



DÍOSPÓIREACHTAÍ PARLAIMINTE
PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

DÁIL ÉIREANN

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

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DÁIL ÉIREANN

Déardaoin, 15 Feabhra 2018

Thursday, 15 February 2018

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

Paidir.

Prayer.

Ceisteanna - Questions

Priority Questions

Acting Chairman (Deputy Eugene Murphy): We will commence today's business with questions to the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport. Before we commence with the first question, I remind Members that there is a six-and-a-half minute slot for each question. The Deputy has 30 seconds to introduce the question, the Minister has two minutes to reply and the Deputy has an opportunity to ask two supplementary questions, to which the Minister replies. I am adhering strictly to this on the basis that I sometimes watch people sitting in the Chamber who wait for their questions to come up and, because we run over time on other questions, do not get their opportunity. I, therefore, ask for this little bit of a co-operation from everyone. The first question is in the name of Deputy Robert Troy.

Traffic Management

1. **Deputy Robert Troy** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport the steps he is taking to address traffic congestion in Dublin, particularly in respect of Luas cross city; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [7940/18]

Deputy Robert Troy: Traffic congestion is at breaking point in Dublin city. It is estimated that it is costing €350 million per annum in lost productivity and lost time. What steps is the Minister taking to address congestion in the capital city, in particular the large-scale disruptions that have occurred since the introduction of Luas cross city?

Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Shane Ross): I thank the Deputy for the question. He is quite right: there is a congestion problem in Dublin. Dublin City Council and the National Transport Authority, NTA, jointly published in 2015 Dublin City Centre Trans-

port Study, which sets out the various measures proposed for Dublin's city centre to ensure the efficient functioning of transport within the city centre. In preparing the 2015 study, Dublin City Council and the NTA reviewed the current and future transportation needs of the city centre, taking into account the Luas cross city project, the need to make the city more attractive and safer for walking and cycling and the move towards a more sustainable and accessible city for all. These two bodies, in collaboration with Dublin Bus and Transport Infrastructure Ireland, TII, are progressively implementing the measures set out in that document to enable the continued development and growth of the city.

A number of changes have been made throughout the city centre over the past six months to accommodate the operation of the new Luas line. The most significant change was the introduction of the additional bus lanes along the north and south quays last August. A host of other junction and traffic signal changes have been implemented in advance of the Luas cross city becoming operational.

Furthermore, it was recognised that the College Green area would be unable, following the introduction of Luas trams, to cater for the same number of vehicles as it had previously. Addressing this, a separate proposal for a civic plaza at College Green was developed by the city council. This proposal also provides for revised traffic arrangements through this area.

The College Green civic plaza proposal is with An Bord Pleanála for determination. If approved, it would remove much of the conflicting traffic movements that exist on College Green.

In advance of a rescheduled oral hearing, the NTA, in collaboration with Dublin Bus and Dublin City Council, has proceeded to reduce bus vehicle volumes passing through the area, which would allow the junctions and signals to function more effectively. The combined effect of these changes has been to reduce the volume of buses passing through the College Green and College Street area by about 20% in order to reduce the delay issues arising in the area.

I am advised that these parties continue to keep the situation under review.

Deputy Robert Troy: On the opening of the Luas crossover, the Taoiseach said it would encourage more people to use public transport, alleviate congestion and reduce our carbon footprint. Unfortunately, to date this has not happened. The Minister talks about the introduction of significant changes prior to this, citing as one of the measures the additional bus lanes on the quays. The average time it takes a bus to get from Heuston Station to O'Connell Bridge has doubled since the introduction of the second bus lane on the north quays. That is certainly not something to be welcomed or proud of. This morning I took the Luas crossover from Dawson Street to O'Connell Bridge. It took 20 minutes. I would have been quicker walking. I took it in order to experience for myself the length of time it takes. Coming back from Talbot Street this morning I took a taxi in order to be here on time for Question Time. This took 25 minutes. Unfortunately, there has been a lack of joined-up thinking and preparation, and the improvements the crossover represents is not feeding down to commuters' needs. People are actually spending longer on public transport now than before this was introduced.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Eugene Murphy): I will afford the Deputy another minute.

Deputy Shane Ross: Deputy Troy is absolutely right: there have been some teething pains as a result of the introduction of Luas cross city. These are not confined to the areas to which he referred; there have also been problems with people getting onto the trams and there has not been enough capacity. However, this is being well addressed and will, I hope, be resolved in

the weeks to come. This involves putting more trams, larger trams and longer trams, on the green line.

To address the specific subject the Deputy mentioned, that is, the city centre, it has been recognised for some time that the College Green area would be unable to cater for the same number of vehicles as it had previously. This is following the introduction of the Luas trams, which has had knock-on effects. Addressing this, a separate proposal for a civic plaza at College Green was developed, which also provides for revised traffic arrangements through this area. That proposal is currently with An Bord Pleanála for determination. If it is approved, it will remove many of the conflicting traffic movements that currently exist in College Green. Trams, buses and taxis would only run on a north-south axis. The existing complex sequence of traffic signals would be replaced with a single pedestrian crossing from the Trinity College entrance across to the plaza.

Deputy Robert Troy: These problems were well flagged. The impact of the Luas cross city on buses etc. was flagged by Dublin City Council's transport committee as far back as 2015. It appears nothing was done. Why did it take tens of thousands of passengers facing severe disruption for the Minister to change some of the bus routes through College Green? Quite seriously, is there a concerted effort by the Minister's Department and the NTA to ensure that there is widespread disruption on College Green, ahead of an attempt at a later stage to take away all motorcars from College Green? What the Minister is doing now is creating such a disruption in the hope that people will get so annoyed and exasperated that they will accept a plan to introduce a cut to motorcars and taxis using College Green in the not-too-distant future.

Deputy Shane Ross: That is a fairly extraordinary suggestion. No, there is no concerted plan of any sort that I am aware of to cause such disruption.

Deputy Robert Troy: None that the Minister is aware of.

Deputy Shane Ross: I am not aware of one and I can assure the Deputy that there is not one because I would be aware of a plan to do anything of the sort. The Deputy is right about one or two things, however. The issues were well flagged. There was a mismatch and still is a certain mismatch. A lot of that has to do with the anticipation of what would and will happen when An Bord Pleanála reaches its conclusion and releases its verdict. When that happens, we expect there to be a great deal of release in those conflicting traffic movements which are going on. However, that has been delayed and is not happening until May. I do not think the Deputy would have asked me or the NTA to delay the opening of Luas cross city until An Bord Pleanála had given its judgment as we never know exactly when it is going to do so.

There is absolutely no concerted plan of any sort. There have been problems but they are being addressed by the NTA in the ways I have described and I think they will be resolved very shortly.

Defined Benefit Pension Schemes

2. **Deputy Imelda Munster** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport the action he plans to take further to concerns that have been raised by unions regarding CIÉ pensions; when his attention was drawn to the underfunding of the pension schemes; his plans to remedy the matter; the reason CIÉ was in a position to disregard a ministerial directive; and if an in-

dependent investigation into the governance of both CIÉ pension schemes will be established. [7877/18]

Deputy Imelda Munster: What action does the Minister intend to take on the serious concerns raised by the unions about CIÉ pensions? Will he confirm when the underfunding was first brought to his attention? What plans has he to rectify that, and will he explain why CIÉ was in a position to disregard a ministerial directive?

Deputy Shane Ross: This is a subject on which Deputy Munster, like virtually every Deputy, will have received submissions from many of those working in CIÉ who are members of the pension funds involved. She will have the same sort of sympathy that everyone else would have for people in this situation where the pension fund is in deficit.

Issues pertaining to CIÉ's pension scheme are primarily a matter for the CIÉ group, its employees and the trustees of the pension scheme. The employees of CIÉ are provided pension benefits on retirement from one of two defined benefit schemes, namely, the regular wages scheme or the superannuation scheme. In common with the overwhelming majority of such schemes, they are facing significant challenges in maintaining solvency to ensure prudent provision is made to fund the cost of future pensions in a low interest rate environment.

CIÉ has put on record at the Workplace Relations Commission, WRC, that it will not impose any change that it proposes without the agreement of the active members of both schemes and that it will continue to contribute to both schemes in accordance with the rules of the schemes. I have outlined the challenges faced in addressing the solvency of the schemes and the process under way to address the deficit, which involves detailed discussion between CIÉ and employee representatives, facilitated by the WRC. I urge all sides to re-engage with the WRC to resolve this issue.

The Deputy has also asked about CIÉ adherence to the requirements of statutory instruments. CIÉ has advised that it has complied with its contribution requirements under SI 323 of 2000 and SI 205 of 2010. Also, the Deputy may be aware that the schemes' accounts are independently audited and are required to be signed off by the trustees if they are satisfied that the rules have been complied with. These audited and trustee-approved accounts form part of each scheme's annual report that is circulated to all the members. To date, no case exists where this has not occurred.

Additional information not given on the floor of the House

In recent weeks, members of one of the pension schemes have highlighted particular concerns and these have been communicated to public representatives and raised with both the Committee of Public Accounts and the Oireachtas Committee on Transport, Tourism and Sport. Previous parliamentary questions from Deputies have also been referred to CIÉ for reply. I understand replies were issued to those Deputies last week indicating that CIÉ proposes to issue a comprehensive response to all queries on 22 February or as soon as possible thereafter. I am informed that a report on this issue will be presented to the CIÉ board, which is meeting on 21 February. I will ask CIÉ to ensure that a comprehensive response will also issue to the Deputy on the issues she has raised.

Deputy Imelda Munster: In 1994, an agreement was reached between CIÉ employees and the company to amalgamate the five pension schemes, which allowed the group to remove a potential €73 million pension deficit from its books. In return, the employees were assured by

the board of CIÉ that it would guarantee the solvency of the pension schemes each year. The company by and large stuck to that commitment right up until 2009 when it failed to provide sufficient funding to ensure the solvency of the schemes in that year and the following years right up to the present. Since then, the board of CIÉ has underfunded the pension scheme to the tune of €80 million. How can the Minister say it has complied with requirements under statutory obligations?

Will the Minister establish an independent investigation into the governance of both CIÉ pension schemes? Did he investigate why CIÉ ignored a ministerial directive? He has not directly answered that question.

Deputy Shane Ross: I am not aware of any ministerial directive that it has ignored. I have asked them this question and they have complied with every statutory instrument to which the Deputy refers. It is a tragedy and is very difficult for the members, but it is not unique. The deficit the Deputy talks about is far from unique for people in this situation at the moment. It is a defined benefit scheme.

I think what is happening here is that people are getting together and, quite understandably and maybe quite rightly, making representations to the board, public representatives, me and CIÉ itself about the difficulties in which they find themselves. This has been in and out of the WRC several times and is now largely outside the WRC. The management and workforce have been trying to get together to produce a funding plan which satisfies the Pensions Authority. They have not been able to do that so far at this stage. The last one is what they call “off track”. Every effort must be made to get this on track for the benefit of CIÉ and the workforce. I urge them to get back to the WRC. This problem is not uncommon and it is in their interests to resolve it. I have every sympathy for the difficulties in which they find themselves.

Deputy Imelda Munster: The Comptroller and Auditor General told the Committee of Public Accounts that this was a statutory rather than a private pension scheme, so there is an obligation there under the law. More than 10,000 CIÉ workers have been left in limbo for the past eight years. They do not know what is happening with their pensions, all because the Government allowed CIÉ to ignore a statutory instrument. Not only has the company underfunded the pension scheme, it has also jeopardised the solvency of the two pension schemes. There are serious questions to be asked. There are questions to be asked of the Government, the Minister’s Department and the previous Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport as to why they have ignored this matter for the past eight years or more. When it comes down to it, CIÉ has been allowed to do this. Quite simply, it has broken the law. What is the Minister going to do about it, how is he going to resolve it and how is he going to hold CIÉ to account for not adhering to a statutory instrument?

Deputy Shane Ross: I repeat that CIÉ has assured me that it has complied with the statutory instruments to which I have referred and I will have to leave it at that. If the Deputy can refer me to a case where a statutory instrument has been defied by CIÉ, I will certainly take action on it because that is important. CIÉ has received all the representations which have been made by Deputies and the public. It will hold a board meeting on 21 February and will respond to all those queries, including those from the Deputy. I will make sure she gets a response on 22 February. It is taking it seriously and is taking the concerns of people who are gobsmacked by the difficulties in which they find themselves seriously. It had to be regarded as not just something with which it has sympathy but something which has to be put right. If the Deputy can wait until 22 February, everybody will get a full response from CIÉ. *A referred reply was forwarded*

to the Deputy under Standing Order 42A.

