supports should be provided at a local level. In the past there was a very strong bond between citizens and local government, particularly where there were urban, town and borough councils. The councils that were abolished throughout the country should be restored. County Tipperary was probably more affected than most counties. We lost Clonmel Borough Council, which had existed since the early 1600s and, through Mayor White, had seen off Cromwell in its time. We also lost the town councils in Carrick-on-Suir, Cashel, Tipperary, Nenagh, Thurles and Templemore. The abolition of these and other councils led to a huge loss of local democracy in County Tipperary and throughout the country. Some towns in County Tipperary, including Cashel and Templemore, do not even have local offices where people can do local business with the county council. The county has also suffered the loss of €1 million in road grants. This is not the only example of a loss of services. The effect of the lack of house maintenance and the introduction of tenant handbooks has been that tenants are now responsible for absolutely everything. This would not be allowed in the case of private landlords. The councils that were abolished should be restored and consideration should be given to the establishment of town councils in other substantial towns like Roscrea, Cahir

and Fethard in County Tipperary. When will the Minister introduce proposals to re-establish the town councils that have been abolished? I understood that a report on this matter was to be prepared by June of this year but we have not yet seen it. I hope the Minister will bring forward clear, substantial and wide-ranging proposals for the re-establishment of the borough and town councils in the near future.

The motion before the House refers to the national planning framework, which is very important. As a previous speaker said, there is a huge regional imbalance between the Dublin area, or the east of the country, and the rest of the country. The south east has certainly lagged behind as a result of the lack of balanced regional development in recent years. The chief executives of all the local authorities in the region recently came to the Leinster House audiovisual room to brief Members of the Oireachtas from the area on the South East Action Plan for Jobs. The south east needs its fair share of development. This needs to happen on a balanced basis. The south east has the second highest unemployment rate and the second lowest growth in foreign direct investment. It has a smaller proportion of high-potential startups than any other region. There has been a significant brain drain from the south east. Some 67% of students leave the region to study and 40% of them do not return. Progress needs to be made quickly on the important question of a technical university for the south east. Proper funding and investment are needed to bring such a university into line with other universities. When the Minister recently announced the N20 project in Cork, we were disappointed that there was no reference to the upgrading of the N24 to motorway status. I ask the Government to ensure motorway status is given to the N24 in the near future as part of the capital investment programme.

**Deputy Noel Grealish:** I wish to share time with Deputy Michael Healy-Rae.

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** Is that agreed? Agreed.

**Deputy Noel Grealish:** I am delighted to have an opportunity to speak on this motion. I compliment my colleague, Deputy Michael Collins, who tabled it. The funding of local authority services is the most important and critical issue which will affect the success of any proposed amalgamation. The underfunding of Galway will be significantly worsened if the proposed amalgamation of Galway City Council and Galway County Council proceeds without an overhaul of funding on the part of the Department of Housing, Planning and Local Government. Earlier this year, an expert advisory group examined the possibility of abolishing the city and county councils and replacing them with a greater Galway authority. This amalgamated authority would cover a vast geographical area from the River Shannon to the Aran Islands. It would include Galway city, which currently has a defined city boundary. Following this review, the amalgamation was unanimously recommended by the expert review group. While there may be some merit for strategic planning and economies of scale for shared services, this proposal should not proceed as long as the current funding model is in place.

County Galway's local authorities are vastly underfunded at present. It is instructive to review counties of a similar size and scale to County Galway, such as counties Mayo, Donegal, Kerry and Tipperary. Among this cohort, Galway County Council has the highest population, the lowest staff complement, the lowest *per capita* budget and the lowest rates base. However, Galway makes the largest contribution to the local property tax equalisation fund. Aside from Kerry, Galway is the lowest recipient of equalisation fund allocations. I would like to compare the figures for counties Galway and Mayo. At the end of 2015, Galway had 740 whole-time equivalent staff and Mayo had 928 such staff. Galway's overall budget for 2016 was €104 million, whereas Mayo's budget was €125 million. Galway's *per capita* budget was €599, whereas

Mayo had a budget of €962 per head of population. Galway's commercial rates base for 2016 was €25.5 million and the equivalent figure for Mayo was €28.8 million. At the 2016 census, the Galway County Council area had a population of 179,000 and the Mayo County Council area had a population of 130,000. Most startlingly, Galway's allocation from the local property tax equalisation fund in 2016 was €1.063 million, while Mayo received €9.319 million. Galway's contribution to the local property tax equalisation fund in 2016 was €2.8 million, while Mayo paid in just €2 million.