Noise Pollution Legislation

3. **Deputy Robert Troy** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport the reason for his appointment of Fingal County Council as an independent noise regulator in respect of airport noise; the reason he plans to introduce less restrictive noise regulations; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [7941/18]

Deputy Robert Troy: In his appointment as Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport the Minister has abdicated his responsibility in respect of the appointment of an independent competent authority for noise regulation at Dublin Airport. He has delayed and procrastinated. He has failed in this regard. We have learned in the past number of weeks that he intends to appoint Fingal County Council as the competent authority. Can the Minister outline the background to this decision and the reason he is satisfied that Fingal County Council has the capacity and capability to be an independent authority?

Deputy Shane Ross: I cannot let the Deputy say things like that without any evidence. I have not delayed a decision. There have been delays, but not on my part. I have not procrastinated. If anything, I have put pressure on people to make haste in this. The Deputy is quite correct in saying that delays have happened elsewhere. They certainly have not happened in my Department; in fact, quite the opposite has happened.

As the Deputy is aware, the State is required to appoint an airport noise regulator under EU Regulation 598/2014. That regulation, which came into force in 2016, sets out how all member states should measure, manage and monitor noise at each of their major airports. In Ireland, only Dublin Airport is large enough to fall subject to the regulation.

As I have previously explained to the House, an earlier proposal to appoint the Irish Aviation Authority, IAA, as the noise regulator ultimately ran up against legal advice, which made it impracticable. Those are the delays to which the Deputy referred. Therefore, an alternative had to be found. Following discussions between my Department and the Departments of Housing, Planning and Local Government and Communications, Climate Change and Environment, it was agreed that on balance, and having regard to the requirements of the EU regulation, Fingal County Council offered the best way forward.

It already has responsibilities under an EU environmental noise directive which encapsulates responsibilities relating to noise caused by conurbations and major transport infrastructures, including roads, railways and airports. In addition, having regard to its planning functions, it has considerable experience and expertise in the conduct of environmental impact assessments, appropriate assessments and managing extensive public consultations. There are, therefore, synergies arising from the assignment of this additional role.

A further factor that was taken into consideration was the existing scale of Fingal, which means it can relatively easily take on an additional function. It is true that Fingal will have to build some additional expert capacity, but that requirement would arise no matter what body this role is assigned to. The draft legislation will provide for additional funding to provide for this. My proposal was recently endorsed by the Cabinet, and I plan to bring draft legislation forward as soon as possible to give effect to this.

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Additional information not given on the floor of the House

I think the Deputy is well aware that what I propose is to fully implement an EU regulation on airport noise. I am legally obliged to do so. It represents a new decision-making process, governed by standard EU rules that apply across all member states, and there is no basis for drawing any conclusion as to what the outcome of this new decision-making process will be. I am of the view that this EU regulation which, among other things, includes provision for public consultation and has the safeguard of an independent appeals process, represents a huge improvement on current arrangements.

Deputy Robert Troy: The Minister said he has not delayed, yet the regulation came into effect in 2016. It is now 2018 and we are still discussing the matter. He cannot even give a timeframe for when his draft legislation will come before the House. First it was the EPA and then the IAA. I questioned the Minister repeatedly and the only difficulty he mentioned was that he was awaiting independent legal advice on whether a statutory instrument or primary legislation was required. Now we have moved on to a new authority. The Minister has failed. He has responsibility for this and has failed to deliver this for the past two years.

Is it true that his predecessor confirmed arrangements two years ago for transposing the EU regulations to the IAA but because of the Minister's inaction there have been two years of negative economic impact on our country? Has the Minister met the CEO of Fingal County Council to determine its readiness, skill and capability to take on this highly specialised task? Has he spoken to the DAA or any of the main airlines which use Dublin Airport regarding how they feel about Fingal County Council? What about the residents? Members outlined to departmental officials that they do not have confidence in the impartiality of Fingal County Council to be the competent authority in respect of noise regulation.

Deputy Shane Ross: The Deputy made a lot of statements.

Deputy Robert Troy: I asked a lot of questions.

Deputy Shane Ross: I do not know whether the Deputy has taken a straw poll of the residents or has met one or two. To make the statements he did is absurd and irresponsible. I take exception to them because nobody has met more of the residents about the issue of noise than I have. Every Deputy who has asked me to meet residents' groups has been received and I have listened to what they have to say. If Deputy Troy wants to come to the House and say the residents are all against the proposal it indicates that he has been wandering the streets of Malahide and Swords over the past few days taking some sort of opinion poll.

I do not believe he knows what he is talking about. He is throwing an allegation around the House in a meaningless way which is totally unscientific and unforensic. Of course the delay was regrettable. A decision was made about the IAA, subject to legal opinion. The Deputy will be well aware that this was decided one way in the Office of the Attorney General and on reconsideration, as a result of certain European standards, and much to my regret and that of everybody else, the decision was made that the IAA was conflicted. We immediately looked for another noise regulator and have thankfully found one.

Deputy Robert Troy: I based my conclusions on my conversations with residents and having talked to democratically elected people who represent the constituency. Incidentally, if the Minister wants the legislation to go through the House he does not have the numbers on that side. He might want to realise that and engage with us. The fact he did not turn up to the

briefing to discuss this issue with the Opposition spokespersons and Members demonstrated his priorities and interest in this.

Did his predecessor of two years ago have in place confirmed arrangements in respect of transposing the EU regulations? Has he met the CEO of Fingal County Council to determine its readiness and skill to take on this highly specialised task? Has he met or spoken with the CEO of the DAA or any of the airlines which use Dublin Airport as their main base? These questions require “Yes” or “No” answers.

We want the second runway to be up and running. This is having a negative effect on economic growth, not just in the Dublin region but the country at large. The Minister has responsibility for dealing with this issue and has failed to do so, whether he cares to admit it, for the past two years.

Deputy Shane Ross: It is a little bit excitable of the Deputy to say that I have refused to engage with anybody on this. I am perfectly happy to engage with the Deputy on this.

Deputy Robert Troy: I said the Minister was not at the briefing.

Deputy Shane Ross: I did not need the briefing; the Deputy did. I have been briefed on this on a regular basis virtually every day. This was a briefing-----

Deputy Robert Troy: The Minister needs to engage with us.

Deputy Shane Ross: -----which was arranged for the Deputy and anybody else who wanted to go to it and was interested in the matter. As the Deputy said, this is one of the most important projects-----

Deputy Robert Troy: Answer the question.

Deputy Shane Ross: -----which faces the country at the moment. Of course we would welcome the support of Fianna Fáil for the runway.

Deputy Robert Troy: Did the Minister meet the CEO of Fingal County Council?

Deputy Shane Ross: Of course we would welcome anybody who is interested in this and we will inform them and keep them up-to-date because it is too important.

Deputy Robert Troy: Did he meet the CEO-----

Deputy Shane Ross: I will answer the Deputy’s question if he does not interrupt me. He is taking up a lot more time. I am willing to meet anybody-----

Deputy Robert Troy: Did the Minister meet him?

Deputy Shane Ross: -----at any time on this issue and my officials have engaged-----

Deputy Robert Troy: I will take that as a “No”.

Deputy Shane Ross: -----in conversations. I cannot hear myself, let alone Deputy Troy. I certainly cannot-----

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Deputy Robert Troy: It is a “Yes” or “No” answer.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Eugene Murphy): I am in the Chair and will rule on the matter. The Minister will answer the question. The Deputy has gone over time and is stopping the next Deputy from asking his question.

Deputy Shane Ross: I will engage with anybody relevant to the project to promote it.

Deputy Robert Troy: I take it that the Minister is saying no.

Deputy Shane Ross: My officials have engaged with them intensely recently.

Deputy Robert Troy: The Minister has failed again.

Road Network

4. **Deputy Danny Healy-Rae** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport if his attention has been drawn to the need for the provision of the Killarney bypass from Farranfore to Lissivigeen and from Lissivigeen to Castlough. [7875/18]

Deputy Danny Healy-Rae: I am asking the Minister to prioritise the Killarney bypass, from Lissivigeen to Farranfore and from Lissivigeen to Castlough on the Muckcross Road. It is a very important scheme. The plan was first unveiled in 2004 but shelved or suspended in 2011. The route has been identified. I raised the matter with the Taoiseach in October during Leaders’ Questions. Happily, a sum of €25,000 has been allocated, but I believe it will only dust down the fines.

Deputy Shane Ross: This is not the first time I have heard the issue of this road being raised. The Minister of State, Deputy Brendan Griffin, has raised it with me many times. It is a serious problem and I recognise that the project is important to the Minister of State, as well as to Deputies Danny and Michael Healy-Rae and Martin Ferris and all other representatives in County Kerry. I will address the issue as seriously as I possibly can.

As Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport, I have responsibility for overall policy and funding of the national roads programme. The planning, design and implementation of individual road projects are matters for Transport Infrastructure Ireland under the Roads Acts 1993 to 2015, in conjunction with the local authorities concerned.

Ireland has just under 100,000 km of road in its network and the maintenance and improvement of national, regional and local roads place a substantial financial burden on local authorities and the Exchequer. Because of the national financial position, there were very large reductions in the Exchequer funding available for roads expenditure after the financial crisis and the cuts meant that a significant number of proposed road improvement projects had to be suspended. The N22, Farranfore to Killarney, scheme was one of the projects suspended at the time.

The Building on Recovery capital plan 2016 to 2021 and the capital plan review allocations mark a significant step forward in restoring funding to the levels needed to maintain the road network in a “steady state” condition and allowing for some investment in road improvement schemes, but it is going to take time for funding to build up to the required level to support road

maintenance and improvement projects. I was able to secure significant additional funding in the capital plan review and it will allow a package of additional measures to be implemented, including the development of a pipeline of future projects. In that context, TII has allocated funding this year to local authorities to progress pre-appraisal of a range of projects. The N22, Killarney to Farranfore, scheme is one of the schemes to be assessed. I understand from TII that the funding provided for Kerry County Council this year is to bring the full scheme through pre-appraisal, with a view to assessing the extent to which the scheme or elements of it can be justified in terms of appraisal and advanced further.

Additional information not given on the floor of the House

The Department of Public Expenditure and Reform's public spending code and my Department's capital appraisal framework have very specific requirements in relation to the appraisal of capital projects and given the many competing demands for funding, the appraisal process is very important in determining how best to allocate resources.

Deputy Danny Healy-Rae: I am glad to see the Minister of State at the Department of Transport, Tourism and Sport, Deputy Brendan Griffin, in the House. I ask him to put his shoulder to the wheel and push this very important project. Progressing it has many merits. Killarney is choked by traffic during the summer months, with people trying to get in and out of the town. In a way, that is good as it shows that people want to come to Killarney. However, we need to cater for them. There is congestion on the Muckross Road, with traffic from Kenmare and Glengarriff trying to get through the town. Traffic has to pass through the town to get to Limerick or any other part of the country. There is also traffic from Killorglin and Liebherr, as well as to O'Shea's Funeral Home in the evenings, when workers travel up Dr. Hans-Liebherr Road and St. Anne's Road. The volume of traffic on the bypass is at the maximum. It is used by 18,600 vehicles per day. It connects with the Tralee and Farranfore road at the Cleeny junction.

Deputy Shane Ross: I am glad that the Deputy acknowledged the presence of the Minister of State at the Department of Transport, Tourism and Sport, Deputy Brendan Griffin. It was very gracious of him to do so. I am also glad that he has acknowledged that we are taking this project very seriously. Kerry County Council selected the route in 2004. However, following a review, the scheme was revised several times before the project was suspended in 2009. The expected cost of construction of the 27 km route is between €160 million and €200 million. A bypass relief road was built in Killarney in the 1990s. It comprised a single carriageway with junctions. It is used by around 18,000 vehicles per day which is above capacity. The 21 km mainline scheme, or a section thereof, will provide a bypass of the town and the existing relief road.

Deputy Danny Healy-Rae: Addressing safety issues should be a priority. There have been accidents and deaths at the top of Lewis Road. We need to get rid of the massive amount of traffic on that road. Madam's Hill junction, Farranfore junction with a turn-off for Firies, mid-Kerry and Dingle and Park Road roundabout and junction which caters for traffic to the industrial estates and people from Gneeveguilla are all dangerous roads. The junction at Ballycasheen is also deadly. Other accidents and deaths have occurred at Coolcaslagh. We have to make the case for the continuation of the growth of the tourism product in Killarney. Some €180 million is being spent there which is projected to go up to over €500 million by 2025. If we include all direct and indirect spending, some €410 million is generated in Killarney. The tourism industry employs 3,122 people. We need to protect these jobs and add to them. It does not make sense to have the traffic from Glengarriff, Kenmare and Sneem travelling around by

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Kenmare Place to get to other parts of the country. As many vehicles need to pass through Killarney, I ask the Minister to prioritise this very important project. We have been told by IBEC that Ireland has the fewest infrastructural projects under way in Europe. I ask both the Minister and the Minister of State to prioritise this very important project.

Deputy Shane Ross: The Deputy can be absolutely assured that I have taken his contribution seriously. The capital plan, as it stands, does not make provision for the N22, Farranfore to Killarney, scheme, but the extra funding provided in the capital plan review will enable TII to develop a pipeline of potential future projects. This project will be considered for development in the post-2022 period. Transport Infrastructure Ireland is progressing approximately 23 schemes through the pre-appraisal and early planning process this year, with a view to prioritising projects to be advanced further. The outcome of the pre-appraisal process will, therefore, determine which schemes or elements of them will be progressed. In the case of the N22, Farranfore to Killarney, scheme, the pre-appraisal process will include consideration of whether all three elements can be justified. Each of the potential projects will be subject to the appraisal requirements of the public spending code and the capital appraisal framework. In that context, the national development plan will state each Department must ensure all relevant appraisal processes and value for money tests in the public spending code are met before committing funding to individual capital projects. I will take to heart and to TII the submissions made by the Deputy and the Minister of State on this project.

Deputy Danny Healy-Rae: Four years is too long to wait given the level of traffic congestion in Killarney.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Eugene Murphy): We allowed the Deputy extra time, but we will not do so again.

Rail Network Expansion

5. **Deputy Eamon Ryan** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport the future of the proposed underground rail interconnector linking Heuston Station and Spencer Dock; if this interconnector will be included in the new national capital plan; and, if not, the way in which he plans to increase the capacity of the rail network. [7883/18]

Deputy Eamon Ryan: In 1972 the report on the transportation in Dublin study carried out by An Foras Forbartha stated we should build an underground rail connection between Heuston Station and Pearse Street and Connolly Station. In 1975 the report on the Dublin rapid rail transportation study stated the same and that it should be the second phase after the introduction of the Howth to Bray DART line. In 2001 the plan A Platform for Change stated the project was more important than anything else and should take precedence over the widening of the M50. That did not happen. A railway order was issued in December 2011 but subsequently cancelled. The report on the NTA greater Dublin draft transport study for the period 2016 to 2035 brought the measure back in and stated we had to have it. Does the Minister intend to build it? Will it happen? Are we for real on this issue? Will it be in the plan that will be announced tomorrow?

Deputy Shane Ross: As the Deputy is aware, the National Transport Authority's, NTA, transport strategy for the greater Dublin area 2016-2035 proposes implementation of the overall DART expansion programme. In the Government's budgetary framework for capital investment, Building on Recovery: Infrastructure and Capital Investment 2016-2021, funding was

allocated to progress a number of key public transport projects in the NTA's strategy, including the DART expansion programme.

The DART expansion programme has a key role to play in delivering an efficient transport system. When fully implemented, the enhancements to the heavy rail system provided for in the NTA's transport strategy will create a full metropolitan area DART network for Dublin with all of the lines linked and connected. This integrated rail network will provide the core high capacity transit system for the region and will deliver a very substantial increase in peak-hour capacity on all lines from Drogheda, Maynooth, Hazelhatch and Greystones.

The original cost of the overall DART expansion programme, including the DART underground tunnel element, was estimated, as the Deputy will be well aware from his own experience, at €4 billion, of which €3 billion was in respect of the tunnel as originally designed. The Government decided in September 2015 that the original proposal for the tunnel should be redesigned to provide a lower cost solution. I understand that the NTA is working with Irish Rail on a revised proposal that is expected to be completed soon.

In the meantime, significant investment to upgrade signalling and turn-back facilities in the critical city centre area allowed the upgrade and reopening of the Phoenix Park tunnel in 2016. At the time of its opening, the NTA stated that the opening of the tunnel was an opportunity in the short term, at modest cost, to bring commuters from the west and south west to the city centre and the business district in the south of the city. It stated also that the opportunity of developing the DART underground is to be protected for the future.

The upgrade to the Phoenix Park tunnel in 2016 at a cost of €13.5 million has seen commuters on the Kildare to Dublin Heuston line benefit from having the option of direct trains to Connolly, Tara Street, Pearse and Grand Canal Dock stations.

Additional information not given on the floor of the House

Following the mid-term review of capital priorities, budget 2018 increased the multi-annual capital investment funding envelopes for the coming four-year period, including providing an enhanced capital envelope of €2.7 billion for Ireland's public transport investment between 2018 and 2021. This enhanced capital envelope includes funding in the order of €230 million for mainline rail and DART capacity enhancement and will allow acceleration of the initial stages of the overall DART expansion programme, focusing particularly at this stage on providing additional fleet to enhance capacity and extending the electrified DART system. Specifically, it will allow substantial progress on electrification of the Northern rail line as far as Balbriggan, now expected to be delivered in 2022, and commencing work on the Maynooth line.

Planning for longer term investment will form part of the national development plan, the Government's overall ten-year investment plan which we will be launching later this week alongside the new national planning framework for the period to 2040.

Deputy Eamon Ryan: That is the same no nothing answer the Minister gave me a year ago. I am clear on what the Minister is saying; it is not going to happen. I have no faith in the Minister's ability to protect public transport or deliver public transport in this city. Our city is grinding to a halt and he is sitting back and watching it happen. It was galling to read in the newspapers today the front-page news that the metro will open up lands in the north of Dublin. We knew that 20 years ago. We were planning that 20 years ago in A Platform for Change, which was a proper plan about how we would make this city function and work. Critical to it, as

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well as the metro, was the DART interconnector because the two go together. There would be joint stations that complimented each other and we would start to have a public transport system that works. The Minister has given up on that. There is nothing happening. He has been saying for a year and a half that he is doing plans and looking at it. If he had been doing it, he would have answered this question today and he would be announcing tomorrow the building of the DART interconnector, but we will get nothing.

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

Deputy Eamon Ryan: The city is in gridlock and it will kill this country's growth prospects because it will not work. All the roads the Minister is building will not work. We need public transport.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Eugene Murphy): You will have a further minute, Deputy.

Deputy Eamon Ryan: Edgar Morgenroth is right. The Minister is killing our cities, particularly Dublin, and I am sad that is happening at a time when we have the money and the opportunity.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Eugene Murphy): Deputy, you know that you have a further minute, so do not abuse the time.

Deputy Shane Ross: Deputy Ryan was a little bit histrionic.

Deputy Eamon Ryan: I am sorry. I am slightly emotional. I am 20 years waiting on this.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Eugene Murphy): Please allow the Minister give his reply.

Deputy Colm Brophy: Deputy Ryan's party bankrupted the country in that 20 years.

Deputy Shane Ross: During that 20 years-----

Acting Chairman (Deputy Eugene Murphy): The Minister without interruption, please.

Deputy Pat Deering: He has a short memory.

Deputy Colm Brophy: A very short memory.

Deputy Shane Ross: -----I believe the Deputy was in government.

Deputy Eamon Ryan: Yes.

Deputy Shane Ross: I did not interrupt the Deputy. He was in government for that period of time. I do not know when this particular project was cancelled but I think the DART underground was deferred by the previous Government in November 2010.

Deputy Eamon Ryan: No. It was 2011.

Deputy Shane Ross: When you were not so busy deferring bankrupting the country, bankrupting the banks and propping up Brian Cowen and Bertie Ahern, which you did with alacrity, I do not know what you were doing about transport but we inherited a situation in transport from you guys which was an absolute and utter disaster. You get up here day in, day out wanting to spend money like water, as you did the time you were in government. I will not sit here and take that as though money comes out of the sky when you are in opposition but when in

government you just spend it and bankrupt the country.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Eugene Murphy): Address the Chair, Minister.

Deputy Shane Ross: That is the outrageous type of narrative Deputy Ryan comes out with day after day. We should be spending €4 billion on an underground-----

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

Deputy Shane Ross: We are doing an extremely progressive job. We will not bankrupt the country for infrastructure.

Deputy Eamon Ryan: The Minister will spend €4 billion on roads in the next four years. He is bankrupting the country now because the traffic system in this city is grinding to a halt. He is the Minister for transport today. He should stand up to that responsibility in a country where we do have budgets. I heard European Investment Bank, EIB, representatives tell the Committee on Budgetary Oversight that there is no counter-party for us to lend to. They have no public projects ready to go. We protected this project when we were in government. We had the metro in the four-year plan. Fine Gael then killed it, which was the worst decision by any Government because it was the perfect counter cyclical plan that would have provided us not just with a transport system that works but it would have opened up those transport lines for housing. Instead, this Government is saying, "Aren't we great". It is 30 years late in opening up those lands for housing. What are the people in Kildare and beyond going to do when that rail system is not good enough to carry the numbers we need to be carried into this city? The Minister is a failure as Minister for transport.

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

Deputy Eamon Ryan: He should stand up to that failure today. His key failing is that he does not believe in public transport. He does not believe in walking, cycling or any such mode of transport. All he wants to do is spend on roads. He has given no money to the cities-----

Deputy Brendan Griffin: We are clearing up your mess.

Deputy Eamon Ryan: -----and it is killing our country. That is why I am annoyed.

Deputy Brendan Griffin: We are clearing up your legacy.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Eugene Murphy): Deputy, please.

Deputy Pat Deering: We are clearing up the mess you left behind.

Deputy Brendan Griffin: We are clearing up the mess you left after you, which took ten years.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Eugene Murphy): Gentlemen, this is Deputy Ryan's question.

Deputy Brendan Griffin: It is very hard to listen to this rubbish.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Eugene Murphy): Minister, will you address the Chair, please? The Minister has one minute to reply.

Deputy Pat Deering: You cannot let him away with that.

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Acting Chairman (Deputy Eugene Murphy): Deputy Deering-----

Deputy Eamon Ryan: Cannot get away with what? It is just the truth.

Deputy Brendan Griffin: The truth is-----

Deputy Eamon Ryan: It is the bloody truth.

Deputy Brendan Griffin: -----that you presided over the bankruptcy of the country.

(Interruptions).

Acting Chairman (Deputy Eugene Murphy): Deputy Ryan-----

Deputy Eamon Ryan: How long did it take you-----

Acting Chairman (Deputy Eugene Murphy): I ask Deputy Ryan and the other Members please to desist. The Minister has one minute to reply. I ask Members to let the Minister reply.

Deputy Pat Deering: It is very difficult-----

Acting Chairman (Deputy Eugene Murphy): Please, Deputy Deering. Your question will be dealt with shortly. I will not allow you your time if you continue to interrupt.

Deputy Pat Deering: Sorry.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Eugene Murphy): If you want your question taken, let the Minister respond.

Deputy Shane Ross: I am speechless-----

Deputy Mick Barry: Correct. That is a first.

Deputy Shane Ross: -----having to listen to this extraordinary narrative which you come in here day after day-----

Acting Chairman (Deputy Eugene Murphy): Minister, will you address the Chair, please?

Deputy Shane Ross: Yes. I wish to know the pills this man is taking.

Deputy Eamon Ryan: How long did it take the Minister to drive in here today?

Deputy Shane Ross: This man must be smoking amnesia-----

Deputy Eamon Ryan: How long did it take him to drive in here today?

Deputy Shane Ross: There is a thing called an amnesia pill, and it makes one forget everything.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Eugene Murphy): Minister, will you address the Chair?

Deputy Eamon Ryan: How long did it take you to drive in today?

Deputy Shane Ross: For his years in the wilderness, he took his amnesia pills. He has forgotten he was in government when the country was bankrupt.

Deputy Eamon Ryan: Where we-----

Deputy Shane Ross: He has forgotten about the four-year plan to which he referred. His plan went up in smoke because he spent money like there was no tomorrow. We are at least producing a plan, which is a ten-year plan that is responsible-----

Deputy Eamon Ryan: Roads, roads, roads.

Deputy Shane Ross: -----gradual and realistic. I will not listen any longer to the sort of hypocrisy I have to put up with from Deputy Ryan. He comes in here day after day and forgets that he was in government when the country went bankrupt.

Deputy Eamon Ryan: You forgot the people of Dublin.

Deputy Shane Ross: You were the great prop of Cowen and Ahern when they had magic coming out of the sky, with castles in the air that never existed and were never built.