This situation will get worse if Galway City Council and Galway County Council amalgamate. The *per capita* budget, which is approximately €684 at present, will still be the lowest of the five comparable counties. It is clear that the ongoing budget shortfall is having a direct impact on services and staff morale in Galway. Five of the seven main personnel in Galway County Council are in acting roles at present because permanent positions cannot be filled due to a lack of funding and uncertainty regarding the potential amalgamation. This means that major decisions cannot be made. Galway County Council's planning office has just half the staff of Mayo County Council's planning office. As of May 2017, the Galway office is processing twice as many planning applications. The erosion of funding has resulted in no local authority housing construction in recent years. This lack of funding has contributed to the national housing crisis, the lack of critical infrastructure, planning delays and difficulties, minimal repair and maintenance of local roads and a host of other problems. Regardless of whether the proposed amalgamation proceeds, the Government needs to review how local authorities are funded. The local property tax was introduced in 2013 to improve and enhance funding for local services. All that has happened since its introduction has been a reduction in the general purpose grant paid by the Department of Housing, Planning and Local Government to local authorities.

**Deputy Shane Cassells:** Hear, hear.

**Deputy Noel Grealish:** There has been no net gain to local authorities or the taxpayer as a result of this tax. There is no clarity on how the local property tax equalisation fund, to which every local authority contributes 20% of the local property tax raised in its area, is allocated. My colleague, Councillor Thomas Welby, has tabled a motion for the next meeting of Galway County Council calling for the discontinuation of the legislation which provides that all counties must contribute 20% to the equalisation fund. He is proposing instead that all the money raised in each local authority area must remain in that area. This would help address the funding inequities across the country.

With the improvement in the economy over the past couple of years, increased funding has been provided to every other State agency and local authorities must get their fair share. No proposed amalgamation will be successful unless improved and adequate funding is provided by the Government. A clear funding model for each new authority must be provided before any further amalgamation proceeds.

**Deputy Michael Healy-Rae:** I am very glad to support Deputy Michael Collins, who is the main man behind the motion. It is a very important motion in that it is like standing up and saying, "Stop. Look at what is happening. Who is saying this is right and who is saying this is wrong?" I support the very good arguments that have been made by each member of our group. This is a critical time in that we are seeing what I would call a grab to take away people's say and to make rural areas smaller and more disenfranchised. During a different debate, I spoke about the abolition of town councils. The same arrogance we are seeing now was displayed at that time. Those councils were done away with by what I would call the type of gerrymander-

ing similar to what is currently proposed. This is the situation in Cork.

Deputy Grealish spoke about Galway. He could be referring to Kerry or any other place. We are here only because the people want us to be. I cannot praise county councillors enough. I have stated repeatedly that I do not care about their politics - whether they are independent or members of Fianna Fáil, Fine Gael, Sinn Féin, Labour or any other party - because, in my honest and humble opinion, they do an invaluable job. County councillors do not get half enough recognition for the good, sound, solid and sensible work they do seven days a week on behalf of the people they are proud and glad to be elected to represent.

Services for people living in rural areas in particular are being continuously downgraded. If autonomy is taken away from those living in rural areas and if those areas are subsumed into larger ones, it means that their level of representation is much less.

Deputy Grealish referred to funding local authorities. Funding has been taken away from our local authorities over the years. I compliment the Minister of State, Deputy Ring, on reinstating such funding. The programme for Government promised the reintroduction of funding for local improvement scheme, LIS, roads. Between 2011 and 2017, that stream of funding ceased completely.