Deputy Eamon Ryan: You are crippling this city-----

Deputy Brendan Griffin: I have heard of a goldfish memory. I have never heard of a green fish memory.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Eugene Murphy): Members, it would be good if we calmed down for the next set of questions. Do not irritate yourselves too much. Question No. 7 is grouped with Questions Nos. 18, 22-----

Deputy Colm Brophy: I have Question No. 6.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Eugene Murphy): My apologies, Deputy Brophy. My train of thought has been interfered with. Is it any wonder?

Other Questions

Sports Facilities Provision

6. **Deputy Colm Brophy** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport the status of the ongoing development of the national sports campus; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [7517/18]

Deputy Colm Brophy: Could the Minister outline the ongoing developments on the national sports campus, allowing for the Government's excellent record in investing in sport, particularly with the recent sports capital grant?

Deputy Shane Ross: I thank Deputy Brophy for injecting an element of calm into the proceedings. Deputy Ryan has gone, so I will leave him alone.

The Government, through Sport Ireland, is committed to the ongoing development of the national sports campus. Sport Ireland is currently reviewing the master plan for the campus development, in consultation with the sporting bodies. The original master plan was drafted in 2004 and there has been substantial progress since then.

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The review will be completed later this year and will be aligned with wider Government capital planning. It may also identify other possible projects which would add further value to the existing facilities, subject to available resources.

Work commenced in July 2017 on the development of Phase 2 of the National Indoor Arena and is due for completion in mid-2019. Phase 2 will see the construction of full-sized and half-sized covered synthetic pitches, primarily for soccer and rugby but capable of accommodating all field-sports, together with changing facilities, strength and conditioning facilities, offices and meeting rooms. This covered facility will provide our elite athletes and competitors in the relevant codes with year-round, always open, training facilities regardless of weather conditions, in preparation for competitive fixtures and international tournaments.

As part of the wider partnership strategy for the development of dedicated field-sport training facilities by individual national governing bodies of sport, Sport Ireland approved plans for the phased development of a high performance, all-weather cricket training facility by Cricket Ireland. The facility will comprise both synthetic and turf bowling nets with a turf outfield area. Work on the facility commenced in December 2017 with a scheduled completion date for the first phase of May 2018.

Work on new office accommodation for Sport Ireland and another national governing bodies at the National Sports Campus has commenced with completion expected in mid-2018. In addition, Sport Ireland is examining the feasibility of providing further office accommodation for national governing bodies which have expressed interest in relocating to the campus.

The Government has committed €16 million to develop a national velodrome and badminton centre at the campus in 2020 and 2021. The proposed facility will comprise a 250 metre cycling track, 12 to 16 badminton courts in the in-track area, spectator seating and ancillary facilities including office space. As the first indoor velodrome on the island, this arena will be a hugely valuable resource for our athletes and should also help to increase participation levels in both cycling and badminton.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Eugene Murphy): I thank the Minister for his reply. My apologies to Deputy Brophy. He has the floor again.

Deputy Colm Brophy: That is okay. Things are much more civilised on this question. I thank the Minister for the information in that reply. There is no question but it is a tremendous campus. The investment which has recently gone into it will be transformative. What the Minister outlined will pay great dividends for us, especially at Olympic level in the sports which will be facilitated. I thank the Minister for outlining those developments.

Deputy Shane Ross: I thank the Deputy for giving me the opportunity to raise this. It is a pleasure to do so.

Controversial and difficult decisions often have to be made in this Department but the sports campus is a living vision. I also thank Deputy Griffin who put enormous work into this project, more than myself. It is something we are very proud of. I will list some of the projects that have been developed there. During 2017, 1.095 million visits were made to the Sport Ireland national aquatic centre, cementing its position among the top pay-in visitor attractions in the State. It is the second successive year where it has broken the 1 million visitor mark and we are very hopeful that it will continue. Work on the Football Association of Ireland HQ was completed in 2007, having completed refurbishment of the former State laboratories to provide

a permanent headquarters to the FAI. Sport Ireland institute was completed in 2009 on the refurbishment of the former central meat control laboratory to provide a permanent base for the institute; and in 2013, work was completed on the refurbishment of the former marine institute for Irish Sport HQ to provide on-campus accommodation for 20 national Government bodies. There is a lot more in addition to that.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Eugene Murphy): I thank Deputy Brophy for his co-operation and also the Minister. Question No. 7 is grouped with Questions Nos. 18, 22 and 83. This means we have 18 minutes.

Sports Capital Programme Applications

7. **Deputy Pat Deering** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport the status of the re-evaluation process of the applications for sport capital funding that were unsuccessful in 2017; and the timeframes involved. [7506/18]

18. **Deputy Martin Heydon** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport his position regarding appeals and decisions with respect to the 2017 sports capital programme; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [7529/18]

22. **Deputy Maria Bailey** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport when the results on appeals with respect to the 2017 sports capital programme will issue. [7724/18]

83. **Deputy Tom Neville** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport the position regarding appeals and decisions with respect to the 2017 sports capital programme. [7538/18]

Deputy Pat Deering: At the outset, I apologise for my interruption earlier. It is no slight on the Acting Chairman.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Eugene Murphy): That is okay. The Deputy is usually very good.

Deputy Pat Deering: I know, but I was very frustrated. I am sorry about that.

I thank the Minister for the very encouraging words. Extra funding was put into the sports capital programme last year which was very welcome. Unfortunately, several groups and clubs around the country have been unsuccessful for one reason or another. I thank the Minister for introducing a system this year whereby there is an appeal process. Will the Minister say what stage this process is at and will there be extra funding for 2018?

Minister of State at the Department of Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Brendan Griffin): I propose to Questions Nos. 7, 18, 22 and 83 together.

I commend Deputies Deering, Neville, and Heydon for their interest in the sports capital programme, SPC, not only regarding the appeals process but throughout the process. I have had constant engagement with them. They are clearly very interested in the programme. I am glad to say we have an appeals process for the first time. The Minister, Deputy Ross, and I want it to be as flexible and accommodating as possible for those whose applications were found to be invalid following the allocation of the programme's funding.

In November and December last, we were very glad to be able to announce €60 million in

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funding to a record 1,800 clubs and organisations nationwide. A record number of applications was also received at 2,320. Unfortunately, around 20% of applications were invalid in 2017. However, that was substantially less than the rate of invalid applications in 2014 and 2015, which was around one third, and in 2012 when it was 48%. This was achieved following various attempts to reduce the rate of invalidation, including a streamlining of the online application process to make it simpler for applicants, and several workshops were held throughout the country prior to the scheme opening to advise applicants on the process and give them the optimum opportunity to make a valid application. We also tried to improve the validation process and the confirmation process for recipients.

Unfortunately, 20% of applications were still invalid. For the first time, we have opened an appeals process, notwithstanding there being the lowest rate of invalidation since the sports capital programme began in 1998. We have opened an appeals process to applicants who feel they were wrongly invalidated by the Department. By the closing date, 20 December 2017, we had received 148 appeals from the local programme. The deadline for the regional programme was 19 January 2018 and we are currently assessing those appeals. We hope we can announce the outcomes of those appeals in the next couple of weeks. The officials in the Department in Killarney and those here in the Department of Transport, Tourism and Sport have been working hard on this and are doing their best to bring the results as quickly as possible to those who have made appeals.

The Minister and I wish to be as flexible and accommodating as possible to applicants to the sports capital programme whose applications have been found to be invalid. We know that the vast majority of applicants are volunteers in their local communities who are trying to do the best they can for them in providing vital facilities for participation in sport by people of all ages, backgrounds, genders and ability levels. We very much value their work and are trying to assist them and serve them as much as we can, which is why we have introduced this appeals system. The reality is that it is unlikely that we can give everyone a successful outcome, but we are continually monitoring the situation to see how we can best address the issue.

We are also looking to the future. We hope to open up a new scheme in the not-too-distant future too in order to assist those who were unsuccessful here.

To clarify, in the regional application process, the top two thirds of all valid applicants received funding but for the local scheme, every valid applicant received funding, which was also a first. It is something the Minister, Deputy Ross, and myself were very keen to achieve. It was a very positive outcome. We had €26 million for the local scheme. We were able to increase that to €60 million in the budget and that enabled to us to fund every valid application. That was a good day's work. The impact of the sports capital programme is felt in every community. Since 1998, €967 million has been allocated under the programme along with €4 million under the regional programme, giving a total of €971 million for clubs and organisations. That has had a profound impact on the State's sporting infrastructure and the footprint is there for all to see. When I visit small rural communities, disadvantaged urban communities or large and small towns, I see that the sporting infrastructure has improved no end over the past 20 years and we want to build on that into the future because, apart from the immediate, direct impact this infrastructure has on the provision of sports in communities, it also has a huge role to play in the long-term health of the nation. We want to build on and advance that.

Deputy Pat Deering: I thank the Minister of State for his worthwhile reply. I am a former chairman of Carlow GAA county board and the importance of the SCP cannot be underesti-

mated. My county has received more than €2.5 million in grants since the programme was reintroduced a few years ago following its abandonment by Fianna Fáil. Was there a consistent reason for clubs being declared ineligible for funding in 2017? What criteria will be used in the re-evaluation process? The third question is the most important and I put it to both Ministers. Has a budget been set aside to fund those who will be successful on appeal?

Deputy Martin Heydon: I thank the Minister of State for his response. I acknowledge the role of both Ministers in what has been a successful round of the SCP. We are focused on the small number of clubs that were unsuccessful as opposed to the large number that were successful. However, all that information came out on the same day. We work closely with these clubs and organisations and we are aware of their hopes and ambitions. Sometimes a stroke of pen or an issue with title deeds invalidates an application and it is welcome that an appeals mechanism is being put in place, which was never available previously. It is galling for the clubs whose application has been rejected to find out on the same day as all their neighbouring clubs will get a large allocation. That puts huge pressure on local politicians and, in particular, on the volunteers in the clubs who have taken the time and effort to fill out the forms and make the application. The appeals mechanism is important and I would like detail on the criteria on which the appeals will be judged.

Deputy Tom Neville: I echo the sentiments of my colleagues. As a soccer player and someone who played GAA, I can see that something tangible has been given to rural Ireland. The allocations do not just go to clubs in small towns and villages. Clubs in small rural parishes benefit from allocations. Small rural clubs in the area I come from are struggling to survive but they have received funding. They do not have a town or village base to draw from. The effect of the SCP is tangible and can be seen in rural Ireland. The Government is giving back as the economy generates funding.

I welcome the appeals process. It is great that feedback will be given to the applicants to show them where they may have gone wrong. What will the assessment criteria be?

Acting Chairman (Deputy Eugene Murphy): I thank the Deputy for revealing his GAA past.

Deputy Tom Neville: I am still playing soccer.

Deputy Brendan Griffin: I understand the Deputy is quite the legend in the local soccer scene in Limerick. In reply to Deputy Deering's queries, the key issue regarding invalidations is title. Generally, the largest number of invalidations result from the title documents not being in order. They have to be to protect public moneys. That is why we require such stringent adherence to the title requirements. Supporting documentation such as bank statements needs to be in date and the names need to correspond with those on the application.

The appeals process will examine whether the Department was at fault in the invalidation of applications and whether there was an overinterpretation of our rules. They will be the primary reasons for adjudicating the outcomes of the appeals.

With regard to Deputy Neville's comments on the rural aspect of the SCP, the programme reaches into every community in the country, regardless of where it is, and it is one of the most pro-rural programmes administered by the State. I acknowledge the role the Minister played in the budget negotiations because, without the additional €30 million for the local programme, a cut-off point would have been necessary and we would have been unable to give funding to

every valid applicant. I reiterate that this is the first time ever that every valid applicant under the SCP local scheme has received funding. That has been allocated to communities the length and breadth of the country. The programme is an important source of funding for sports organisations.

Deputy Tom Neville: I thank the Minister of State for outlining the communication process, particularly for small rural organisations, because there was frustration when an application was invalidated in the past that there was no feedback which would allow applicants to know what way to go the next time. Every time people apply, they are educating themselves about the process. Feedback is imperative and we need to continue to have more synergy and more integrated communication between the Department and the organisations that are applying. As the Minister of State said, the people making the applications are volunteers. They do this while running their own lives, organising underage matches on a Saturday morning, raising funds, running table quizzes and so on. It is difficult and it is always the same three or four people involved in running the organisation. I welcome the appeals process.

Deputy Martin Heydon: I worked closely with a couple of clubs that lost out. In one case, it related to the title deeds. The solicitor advising the club advised that the trustees should be named in the title instead of the club. That is arbitrary. Everything else was in order. In another case, a date was left off one of the quotes for a tender. I wonder whether that is a proper ground to invalidate an application. The appeals process is, therefore, important to give clubs and the Department an opportunity to review whether there should be some flexibility. Although it is not the case anymore, during previous rounds of the programme, there was a sense that these reasons were used as a system to weed out clubs. I welcome the Minister of State's comment that it is hoped to have a future round. Will he introduce an early bird system in order that where clubs are missing something simple but vital to the application, it is flagged with them early in the process and they have the opportunity to rectify that within a month or be informed that they are out? The expectation that is generated when the process goes on for a year with clubs thinking they are included in the programme when they are not is damaging.