At the same time, millions of euro were pumped into roads and infrastructure around Dublin. This comes back to what I have said since the first day I came to the House, namely, that there are people in Dublin and in government who think there is no world beyond the Red Cow roundabout. They think everything stops within that boundary. I have news for them. Whether in Goleen in west Cork or south, north or east Kerry, we have people who we want to represent. There are people who have issues regarding their local areas and we want to stand up for them and fight for more funding.

Things are being proposed that would not be for the betterment of people living in the localities, townlands and hinterlands affected by what is mentioned in the motion. That is why Deputy Michael Collins was right to insist on bringing the motion before the House. It is right to debate this matter and to hear about all of the issues involved. Ultimately, we are standing up for people in terms of the issues that affect them. We want people to have proper, fair and strong representation, whether in Dáil Éireann or local authorities which, as I said, could never be commended enough.

I thank the management, directors of services and people with shovels working for the local authorities today. They deserve our support. We represent the people and fight to ensure that whether one is living in a remote area or in a large town there is fair and equal representation for everybody. We will always stand up for people locally or nationally.

**Minister of State at the Department of Housing, Planning and Local Government (Deputy Damien English):** I welcome the opportunity to discuss the many positive impacts on rural areas that will flow from the national planning framework, to dispel concerns about any connection between the framework and local authority boundary reviews and to hear the views of Deputies on many issues. I have had an opportunity to listen to Deputy Michael Healy-Rae twice on the same issue. I can understand his concerns and his love of local councils. We all agree that they do great work, but many towns had no councils.

As someone who served on an area council, I am aware that there was a lot of duplication of work. I have said umpteen times that there were often delays between different councils

operating in the same areas. District areas worked quite well and conserved towns very well, including Navan town in my constituency. This was because the municipal areas covered entire towns. The system worked extremely well.

There is an ongoing review of the size of boundaries and municipal areas. I accept that councillors in Kerry, Mayo and other counties represent large areas and that they do great work. It can be difficult for them to cover such large areas. The system is being reviewed and it is to be hoped that we can all agree on the best way forward when the matter comes before the Cabinet in the months ahead.

It would appear that behind the motion from the Rural Independent Group Deputies is a concern about the draft national planning framework and what it proposes in respect of rural areas. I want to be clear. I represent Meath and Westmeath. There are large urban areas in those counties. The position is similar with the greater Dublin region, which Deputy Cassels represents. We also represent very rural areas, including the northern part of Meath and Westmeath. We understand exactly what Deputies are trying to say. The national planning framework is not to the detriment of rural areas. Rather, it is about trying to rebalance employment, housing and other services throughout all of the regions and help rural areas.

It is important to recognise that the Joint Committee on Housing, Planning and Local Government will tomorrow consider the draft framework and will have a chance to express its views in the final version of the document. The matter will be discussed in the House and by the committee. The latter will consider the work and views of the House. The process continues, following an informal briefing.

There is a great deal for urban and rural areas in Ireland 2040. The most important element of the national planning framework is having an overall plan for our country's strategic development, not just rural or urban areas. Rather, rural and urban areas should work together for the overall benefit of our communities and future. This is about our future and looking ten, 20 or 25 years ahead, something we, as politicians, should do on a regular basis. Too often we discuss the crisis of a given week or year in the House. This is about trying to ensure that we all take a long-term view. We are all involved and it will be a Dáil document looking 20 or 25 years ahead. That is what we are trying to do in order to get the balance right in terms of education, health, job creation and so on.

I will turn to some specifics. A couple of key points need to be made. In the context of future population growth, the framework envisages a broadly even split between the future growth of our cities and wider regions and rural areas. It is a sensible and reasonable approach, recognising that our cities and wider rural areas need to grow in a structured and harmonious way. On the other hand, the reality of not having a plan, as many Deputies will be aware, can mean vast developments on the edges of our cities and towns, with a general denuding of small towns and villages and older city cores alike. Towns have suffered from a lack of investment and economic purpose for 20 or 30 years. This has not happened during the recession of the past ten years alone. Some rural areas have been in decline and suffered from depopulation for 20 or 30 years. We are trying to put life back into some of these places. Unless we begin to do something about this now, this will lead to many possible serious consequences in terms of social disadvantage, the need to expend significant sums of money on urban regeneration and in playing an endless game of chase in respect of investing in new infrastructure in fast-growing areas. The sprawl, and certainly unplanned sprawl, must stop. It is very important that to make certain areas sustainable, the population must increase to make them viable for the provision

of services. We have seen this in many towns and villages around the greater Dublin region. Towns and villages throughout the country should be built up to serve cities and work off them as well. This document will help to try to plan where we are going with each town and village in all our counties. There must be a logic to which we can all subscribe that will balance services in a sustainable way that we can afford.

If we think a sprawl-based development pattern is right for our future, we face a lose-lose scenario for both rural and urban areas. We need a plan to deal with at least an extra million people living in the Republic, which will take the population to 5.75 million people. On the whole island, the population will increase to approximately 8 million people, and we must plan for that and see where we can put people's homes in order that they can be close to a job and various services.

**Deputy Noel Grealish:** The Government is finding it hard to build homes at the moment.

**Deputy Damien English:** There will be an extra 600,000 jobs, mainly in the knowledge economy, frequently being drawn to the cities and central urban areas. I heard the Deputy speaking about Galway today, which is one of the medical technology hubs of the world. It is a major centre and we need to enhance and develop it. This means Galway city must grow and the population living there must increase. We have to find ways to provide housing today and in future.

**Deputy Noel Grealish:** We can do that. There is no need to extend boundaries.

**Deputy Damien English:** It is about making decisions with local authority members and Deputies representing the area. It is also about making long-term planning decisions.

**Deputy Noel Grealish:** Make sure it is properly funded.

**Deputy Damien English:** I am not here to have an argument.

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** The Minister of State, without interruption.

**Deputy Damien English:** I want to support the Deputy.

**Deputy Mattie McGrath:** Show us the money. Tabhair dúinn an airgead.

**Deputy Damien English:** We know if we really want to develop Galway as a city, approximately €1 billion must be spent on transport to service the area. These are the kinds of questions that should be considered in a long-term plan. What needs to be spent and where must it be spent to achieve what we want? That is the idea of a long-term plan; it is like a business case setting out where we are going with the country in every region. This can then be backed up, paid for and planned over ten, 20 or 25 years. That is how to sustainably plan a town, village or city. We have suffered from a lack of planning in this country for many years and Deputy Cassells and I have seen the consequences of that living in County Meath.

**Deputy Noel Grealish:** I agree about bad planning.

**Deputy Damien English:** We live in towns that were not planned and suffered population overspill from Dublin. They suffered all kinds of consequences in trying to catch up. If we get this right, with the support of the House, there will be no catching up on bad planning as we will have good planning from the start. The money will follow the population to provide

required services as people start to live in areas. It will not take ten, 20 or 30 years for them to come about.

As I stated, we must plan for an extra 600,000 jobs and at least 500,000 new homes. We must get that right. We must also plan for a doubling of the numbers in our communities aged over 65, as 1.3 million people will be over that age. We have to plan for the services and towns they need with respect to housing and health care, along with all the other services. People must have a choice to live in communities all their lives and not have to move away when they get a little older.

The people of this country expect politicians, whether they function at national, regional or local levels - we all have a role in this and must work together as much as possible - to put in place sensible and reasonable planning policies that not only address these major changes coming quickly towards us but also deliver lasting benefits. Our real job is to plan ahead to get the maximum benefit for everybody. This means putting in place a deliberate strategy - not business as usual but a disruptive strategy - that will see Ireland and its urban and rural places developed in harmony rather than in competition with each other. There is room for everybody to expand and we must do this properly.

The motion being countered by the Government suggests the national planning framework will weaken rural Ireland, which is wrong. I do not agree with that. The suggestion is dubious and it is completely and utterly erroneous.