Deputy Pat Deering: I thank the Minister for State for his reply. It is interesting that the two main issues relate to title and banking, but it is encouraging that there will be flexibility on them. I was dealing with an application where a technical point relating to a bank statement ruled the club out under the programme. Will the Minister of State introduce a system to educate unsuccessful clubs on how to go about this process successfully, particularly where it relates to banking or title issues? Has funding been put in place for successful appeals? If so, how much?

Deputy Robert Troy: What is the timeframe for the appeals process? When will clubs know whether they are successful? Is a budget in place? Kinnegad GAA club applied last year. It previously received a grant, which meant its title deed was in order because the Department has a registered interest in the club. However, the application was invalidated, yet the Department's interest is clearly stipulated on the title.

Deputy Brendan Griffin: We are confident that we will be able to fund the successful applicants in the appeals process from within our existing budget. I would like to reduce the number of invalid applications by ensuring we avoid the submission of as many such applications as possible. This can be done by giving people an opportunity to submit further information if their applications are found to be invalid when they are first checked. It would be fair and right to give people a chance to rectify what needs to be rectified. In many cases, one page can be the

difference between invalidation and validation. The current appeals process examines whether the Department was at fault by reference to the published terms, conditions and criteria. It does not give applicants an opportunity to provide further information to validate their applications. We hope to provide the outcomes of appeals within two weeks.

I am embarking on a nationwide tour of constituencies to meet front-line volunteers in sports clubs and organisations who have previously submitted applications under the sports capital programme or intend to submit applications in the future. I want to hear their views on the programme and their feedback on what we are doing right, what we are doing wrong and what we need to build on and improve. So far, the tour has proved to be an invaluable exercise. It is an excellent way to meet volunteers and hear from them exactly what we need to be doing. I am glad to say I will be in Limerick, Carlow and Kildare the week after next. I was in Longford-Westmeath on Tuesday night and Galway the previous week. So far, the information evenings have been very well attended. We expect to hold workshops well in advance of the application date for any future programme.

The avenue that will allow further information to be provided will reduce the number of invalid applications by the maximum amount possible. There will always be some invalid applications that simply do not fit the criteria of the scheme. In cases in which not enough information or incorrect information has been provided, people should be given a second chance. That is what we intend to do in the future.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Eugene Murphy): I thank the Minister of State and the Deputies for their co-operation in dealing with this group of questions.

Industrial Relations

8. **Deputy James Lawless** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport when weekend and off-peak rail services on the Kildare line will commence through the Phoenix Park tunnel; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [7730/18]

13. **Deputy Bríd Smith** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport if he has engaged with workers' representatives in Irish Rail or Bus Éireann on the ongoing issues at those companies following recent disputes; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [7718/18]

23. **Deputy Mick Barry** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport his views on the industrial relations disputes in Irish Rail; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [7727/18]

87. **Deputy Mick Barry** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport his views on the current dispute in Irish Rail regarding driver training; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [7546/18]

Acting Chairman (Deputy Eugene Murphy): The Ceann Comhairle has given Deputy Robert Troy permission to take Question No. 8 in the name of Deputy James Lawless on the basis that he is unavoidably absent. Also, I think Deputy Mick Barry will be able to take Question No. 13 in the name of Deputy Bríd Smith, if he so wishes. I ask Deputy Robert Troy to make the 30-second introduction. The other Members will be able to make their contributions after the Minister's reply.

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Deputy Robert Troy: Does the Minister have plans to introduce weekend and off-peak services on the Kildare line through the Phoenix Park tunnel? It is fair to say the tunnel, about which we spoke earlier, has been a positive development, although its operation is very restricted. Does the Minister intend to extend its operating times?

Deputy Shane Ross: I propose to take Questions Nos. 8, 13, 23 and 87 together.

The commencement of off-peak commuter services on the Kildare line through the Phoenix Park tunnel is the subject of industrial relations discussions in Irish Rail. The services are expected to commence later this year and I am determined that they will. Industrial relations are a matter for the company and its employees. Disputes about pay or conditions can only be solved by engagement. As Deputies are aware, the State can assist through the normal industrial relations machinery. The Labour Court and the Workplace Relations Commission are the appropriate forums for discussion. I have made it clear time and again that I will not intervene in areas in which it is not appropriate for a Minister to do so.

Following two days of strike action by Iarnród Éireann staff in early November 2017, the Labour Court intervened and a recommendation of a 7.5% increase over three years was accepted on 8 December. A separate Labour Court recommendation which issued in August 2017 related only to train drivers and union claims involving past productivity gains which unions allege were never remunerated. The court recommended an award of 1.15% in full and final settlement of the issue, in return for which drivers would co-operate in the mentoring and supervision of trainee drivers in their final phase of training. Unions rejected the proposed 1.15% additional award on 10 January. The NBRU and SIPTU have commenced a ballot of their members and a result is expected on 28 February. The company and the trade unions have agreed to a referral to the Labour Court for adjudication on the training and mentoring of trainee drivers. The lack of agreement has delayed the completion of the training of new drivers and forced the company to suspend the expansion of services, including services on the Kildare line, as mentioned by Deputy Robert Troy earlier.

Regarding Bus Éireann, I have been advised that progress has been made on many parts of the 2017 Labour Court recommendation, including changes to rosters to ensure maximum rostering efficiency.

Deputy Robert Troy: The Minister has a little amnesia. In one of his earlier replies he made disparaging remarks about previous Governments. He has forgotten that he complimented Michael Fingleton on providing “a cracking set of figures” which had left “superstar” Seán FitzPatrick standing in awe.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Eugene Murphy): Will the Deputy, please, deal with the issue?

Deputy Robert Troy: In another article he wrote when he was a journalist, the Minister commended Seán FitzPatrick and said he should be Governor of the Central Bank. He continues to show his cheerleading abilities for the banks.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Eugene Murphy): Will the Deputy, please, deal with the issue?

Deputy Robert Troy: Now that he is in government, the Minister has done nothing to help the people who are suffering with tracker mortgages.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Eugene Murphy): Will the Deputy, please, resume his seat?

Deputy Robert Troy: We have learned today that the Government is planning to allow the loans of 20,000 people through Permanent TSB to be sold to vulture funds.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Eugene Murphy): I will suspend the sitting.

Deputy Robert Troy: The Minister has come into the House today to lecture us about previous Governments.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Eugene Murphy): Will the Deputy, please, resume his seat?

Deputy Robert Troy: He has been in a position to act as a member of the Government, but he has done nothing. The 20,000 families may be evicted.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Eugene Murphy): I must say I am very surprised that the Deputy is acting in this way.

Deputy Robert Troy: They are being thrown to the vulture funds, while the Minister is doing nothing.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Eugene Murphy): Will the Deputy, please, resume his seat?

Deputy Robert Troy: I am going to ask the question.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Eugene Murphy): Sit down.

Deputy Robert Troy: I am going to ask the question.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Eugene Murphy): No. The Deputy should sit down when I tell him.

Deputy Robert Troy: I will do so out of respect for the Acting Chairman.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Eugene Murphy): I am most surprised that the Deputy has not adhered to what the Chair has told him. The Minister has answered the specific question asked on which the Deputy is being allowed to deputise for Deputy James Lawless. I ask him to address the issue. He has wasted quite a lot of his time, but I will allow him to ask a supplementary question as long as he sticks to the matter before the House.

Deputy Robert Troy: It is a pity you were not so forceful when the Minister was throwing disparaging remarks across to this side of the House.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Eugene Murphy): Please, Deputy.

Deputy Brendan Griffin: The Deputy is replacing Deputy James Lawless, but he is not supposed to be lawless.

Deputy Robert Troy: I accept that the opening of the Phoenix Park tunnel is subject to industrial relations considerations, but the Minister has failed to convene the stakeholders forum. Does he accept that if he had convened it six months ago, when he promised to do so, these issues could have been addressed, negotiated and worked through? Will he confirm that enough carriages are available to increase the number of services passing through the Phoenix Park tunnel? I know from my meetings with the former CEO of Irish Rail that no additional

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carriages will come on stream at Irish Rail for a minimum of 18 months. The carriages in question will be taken from rolling stock that has been put out of service. Old carriages are being reconfigured and refurbished. No new carriages have been ordered. Even if they were ordered today, it would take a minimum of four years to deliver them.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Eugene Murphy): I ask the Minister to, please, stick to the issue in his response.

Deputy Shane Ross: I will.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Eugene Murphy): Before the Minister responds, Deputy Mick Barry must have a chance to come in.

Deputy Shane Ross: I am sorry; I will let him in first.

Deputy Mick Barry: No; my question is on pensions. It is to be taken after this question.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Eugene Murphy): No; it has been grouped.

Deputy Shane Ross: They have been grouped together.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Eugene Murphy): Deputy Mick Barry can speak on the issue of pensions now

Deputy Mick Barry: I can speak on it now.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Eugene Murphy): Yes.

Deputy Mick Barry: My question relates to the CIÉ pension fund, an issue of great concern to 10,000 CIÉ workers. The pension fund is underfunded to the tune of €80 million. The board of CIÉ has not been funding the pension fund properly since 2009, despite the fact that it is legally obliged to do so. One hour ago in this House the Minister challenged Deputy Imelda Munster to refer him to where the board of CIÉ was in defiance of the law.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Eugene Murphy): I apologise for interrupting the Deputy, but the Minister is addressing the subject matter of Question No. 23 in the Deputy's name, not the issue the Deputy is raising.

Deputy Brendan Griffin: This question relates to the Phoenix Park tunnel.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Eugene Murphy): We are taking Questions Nos. 8, 13, 23 and 87 together. Question No. 23, in the name of Deputy Mick Barry, asks the Minister to set out his views on the industrial relations disputes in Irish Rail.

Deputy Mick Barry: I tried to make it clear to the Chair that I wanted to follow up on my question on the pensions issue.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Eugene Murphy): No; it has been grouped.

Deputy Mick Barry: I am aware of that.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Eugene Murphy): These are the rules of the House. The Deputy has tabled a question on this matter. Does he wish to make a contribution?

Deputy Mick Barry: I do not.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Eugene Murphy): I call on the Minister to reply to Deputy Troy in regard to the question from Deputy Lawless.

Deputy Mick Barry: I am furious about this.

Deputy Shane Ross: I will not address it except to say that Deputy Troy should be accurate in so far as I never suggested that Seán FitzPatrick should be Governor of the Central Bank. Perhaps he will withdraw his remark in that regard.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Eugene Murphy): The Minister can take that up with Deputy Troy. I ask him to address the question.

Deputy Brendan Griffin: Deputy Troy's remark is on the record of the House.

Deputy Shane Ross: It is on the record of the House.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Eugene Murphy): I ask the Minister to answer the question.

Deputy Shane Ross: I will do so but, on a point of order, there is something that Deputy Troy should withdraw from the record of the House.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Eugene Murphy): And that is?

Deputy Shane Ross: I never suggested that Seán FitzPatrick should be Governor of the Central Bank and I ask Deputy Troy to withdraw that allegation.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Eugene Murphy): Does Deputy Troy wish to correct the record?

Deputy Robert Troy: I will double check my sources and revert on the matter.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Eugene Murphy): Does Deputy Troy wish to correct the record?

Deputy Michael McGrath: Deputy Ross lauded Seán FitzPatrick.

Deputy Shane Ross: I never suggested-----

Deputy Robert Troy: In an article written by Deputy Ross he referred to Seán FitzPatrick as a "superstar".

Acting Chairman (Deputy Eugene Murphy): Deputy Troy stated that he will check his-----

Deputy Robert Troy: In the interests of being fair to the Acting Chairman-----

Acting Chairman (Deputy Eugene Murphy): Deputy Troy should not ask me again.

Deputy Robert Troy: I wish to be of assistance-----

Acting Chairman (Deputy Eugene Murphy): Deputy Troy stated that he will check his records.

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Deputy Shane Ross: His records are incorrect but he can check them.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Eugene Murphy): I call on the Minister to answer the question that was tabled.

Deputy Shane Ross: I will be delighted to do so.

(Interruptions).

Acting Chairman (Deputy Eugene Murphy): Two Deputies who are present will not be able to ask their questions because of what is going on, which is unfair. I ask the Minister to continue.

Deputy Shane Ross: I will reply to part of what Deputy Troy said but will not reply to a contemptible allegation.

I am absolutely committed to holding the public transport stakeholder dialogue which Deputy Troy stated I failed to hold. My interest is that industrial relations should be extremely good. The Deputy is aware that during an industrial relations dispute when the unions, quite understandably, asked that I become involved and intervene, which I cannot do, I pledged to hold a public transport stakeholder dialogue on the condition that it should not take place during an industrial relations dispute because that would probably be the only subject of conversation, which is not the purpose of the dialogue. We made several attempts to establish that dialogue but, unfortunately, industrial relations disputes were ongoing. A few weeks ago, we were ready to send out invitations for the dialogue but an industrial relations dispute broke out. As soon as there is industrial peace within the relevant companies, I will send out those invitations because I am determined to progress the dialogue. The industrial relations problems in the transport companies would not necessarily be resolved but would be ameliorated by getting all parties together to discuss the future of transport. My Department is embarking on the preparation of a public transport policy statement. As part of that review, I am committed to convene and host the round-table policy discussion to which Deputy Troy referred. The objective of that event is to facilitate an open and inclusive exchange of views from interested parties on the potential challenges and competing priorities likely to arise across all aspects of public transport provision, including economic, social and environmental considerations.

Deputy Robert Troy: The Minister stated that he made several attempts to establish the dialogue but the reality is that he attempted to do so only once, which was after the conclusion of industrial action at Bus Éireann. Had the Minister acted in a swift manner at that time and convened the multi-stakeholder forum, it would have been in operation and would have prevented industrial action. However, like most projects to which he turns his hand, he put it on the long finger.

As regards the Phoenix Park tunnel, is the Minister confident there is sufficient rolling stock to roll out that service throughout the day when the industrial action concludes? As I stated, when I met the CEO of Irish Rail before Christmas he identified that there was insufficient rolling stock to introduce new services on certain lines. Does that include the Phoenix Park tunnel?

Deputy Shane Ross: I told the Deputy that it is my intention for that to happen as soon as possible. It is an operational matter for the NTA but it is a high priority.

Wild Atlantic Way Project

9. **Deputy Hildegarde Naughton** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport the details of the Wonders of the Wild Atlantic Way marketing campaign, with specific reference to the aim of highlighting ease of direct access from six British gateway cities; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [7521/18]

Deputy Hildegarde Naughton: The Minister will appreciate that the broadening of access to and the success of the Wild Atlantic Way is of vital importance to the west of Ireland and in that regard I ask him to give details on the Wonders of the Wild Atlantic Way marketing campaign.

Deputy Brendan Griffin: I thank Deputy Naughton for raising this matter and I appreciate her interest in tourism in Galway. I was glad to have joined her and the Minister of State, Deputy Kyne, recently on a tour of her constituency of Galway West to deal with a number of tourism and sport-related matters.

I thank her for her interest in the Wonders of the Wild Atlantic Way campaign. It is a new €1.8 million initiative to highlight the ease of access to the Wild Atlantic Way from six gateway cities in the UK, namely, Edinburgh, Glasgow, Manchester, Birmingham, Liverpool and London. The six arrival airports along the western seaboard are Cork, Kerry, Shannon, Donegal, City of Derry and Ireland West Airport, Knock. I have been working on this initiative with Tourism Ireland and Fáilte Ireland since assuming office and have made several trips to London to work with Tourism Ireland to develop the campaign. We are pleased to say that the campaign has been launched and is operational and will target 10 million Britons who will be reminded in a very vivid way of how close to them the Wild Atlantic Way is. The selected airports are all within two hours of the Wild Atlantic Way and we are using a number of high visibility outdoor advertising media such as billboards to highlight its proximity to those cities.

We are very keen to reverse the fall in visitor numbers from the UK to Ireland since the Brexit vote in June 2016 and this campaign will produce results. It will also help boost visitor numbers during off-peak times outside the traditional tourist seasons, which is a key challenge for many areas, in particular the peripheral parts of the country. There is a great focus on regionality and seasonality in the initiative and I hope it will produce tangible results for places such as the Galway West constituency and the entire western seaboard.

Deputy Hildegarde Naughton: I thank the Minister of State for his comprehensive reply and for visiting the Connemara greenway, which, he will agree, is a fantastic amenity. It is important that we continue to review these marketing campaigns to ensure we maximise the potential of our amenities along the Wild Atlantic Way.

Deputy Brendan Griffin: We are partnering with Classic FM in the United Kingdom, which has a listenership of 5 million people whom Fáilte Ireland and Tourism Ireland have identified as our key market in the UK and to whom we will intensively market the Wild Atlantic Way for a month. Although there was a decline of 5% in 2017 in visitors to Ireland from the UK, it is very heartening that there was an increase of 0.1% in the final quarter of 2017, which is a step in the right direction. We are very determined not just to recover the numbers from the UK coming here on holiday but also to build back to our natural base. The UK is far too important a tourism market for us to give up on it and we are determined to recover and build on previous visitor numbers. This initiative is a very strong part of that effort and I am confident

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that we can get back to our rightful place in the UK market.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Eugene Murphy): I will allow Deputy Barry to ask his next question and will permit one response from the Minister.

Deputy Mick Barry: I will then be able to respond to the Minister.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Eugene Murphy): We will decide on that depending on the time remaining. I am giving Deputy Barry the opportunity to ask his question.

Deputy Mick Barry: In order to facilitate that-----

Deputy Kevin O’Keeffe: The Acting Chairman is back-tracking.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Eugene Murphy): I am not.

Deputy Kevin O’Keeffe: Question No. 10 is part of a grouping that was already dealt with.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Eugene Murphy): No, it was not.

Deputy Kevin O’Keeffe: The Acting Chairman already dealt with it.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Eugene Murphy): I did not. The groupings are listed here. Deputy O’Keeffe is incorrect.

Pension Provisions

10. **Deputy Mick Barry** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport if the CIÉ pension scheme can be converted into an unfunded scheme as exists for employees in most statutory bodies. [7725/18]

35. **Deputy Mick Barry** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport his views on the concerns recently expressed by the unions regarding the funding of the CIÉ pension fund; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [7545/18]

Deputy Mick Barry: I ask the Minister for a statement on the position in regard to the CIÉ pension funds.

Deputy Shane Ross: I propose to take Questions Nos. 10 and 35 together.

I refer Deputy Barry to the answer given to Parliamentary Question No. 2, for which he was present. Issues in regard to the CIÉ pension scheme are primarily a matter for the CIÉ group, its employees and the trustees of the pension scheme.

12 o’clock

The employees of CIÉ group companies, Bus Átha Cliath, Bus Éireann, Iarnród Éireann, and CIÉ itself are provided pension benefits on retirement from one of two schemes – the regular wages scheme or the superannuation scheme. Both schemes are defined benefit schemes. The current CIÉ funded pension schemes are in line with other pension schemes in the private and commercial semi-State sectors which are generally funded schemes. CIÉ’s contributions to both schemes are determined on the basis of advice of the actuary and the rules of the schemes.

CIÉ has advised that it has complied with its contribution requirements under SI 323/2000 and SI 205/2010.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Eugene Murphy): Yes, Deputy Barry.

Deputy Shane Ross: Will the Acting Chairman allow me one sentence?

Acting Chairman (Deputy Eugene Murphy): We are over time.

Deputy Shane Ross: It is a specific answer to the Deputy's question. I have no plans for the CIÉ funded pension schemes to be converted into unfunded pension schemes.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Eugene Murphy): Question No. 10 was not grouped before now. It is up to the Minister to group questions, not me. Deputy Barry has one minute.

Deputy Mick Barry: The issue is the €80 million underfunding of the CIÉ pension funds, which is a matter of grave concern to 10,000 workers. Earlier the Minister challenged Deputy Munster to refer him to where the CIÉ board had been in defiance of the law. I will tell him precisely where. SI 323/2000 and SI 205/2010 require the board of CIÉ to financially support and maintain the solvency of both of the pension funds in every year, something it has been in breach of for nearly ten years now. On 20 September 2017, the CIÉ superannuation scheme 1951 pension committee failed to confirm to CIÉ's employees that it had not broken the law, SI 353/1951, in its submission of funding proposals to the Pensions Authority in 2013. This is happening on the Minister's watch. The law is being broken. These workers are being taken for a ride. What is the Minister prepared to do about it?

Acting Chairman (Deputy Eugene Murphy): I am not taking a response. The Deputy has made his case. I have been extremely fair towards him by allowing him in. *A referred reply was forwarded to the Deputy under Standing Order 42A.*

Written Answers are published on the Oireachtas website.

Leaders' Questions

Deputy Dara Calleary: Before I begin, I want to mention the appalling atrocity in which 17 young people were shot dead and 50 more injured in the Marjory Stoneman Douglas high school in Maryland in Florida. It is critical the global community does not become complacent about such heedless, needless and gun-fuelled violence. Our thoughts and prayers are with the families. A very basic right is that one's children should go to school and come home safely. We send our solidarity to the people of the area and the people of the USA as they grapple with yet another major school tragedy.

This morning, thousands of homeowners across the country are reading in the *Irish Independent* that their home loans are being put up for sale without their agreement. Permanent TSB is beginning to market a portfolio of home loans worth nearly €3 billion to a range of international investors, including those we know as vulture funds. It is estimated this could represent up to 20,000 loans. That is 20,000 families who are facing a very uncertain future this morning. I want to put that 20,000 figure into context. In the third quarter of 2017, there were just over 11,000 family home loans held by unregulated vulture funds. This one sale could nearly triple that figure in one go. The loans will be sold at less than their actual value to these vultures but

the borrowers, these families, will still have to pay every cent of the loan plus interest. Many of the potential bidders for this portfolio are already in business in Ireland and it has not been a good story. They are impossible to engage with. They do not have branches; they have call centres. They rely on anonymous call centres, which may not even be based in the State, to deal with customers. They are aggressive in dealing with borrowers and their families. They are aggressive to the point of causing considerable mental and physical stress to the people involved. They get away with it. They get away with that aggression because there is no regulation. They are accountable to nobody. The finance committee has sought in recent weeks to try to get these people to come into the committee to engage with it but virtually all of them have turned down the request of an Oireachtas committee to account for their actions. Yet, we propose to hand another 20,000 families into their clutches. Permanent TSB is only the first; other banks will follow suit. Loans involving more family homes, family farms and family businesses will be sold to the highest bidder with no regard for the families and borrowers involved.

The Government owns 75% of Permanent TSB. It is the main shareholder so it pays the piper. When was the Government made aware by Permanent TSB of its decision to put this loan portfolio up for sale in this specific manner? Did the Government at any time signal any concerns to Permanent TSB about family homes and the treatment of families in this process? What protections is the Government seeking for those families? The Minister, Deputy Donohoe's spokesperson said this morning that some banks, including Permanent TSB, were considering the sale of portfolios. What other banks, in addition to Permanent TSB, was she, and therefore the Minister, referring to?

The Tánaiste: I thank the Deputy for raising this issue. It is important to say to the House that we want to complete the repair of the banking system and ensure banks are there to support the wider public interest, which is the whole purpose of a functioning banking system within an economy, as set out in the programme for Government. Dealing with non-performing loans is one of the key priorities of the European regulator, the Single Supervisory Mechanism, SSM. While great progress has been made in the Irish banks, the SSM has made it clear that further reductions need to be made. At 28%, as of last June, Permanent TSB's non-performing loan ratio was one of the highest in the eurozone. Given the volume of borrowers who have not engaged with the bank in recent years and the number of cases where treatments were not possible or have failed, the bank has said that achieving an acceptable non-performing loan ratio will not be possible without some form of loan sales. Under the terms of the relationship framework with the bank, loan sales do not require the Minister for Finance's consent. However, the bank will be required to consult with the Minister and will do so in due course. In any loan sale, it is important to highlight that the contractual terms of borrowers, or indeed tenants, remain in place after the loan sale while the Central Bank code of conduct for mortgage arrears still applies. In other words, mortgage holders have the same rights regardless of who owns the loan book. While loan sales are regrettable, the Minister for Finance is conscious of the need for the bank to continue on a path of recovery.

The Government was briefed on this by the Minister for Finance on Tuesday at its last meeting. On the Deputy's question about other banks, Ulster Bank had a loan sale last year or 18 months ago. Of course people are concerned about who will be managing their loans and who they will be talking to or negotiating with in terms of debt. We are very conscious of that. We are also conscious of the rules that apply and there is a significant onus on the Central Bank to make sure that when loans are sold, the contractual rights of those who are linked to those loans continue to apply and we will do that.