**Deputy Noel Grealish:** It is a proposal to put people in towns and villages.

**Deputy Damien English:** It is not true. I have been clear in saying I am not here to have a row with the Deputies. How many Deputies spoke here tonight and how many will have the chance over the weeks ahead, before the consultation closes on this process?

**Deputy Mattie McGrath:** There are not many of the Minister of State's colleagues here anyway.

**Deputy Damien English:** We have had numerous discussions on this up and down the country and many Deputies did not take the time to get involved. There are a few weeks left to have the conversation both here, in committee and in other forums. I hope people will take the time to have their views known, make representations and give us a chance to tease out ideas. Do not tell me in three months there was no opportunity for that. This has been discussed for the past two or three years. Most people have failed to get involved but there is plenty of time left and Members should not tell me in six months' time that they have missed out on a discussion or debate.

If Deputies consider the whole document, rather than reacting to those who spin against a long-term transformational strategy, they will see it contains many different kinds of practical planning and development and investment policies. These will benefit rural Ireland by driving planned and community-led regeneration initiatives aimed at repurposing rural economies to benefit from new technology, driving economic activities and new living possibilities. It is about growing our regions outside Dublin and the east by more than would occur under a "business as usual" scenario and improving connectivity to weaker areas of our country, including the northern and western parts of Ireland. I can provide a statistic the Deputies might not like agreeing with. One can review job creation in 2016 and most of 2017 and see that more than 70% of all new jobs created are outside cities. They are in the regions and that includes the likes

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of Galway. That is a fact; I am not making it up. That comes from long-term planning. It came from the Action Plan for Jobs and specifically a regional process to ensure jobs were pushed to the regions. This is getting results. It is about making a plan.

We must all understand and accept the traditional economic structure of rural Ireland is changing. Agriculture, the food sector, tourism and many traditional pillars of the rural economies must play their part in the implementation of the national planning framework but it is also necessary to create new opportunities for the renewal and revival of rural economies. In many smaller towns and villages across rural Ireland, one will see many empty buildings, closed shops and schools that are under threat. We must get people living in those empty streets and buildings again and must give them a purpose to be there. I accept we must encourage and fund this.

**Deputy Noel Grealish:** We need infrastructure.

**Deputy Damien English:** I mentioned to Deputy Harty getting people out there. Funding is required in a co-ordinated, logical and planned way that has buy-in from all State agencies and Departments. That can happen with this document, which will be the saviour of rural Ireland and not the opposite, as it is being portrayed today.

**Deputy Mattie McGrath:** Ar an chéad dul síos, déanaim comhbhrón le clanna na daoine a fuair bás inné. They were Ms Clare O'Neill, whose home was not too far away from me in Aghlish, Contae Port Láirge, Mr. Fintan Goss in County Louth and Mr. Michael Pyke. I know the Pyke family and express my sympathy to all the families. The Pyke family is hard-working and decent, and Michael's dad, Tony, worked for years with Tipperary County Council. He was out yesterday with the other colleagues who came on the scene, including fire services and the Garda Síochána. They attended many such incidents. Like many who have spoken, I thank the front-line service men and women and the people who heeded the good warnings given by Met Éireann. I condemn the people who shamefully and wilfully went out to sea to surf, for example. There should be legislation on this, as somebody mentioned. We cannot have people endangering the lives of rescue personnel, including the Red Cross, the Garda Síochána and the fire and ambulance services. People were putting their lives at risk and we must support and salute them. I appeal to those who still are without power to be very careful with trees that have fallen or roofs that have shifted. They should be extra careful as we do not want any more fatalities or serious injuries. It was a short, sharp hurricane but it brought back the reality that there is a God above and things can happen. With all the power we have, we cannot stop him. We want to be careful so there are no more fatalities. People should watch out for falling debris and changes to land beside rivers and streams. Much can happen when trees are uprooted in particular. Bígí cúramach.