Deputy Dara Calleary: The vulture funds are not regulated by the Central Bank. They are untouchable by the Central Bank. The Tánaiste knows it as does every Deputy here. We have been dealing with these and they have no regard for the Central Bank, the Oireachtas or the law. They are pursuing borrowers with no intent. We deal with them all here. On the notion that in due course the Government will engage with Permanent TSB, it said this morning that the loans of 20,000 families are up for grabs. Now is the time to engage with it, not in due course, to say it has to protect these families. These are not non-entities, they are not systems. They are people living in family homes the length and breadth of this island. Some may have had difficulties with their loans but they have tried to engage and that engagement will count for nothing when it goes on to one of these funds. That has been our experience in dealing with these funds.

The Tánaiste should try to put the interests of families at the front of this. The Government is obsessed with fixing the system, but it should think about families who today face such an uncertain future and it should stand up for the rights of those whose family homes are under threat as we speak.

The Tánaiste: It is difficult to take this lecture on thinking about families and loan books from Fianna Fáil given what it-----

Deputy Mattie McGrath: For God's sake.

Deputy Dara Calleary: Fine Gael has been nine years in government. It should move on.

The Tánaiste: -----was responsible for in the banking sector.

Deputy Michael McGrath: The Tánaiste has some cheek.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: The Government should deal with the banks.

Deputy Dara Calleary: What is the Government doing?

The Tánaiste: Our job as a Government is to try to fix what Fianna Fáil broke.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: The Government should put its hands up.

The Tánaiste: The tens, if not hundreds of thousands of families that have suffered as a result of that banking collapse-----

Deputy Mattie McGrath: What is the Government doing about it?

Deputy Michael McGrath: The Government is selling them down the Swanee.

The Tánaiste: -----which was directly linked to poor banking regulatory and Government policy.

Deputy Michael McGrath: By selling them to vulture funds.

The Tánaiste: That is what we have spent the past six and a half years-----

Deputy Mattie McGrath: The Government lobbied for more all the time.

The Tánaiste: We will continue to try to fix that in a way that does prioritise families, tries to protect people in their homes and gives them State-funded supports in terms of the advice they need to get through a difficult debt and finance management journey, which many families

are on.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: The Government is in bed with the banks.

The Tánaiste: We also need to ensure that the Central Bank has the power to ensure that, regardless of who owns loan books, how they are managed in respect of keeping people in their homes and protecting the public interest is at the forefront of what we are doing.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: Over the past year there has been a mammoth amount of work done to restore the political institutions in the North. Sinn Féin's focus has been doing that on the basis of respect, integrity and equality for all sections of society. When the latest round of talks was announced in January, we said that a sharp focused negotiation was required to resolve the outstanding issues of rights and equality available to everyone on this part of the island and in Britain. Sinn Féin engaged. We worked in good faith. We stretched ourselves. This time yesterday afternoon there was an accommodation with the DUP. We had the basis of a deal. The Government, based on what the Tánaiste has said since, believed there was the basis for a deal. The British Government did likewise. The DUP failed to close that deal and collapsed this process yesterday afternoon.

Notwithstanding that, these issues will not go away. I know that, the Tánaiste knows it, and the British Government and the DUP know it. These issues do not threaten anybody. They are issues of fundamental rights and rights for all do not mean fewer rights for some. Tá Sinn Féin réidh dul i mbun oibre. Ba mhaith linn dul i ngleic leis an dúshlán seo. Tá bunús réitigh ar an tábla agus tá muidne breá sásta páirt a ghlacadh ann.

Deputy McDonald and Michelle O'Neill, MLA, are in Belfast today. I urge the DUP to reflect on its position. I also encourage Fianna Fáil to reflect on its position. The Fianna Fáil leader, Deputy Martin, has trotted out the same tired so-called "two problem parties" line while also blaming both Governments. This is from the same Fianna Fáil leader who a couple of years ago called for the institutions in the North to be suspended. Now he wants to point the finger of blame at everyone involved in efforts to get the institutions back up and running, despite not lifting a finger himself. This is a disgraceful attitude which is completely at odds with the facts.

I acknowledge the Tánaiste's contribution to trying to make this work. He has been involved and engaged. It is important for us to say that. The officials have also been involved and we are very grateful for that. Sinn Féin wants the institutions back up and running and public services and rights being delivered for all. There has been much speculation this morning about what happens next. We are crystal clear on this. Direct rule is not an option. The Taoiseach said in December that the Irish Government "won't be supporting direct rule". In September the Tánaiste said there "can be no British-only direct rule". Has the Tánaiste made that position clear to the British Government?

The Tánaiste: First, I intended to say in response to Deputy Calleary that I, too, would like to extend the condolences of the Government to every US citizen in Ireland and of course to the families mourning this afternoon after the extraordinary tragedy of yesterday where 17, predominantly young, people and children lost their lives in yet another shooting. I hope and expect that the House will join me in that expression of sympathy.

Yesterday was a surprising and very disappointing development in Stormont. We and the British Government were not expecting the DUP to make the statement it did. I do not think Sinn Féin was expecting that either. That said, it is important to say that the past eight months,

particularly the past four weeks, have been a period when the two largest parties in Northern Ireland have been making significant progress to try to find accommodation with each other. I believe that last Friday we were very close to a final deal that undoubtedly required further discussion on its presentation and description this week, but the basis of that deal was there. I recognise the willingness of parties to try to compromise and to accommodate each other for the sake of Northern Ireland and for the sake of getting a devolved institution back up and running, which is what everybody and all the parties in Northern Ireland, including the DUP, have said repeatedly they want as the best form of governance. We have spent a great deal of time together trying to bring this about.

Some of the commentary this morning has been unhelpful, in particular from the Fianna Fáil leader who does not seem to understand what has been going on in Northern Ireland.

Deputy Michael McGrath: Is this a new coalition?

The Tánaiste: We have a tradition in this House, particularly between Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael, of supporting and helping each other, regardless of who is in Government, in the context of protecting the fundamentals of the Good Friday Agreement and of looking after our responsibility towards people North of the Border. If Deputy Martin has an issue with how we are taking on and performing those responsibilities, he should talk to us about it as opposed to tweeting within the hour of hearing the DUP's statement yesterday, trying to criticise two Governments which are working in partnership to try to bring about devolved government again in Northern Ireland.

Deputy Dara Calleary: The Tánaiste should listen to him.

Deputy John Brassil: He is a tweeter too.

Deputy Michael McGrath: He is pretty good at tweeting himself.

Deputy Dara Calleary: He is pretty good at tweeting quickly too.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: He likes tweeting.

Deputy Dara Calleary: The Tánaiste is pretty handy on the tweet button himself.

The Tánaiste: Not on this issue I am not. In response to Deputy Pearse Doherty's questions, we have made it clear to the British Government, in the right and appropriate way, that a move to direct rule is not where we want to be and it is not where the British Government wants to be. It is also not where the DUP wants to be, in my view, even though that is what it effectively requested yesterday. Instead, Karen Bradley, the Secretary of State, and I will work together with the parties to try to bring us back to a point where we focus on finding accommodation with each other again with a view to trying to get an executive up and running. Any alternative to that is bad news for everybody - unionism, nationalism and both Governments. We will work hard to avoid that happening.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: I acknowledge the Tánaiste's comments on the mass shooting. I believe it is the eighth instance of gun violence in schools and it is a tragic loss for all the families involved.

I also acknowledge the Tánaiste's comments here in the Dáil, in particular his statement that the Government is making its position clear to the British Government in the appropriate

way. It is important for all of us to remember that the objective is to get the institutions up and running on a sustainable basis with integrity, respect and equality at its core. Whatever about political potshots, this issue is far bigger than political parties and cheap political points. That is our aim. It is what we are committed to doing. In my view, the Government needs to stay focused, on track and steady with regard to this. We have stretched ourselves and worked hard to get the institutions back up and running. As the Tánaiste said, progress has been made. However, it is not just the case that progress had been made. An accommodation had been reached with the leadership of the DUP and a way forward on all the key issues. For our part, let me be very clear that we are open for business and want to address these issues. A basis for a deal was on the table and that is a deal we are up for. We look forward to working with the Tánaiste, the Government and other political parties in the time ahead to ensure that the institutions are back up and running on a credible and sustainable basis with equality, integrity and respect at their core.

The Tánaiste: We will try to help the Deputy do that with the other parties. If one looks at Arlene Foster's statement yesterday, one can see that there are positives in it. We need to focus on those and build on them in terms of her desire to see devolved government up and running again, but clearly there is an issue and there is a frustration within unionism and the DUP regarding Irish language issues in particular. My understanding of the accommodation that was reached is that it was one that ensures that the Irish language is not a threat to anybody but instead is part of the diversity of Northern Ireland and part of the identity of many who live there who see the Irish language as part of who they are and who do not want to force that part of who they are on anybody else. It is important that we all reach out to unionism in that regard and ensure both communities in Northern Ireland understand and respect the diversity, difference and perspective on history of the other community. That is what the past eight months has been about. We made huge progress in terms of trying to build relationships and trust between parties, particularly in the past three weeks, which is why yesterday was such a setback, but that does not mean that we should abandon those efforts now and I can promise the Deputy that we will not.

Deputy Joan Collins: Last week in response to an issue raised on Leaders' Questions about the HSE, the Taoiseach said that certainly there are no secrets in the Department of Health or the HSE and he agreed that we should have an honest debate about our health care and health funding. I disagreed with him on the first issue. There are many secrets in the health service and one of them is sitting in the Public Gallery just up there in front of the Tánaiste, so let us have an honest debate.

Aisling Corcoran is 31. She travelled here this morning with her mother Tricia from Mayo. Aisling had rods inserted when she was a young child because she had scoliosis. In 2014, the rods had to be removed as they were infected and she went on the waiting list for surgery to get rods reinserted. Aisling was under the care of a consultant orthopaedic surgeon in University Hospital Galway. I first had contact with Aisling in early 2015 as I had been raising many questions about the Our Lady's Children's Hospital in Crumlin. I will read out a few lines from a letter from the consultant in University Hospital Galway:

Aisling is one of approximately 40 people under my direct care that require major complex spinal surgery at Galway University Hospitals. She has been placed on a waiting list for some time for this to occur and in the current context of allocation of resource to me at my hospital I do not see it happening easily for the foreseeable future.

This is exactly what happened. She was transferred to a consultant in Tallaght Hospital. Her first consultation was in January 2016. Aisling was assessed and put on the surgery list as a priority. Eventually, she was given a date of 5 September 2017. She had to come up to Dublin for pre-operative assessment, scans and X-rays. It is complex surgery so Aisling and her family and friends were anxious and had to arrange travel and time off work. It was cancelled by the surgeon due to personal matters. That can happen. It was a huge letdown. The operation was rescheduled for 28 November 2017. Again, she underwent pre-operative assessment, X-rays and scans. It involved getting organised, getting her bags packed and anxiety. At the eleventh hour, the operation was again cancelled due to personal matters. This was a massive letdown mentally and physically for Aisling.

To add insult to injury, to date, the consultant has made no professional contact with or arrangement to meet Aisling despite her ringing him continuously. Every time she does so, the surgeon is out due to personal matters, his secretary has not spoken to him, he is busy between Tallaght Hospital and Our Lady's Children's Hospital in Crumlin or he is out sick. In the mean time, Aisling's curve is now 70%. There is a danger that her walk, structure and organs will be affected. Her life is on hold. She gets terrible spasms of pain and often ends up in accident and emergency departments or stays in bed for days. Aisling cannot plan her future.

Let us be honest. Is this acceptable? Does the Government stand over a health service that treats patients this way? The Minister for Health knows about this case. I brought it to his attention two weeks ago and rang his PA yesterday to say that I would be raising this issue today. I am surprised he is not here in the Chamber to meet Aisling. Aisling is seeking an honest answer and expects an honest reply.

The Tánaiste: I thank the Deputy for giving some notice of this question so that I could give her a proper answer. We have been in contact with the Minister's office and he has been in contact with the hospital involved regarding this case. I am happy to meet Aisling after Leaders' Questions if that would be helpful. We received a letter from the hospital this morning. The Deputy may not have seen it yet because it has only just been sent but it does confirm that Tallaght Hospital is committed to completing the procedure in three months' time. The Deputy asked whether we could outsource this operation or whether it could be done abroad. My understanding is that it is too complex an operation for that to be done. Undertaking the procedure involves two consultant doctors because of its complexity. One of those consultants is not available for personal reasons between now and when it can be done but we have a commitment in writing today that this procedure will take place in three months' time so I hope that will give Aisling and her family some certainty. I and, I am sure, many others in this House know what it is like to work with families whose members have scoliosis. As people grow and as their spine does not develop as it should, all sorts of other complexities emerge apart from it being extremely painful. I understand the time issues here and why they are important, which is why we are trying to provide clarity for the family and Aisling.