I am appalled the Minister of State has been on his own for the past half hour, as had been the other Minister of State, Deputy Phelan, before that. That is the interest the Government has in the rural-centred motion we put down. I compliment Deputy Michael Collins and all colleagues in the Rural Independent Group on putting this down. One might argue it is about Cork but it is not; it is about the national planning framework and what is going to happen after the change in Cork and every other place. I thank Ms Máiréad Nic Craith, our secretary, and Padge Reck in Wexford, a politician of long standing, now retired, who gave us some input on this. Without people like those and their service, we would not be anywhere at all.

Many people made contributions tonight and I welcome all the comments. I am disappoint-

ed with the lack of support offered tonight but that is democracy. There are only seven of us and we will have to get stronger in order to reach the ten Deputies we need to push our votes. We would welcome others in supporting us on Thursday so we can divide the House on the motion.

I raised similar concerns recently when I informed the House of the latest statistics from the EUROSTAT 2016 yearbook, which are deeply alarming for rural Ireland. This is staring us in the face. One does not need spectacles and if there is a nose on one's face, one would see it anywhere. We can see it in the Minister of State's constituency, my constituency or those of Deputies Harty, Michael Collins, Grealish, Michael Healy-Rae and Danny Healy-Rae. It is there in front of us night and day.

**Deputy Damien English:** This will save it.

**Deputy Mattie McGrath:** That is wishful thinking.

**Deputy Noel Grealish:** It will on paper.

**Deputy Mattie McGrath:** I said it last week on "Prime Time" on RTÉ, which was pitting Dundrum in Tipperary - a fine rural village - against Dundrum in Dublin with respect to property tax.

It was said that we should table motions to keep the property tax that is paid in Tipperary in Tipperary and keep the equalisation fund. The statistics demonstrate that over 50% of Ireland's GDP, which is the total value of everything produced in this country, is generated in Dublin. This is despite the fact that an estimated 60% of the population live outside County Dublin. That is a stark statistic, and it is getting worse. These figures are from a European body. These figures point, yet again, to the absurdly disproportionate level of economic activity that is concentrated in Dublin. I walked down to the church on Clarendon Street to say a prayer. There are cranes all over the place and homeless people on the streets beside them, yet this Government is building offices. We want people to get back to work. We all do, but where are they going to live? It is nonsense. All the cranes are building commercial departments. There is no real interest in housing. Where are the people going to go? On the one hand it is great news for those living and working here in Dublin, but it also gives the lie to the idea that the rest of the country would benefit from a booming economy in the capital. It is a farce. There are many reports and much spin. The Taoiseach is now spending €5 million on a PR team. It will be no use. As I said about the budget, it will be like snow in a ditch. It will be like the fog in Kerry, west Cork, Kinvara or the Knockmealdowns in my own area that disappears at ten o'clock in the morning.

That the rest of country will benefit has clearly not come to pass, and it has been left to stagnate instead, particularly rural Ireland. The Minister of State knows that better than I do. He was shouting about it for years in opposition, when it was his job and his duty. Now he is trying to defend the indefensible. Even the European Commission in Ireland has observed that the figures here are way out of kilter with the majority of other EU capitals. Surely we can listen to that. I came back from Liverpool this evening where I spent two days discussing Brexit. It is quite clear why they left. There is too much bureaucracy, stagnation and bullying from Europe. The European Commission has also pointed out that in 2004 the shift in economic activity towards Dublin was the second highest in the EU, at 5.5 percentage points. That cannot be good. What we are continuing to see, therefore, is the total absence of any effective measures to address the massive imbalance that exists between Dublin and the rest of the State. This has

to be addressed, not only at Government level but also at EU level, where perhaps consideration might be given to an idea such as making industrial grants conditional on development in rural Ireland. We have to do something like that because development is not happening. This would be consistent with the EU's own agenda of making areas with viable commercial and industrial centres.

So many concerns addressed here tonight centre around the idea of giving rural Ireland a fair and proportionate chance to thrive. We are not beggars. We are a proud people, and we want to be able to work, live, play, and support our clubs and our neighbours. Community alert groups are out tonight checking on their elderly neighbours. That is the kind of people we are in rural Ireland. We do it. We do not have the handouts, but we are entitled to our fair share. That is all we want, and we are not getting it.

Deputy Grealish spoke about the amalgamations in Galway. The amalgamations in Tipperary were an abject failure. It is a pity the previous Minister is gone. He spoke about the local government Act in 2014. The flame in south Tipperary is in the person of both myself and the former mayor of the proud town of Clonmel who have a case in the High Court challenging many aspects of that legislation. I had the privilege of serving that summons on the former Minister, big Phil Hogan, the enforcer, when he was having a cup of coffee in this House. He thought I had something nice for him, and he had a look on his face the like of which he had during the water charges issue when he spoke about the ordinary people and what he was going to do with them. The look was gone off his face after the next election. I served that summons on him. It is there, and is to be challenged.

I have questions about that amalgamation in Tipperary in 2014 which was decided on in this House. I was the only man to stand up, not Deputy Cowen, who was here as well, and say that we would be heard from again in another place. I could not call a vote because I did not have the adequate numbers, and it all went through nicely. How did he appoint executives from north Tipperary to take over south Tipperary a year before the legislation was enacted, or even discussed or debated?

All is not well. The people in rural Ireland are awake. The west is awake. West Cork is awake. Clare is awake. Kerry is awake. Tipperary is awake. Many areas that our group represent are awake.

**Deputy Damien English:** Do not forget Galway.

**Deputy Mattie McGrath:** Of course Galway is awake. They won the all-Ireland. They are alive and awake and are not going to accept this any more because it has gone on for far too long. All governments have paid lip service, but the permanent government are here, with their hands on the handlebars, and it would take a jackhammer to get them off. They do not want to give anything to rural Ireland. Let the croppies lie down. Cromwell said "To hell or Connaught". Now it is to hell or any place except Dublin. That is bad. We see the homeless problem, the problem with education, with parking-----

**Deputy Damien English:** Check the job creation statistics for the last 12 months.

**Deputy Mattie McGrath:** When are the jobs coming to rural Ireland? I spoke to people from the IDA in Washington in America last St. Patrick's Day. I was told that they were not even coming as far as Kildare, Naas, or Meath. I will check the stats.

**Deputy Damien English:** The Deputy is reading reports from ten years ago.

**Deputy Mattie McGrath:** One can have all the stats and all the reports. The national planning framework is a bad business. I do not accept the national planning framework people. Who are they? It is all jobs for the boys - retired county managers and retired senior officials. There are very few ordinary people, like shopkeepers or small business people from Tipperary, Kerry, Cork or any other place. No, they will not be consulted at all. They will just pay up or shut up. We have reviewed the race now in Tipperary, all over the county. We are going to put up. We have proud towns, such as Carrick-on-Suir. Clonmel had a budget of €15 million. Now we do not have a shilling. The Minister of State is talking about municipal districts being good. They are not good. They are a disaster. They are too big. The towns are being neglected. We are trying to spread it too thinly and end up with nothing for anyone. Cashel Town Council was there for centuries, where the high kings of Munster sat. We had Roscrea, Templemore and Nenagh and now what have we? We had no town council in Cahir, but we had a block grant every year for the town. You have raped and plundered, and I hate using that word in this context, and you continue to do it. This motion is an effort to correct the imbalance. We want to have a debate here, not just with your slippery, slimy amendments. With the confidence and supply agreement, Fianna Fáil and the Government have proposed two amendments to try to put manners on us and tell us to lie down. We will not lie down and the people of Ireland will not lie down. We will be back agus beidh lá eile ag an bPaorach.

**Deputy Michael Healy-Rae:** Keep going.

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** Do not be enticing the Deputy to break the rules. It is not becoming of you, Deputy Healy-Rae.

Amendment put.

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** In accordance with Standing Order 70(2), the division is postponed until the weekly division time on Thursday, 19 October 2017.

The Dáil adjourned at 10.10 p.m. until 10.30 a.m on Wednesday, 18 October 2017.