It is important to say that the Minister introduced a paediatric scoliosis action plan last year which is delivering real results. As a result of that action plan, 321 surgeries took place in 2017 compared with 220 in 2016. This represents a 46% increase in activity. The HSE has confirmed that it will maintain a four-month target into 2018 and beyond, which is international best practice in terms of limiting waiting times for people who need clinical care and surgery. In respect of the particular case raised by the Deputy, I am glad to confirm that Tallaght Hospital is confirming and committing to undertaking the surgery in three months' time.

Deputy Joan Collins: I also received that letter this morning at 10.38 a.m. Obviously, the hospital knew this case was going to be raised today. I do not think it is acceptable. This is an arse-covering exercise as far as I can see because the hospital had plenty of time from 29 January 2018, which was when I put in the question. The Minister for Health knew about this two weeks ago. Are we saying that patients have to wait for consultants at the consultants' call? Two operations have been cancelled while there has been no contact with the patient to date and we are talking about it taking place in three months' time. Are we saying that this consultant is the only consultant who can do this surgery? If that is the case, the HSE is in trouble. If the consultant died tomorrow, and I would not wish it on the man, what would happen then? Are we saying there is no other consultant there to do it? This is an emergency case. She is a priority. If it cannot be done here within a reasonable period of time, not three months because something else could happen in three months' time, we should bring some expert over from London or Europe to carry out this surgery. Would the Tánaiste accept waiting for four years? Would he accept his daughter walking around in severe pain for four years? It is not acceptable and the health service should be able to respond and service its patients.

The Tánaiste: The Deputy probably knows that it is not as straightforward as that, particularly with regard to very complex cases involving scoliosis. I accept that nobody should have to wait four years. I also think it is inappropriate for me to attempt to go into the medical detail of this case on the floor of the House. I am not a doctor but I am just going on the briefing I received this morning. This is a particularly complex case. It should have been dealt with before now but it was not. We are trying to ensure that it is and that the procedure can take place as quickly as possible. Given the complexity of the case, this is not an operation that can take place using the National Treatment Purchase Fund. It needs to happen here because of its complexity. It takes two consultants, and one of them is not available. Not many consultants are capable of performing-----

Deputy Joan Collins: Four years. That is just the process.

The Tánaiste Simon Coveney: I have accepted that it should have happened before now.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: The minute has expired.

The Tánaiste Simon Coveney: This is a question to which I have been asked to respond today and it has been brought to the Minister's attention this week. We have acted on that. There is a commitment this morning to ensure this procedure takes place in three months' time. We are trying to provide some certainty to the family.

Deputy Joan Collins: Can we not get somebody else to do it? The person concerned will be in the café at 1 p.m., if the Tánaiste wants to speak to her.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: We will move on to the Rural Independent Group. I call Deputy Lowry who has three minutes.

Deputy Michael Lowry: I ask this question in the context of the national procurement framework. I refer to how this is impacting on small to medium sized enterprises, SMEs, by using the example of Templemore Garda College. There are 600 people on-site serving 2,000 meals a day. Up to now, purchases were made from local suppliers. There are 31 local suppliers from across Tipperary, in places such as Templemore, Thurles, Roscrea, Nenagh and Newport, that have traditionally supplied the needs of the college. They are mostly small family businesses. They are reputable and reliable and work long hours to give exceptional service

with high standards and good quality food. It is quality food on the doorstep of the college. Until now the management of the college always dealt with these matters. It is capable, competent and efficient. For instance, it tendered locally for a butcher and got three suppliers. The management bargained, got the best price and reached agreements, and those agreements were honoured by both sides. Above all, they always came in within the budget available.

The Garda College has been put under the spotlight in a persistent prolonged period of allegations and questions concerning historical events. This has involved several appearances by Garda management before the Committee of Public Accounts, with a subsequent stream of negative publicity. There is no doubt that this exercise has been damaging to the reputation of the college. The current administration of the college has been left answering questions about practices that happened under senior personnel many years ago, most of whom have retired or moved on to different positions. The college has been unfairly undermined and the administration and its capacity to govern deliberately questioned.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: By Deputy Kelly.

Deputy Michael Lowry: Arising from this episode, changes have been introduced, in particular to the procurement policy of purchasing goods and services. All decisions regarding the purchasing of supply items to the college have been removed from local management. They will now be under the control of the Office of Government Procurement. This is a significant and alarming development for the small businesses in the Templemore area supplying the needs of the college and they have now lost out. Those people were informed last week and of 31 local suppliers, 26 have lost out. They are disillusioned, disheartened and angry. They have lost out and, effectively, have been locked out. Their services have been dismissed in an impersonal and hurtful manner. This business was the core of their businesses and jobs are threatened as a result of this decision, which does not make economic sense. Faceless people in a Dublin office are now going to be making decisions about purchasing for the kitchen in Templemore and controlling the management of the kitchen. It does not make sense and it is very damaging and unfair to the local suppliers.

Simon Coveney: I am sure the Deputies are aware that the financial practices and procedures at the Garda College in Templemore were the subject of public controversy last year and were examined in great detail by the Committee of Public Accounts. The Government has no direct role in the management of the finances of the Garda College. The Garda Commissioner is the Accounting Officer for the organisation. The Garda Vote is subject to audit by the Comptroller and Auditor General and the Committee of Public Accounts. They have taken a particularly active approach in examining matters concerning the Garda College.

I am advised the Garda College in Templemore previously had an historic practice, as the Deputy outlined, of purchasing food from local businesses. Following the public controversy last year, I understand the Committee of Public Accounts was particularly concerned the college had directly engaged local suppliers in the community rather than following correct procurement procedures. I am informed that a tendering process in accordance with the public procurement rules is now almost complete. Successful tenderers have been notified and the outcome of the tendering process is subject to a two-week cooling-off period.

I can understand the frustrations of the local businesses concerned. The communications between the Garda College and those suppliers, who may not have been successful through this tendering process, sounds like it could have been much better. However, it is important to note

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the controversy we have been through in respect of procurement procedures in Templemore and how money was allocated and spent. The Garda needs to lead by example in these things. That is why there is now strict adherence to the procurement rules in respect of how contracts are assigned. I regret that has had a negative consequence for many local businesses. However, given the history of this over the last six to eight months, it is understandable how it has developed the way it has.

Deputy Michael Lowry: This does not just affect Templemore. The tender documents from the Office of Government Procurement are complex, complicated and impossible for the normal business manager to comprehend or understand. The process is absolutely loaded in favour of the big players in the market.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: Hear, hear.

Deputy Michael Lowry: The small to medium sized enterprise has no chance under this new system.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: Get rid of it.

Deputy Michael Lowry: Contracts from the Government and State agencies are gobbled up by the multinational groups. This is not just happening with food and essential items. It is happening across every sector of demand and supply in the public sector. It includes printing, stationery, mechanical, electrical, engineering, medical, marketing and legal services. The powerful are getting all the business. They are getting bigger and bigger and the SMEs are weaker and weaker.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: Hear, hear.

Deputy Michael Lowry: Government policy is supposed to encourage and increase activity outside the cities and promote regional development and jobs. This procurement framework, which was used for Templemore, does the opposite. It centralises purchases. It makes the rich companies richer and stronger. It is gradually creating an elite number of companies that have dominance and control of the supply chain. The system is anti-small business. So much for the slogan of keeping rural Ireland alive. Across Ireland, we have Leader groups and enterprise boards giving encouragement, support and financial grants to support start-up business.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: I thank the Deputy.

Deputy Michael Lowry: However, when it comes to accessing the lucrative public sector supply chain, they are snuffed out and excluded. Tender qualification criteria need to be reviewed.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: The Tánaiste has one minute to respond.

Deputy Michael Lowry: The rules, criteria, regulations and thresholds governing the competitions make it impossible for a small organisation to be successful in trying to get into the supply chain.

Simon Coveney: On the general point of supporting SMEs and creating jobs outside of Dublin-----

Deputy Mattie McGrath: The Government is not.

Simon Coveney: -----it is worth noting that the vast majority of jobs created last year were actually created outside Dublin. Every county in the country without exception-----

Deputy Mattie McGrath: The Government is destroying jobs.

Simon Coveney: -----has seen job numbers grow. In the last budget, and subsequently, we have seen numerous initiatives to help and support SMEs. I accept that in the procurement process, depending on how the contracting and procurement process is structured, it can be difficult in a competitive environment for SMEs. There are, however, examples of many State agencies and organisations looking to break up tenders to allow SMEs and smaller operators to compete and not exclude them in respect of the qualification criteria. I do not have the details on the qualification criteria for this tendering process but perhaps I can get the Minister to follow up with Deputy Lowry.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: Where is Deputy Kelly today? It was Deputy Kelly who caused all the trouble. He is missing as usual. I apologise.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: I thought Deputy Lowry was more than capable of asking his own questions. I did not think he needed any assistance.

Questions on Promised Legislation

Deputy Dara Calleary: The Cabinet has an uncomfortable weekend ahead. There will be so much spinning tomorrow that everyone will be dizzy for the weekend when the national planning framework and the capital plan are addressed. The Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government, Deputy Eoghan Murphy, is in the Chamber. Will he confirm, since the Taoiseach was unable to do so yesterday, what the Government's plans are for legislative underpinning of the national planning framework? My question for the Tánaiste is whether it is appropriate that bodies such as the Irish Farmers Association, IBEC and the Construction Industry Federation are being briefed on the content of the two plans, while Members of this House have not yet received any information? We will depend on the outcome of the press conference tomorrow to obtain that information.

The Tánaiste: I will answer the second question. The consultation process has been ongoing on nearly three years.

Deputy Dara Calleary: There was a briefing this morning.

The Tánaiste: There have been 40 public meetings held throughout the country. The Oireachtas committee has considered the issue on numerous occasions. There was a debate in this House without the use of a guillotine on the national planning framework. The debate came to an end because we had run out of speakers. There were 42 speakers in all. There has been no shortage of consultation with other political parties and the House on getting the report right.

Deputy Dara Calleary: What about a briefing?

Deputy Mattie McGrath: The House never voted on the issue.

The Tánaiste: It is perfectly understandable that other stakeholders in Irish society, both rural and urban, also want to be a part of a discussion before the final details are published to-

morrow.

Deputy Michael Moynihan: The day before.

Deputy Dara Calleary: The Tánaiste told-----

The Tánaiste: I will let the Minister, Deputy Eoghan Murphy, deal with the legislative element.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: There should be only one question per Member. We are breaking with precedent.

Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government (Deputy Eoghan Murphy): The Taoiseach yesterday made the process involved clear. The legislation which has not yet been enacted and the spirit of which we have followed provides for consultation with the Oireachtas on the draft of the document.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: Approval.

Deputy Eoghan Murphy: That happened in November last year. The legislation also allows for consideration by the Government of the outcome of the consultation process before presenting the final document. The legislation is not yet in place, but we have followed the spirit of it. The draft legislation does not envisage the Oireachtas having a final say on the document.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: The Minister has misled the House. As he knows, the legislation does not talk about consultation but about approval by both Houses. It is disappointing that he has decided to do what the Taoiseach did in response to our questions.

The Tánaiste: It was a draft.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: The Minister should acknowledge that he has misled the House.

(Interruptions).

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Deputy Pearse Doherty to continue, without interruption.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: My question relates to the commitment in the programme for Government to introduce a range of measures to keep people in the family home. Nothing concrete has been delivered from that commitment and we learned this week that Permanent TSB is to sell thousands of family homes to vulture funds. A State-owned bank is selling off the mortgages of working families to unregulated vulture funds. Nothing has changed under the Government. It is still in bed with the vulture funds and will not regulate or tax them. Now it is feeding them. It is throwing people at their feet and washing its hands of the issue. Where is the Independent Alliance? Its members were supposed to be the so-called saviours and champions of struggling homeowners.

(Interruptions).

Deputy Pearse Doherty: Will the Minister who is the owner of Permanent TSB tell it to stop feeding the vulture funds? Will he pick up the telephone and tell Jeremy Masding that State banks are no longer allowed to sell to vulture funds? Will the Government support my legislation, the Consumer Protection (Regulation of Credit Servicing Firms) (Amendment) Bill

2017, which will, for once and for all, regulate vulture funds to ensure people will be protected from them?

Deputy Eoghan Murphy: The Deputy said I had misled the House. That is not the case.

Deputy Eoin Ó Broin: It is the case.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: It is.

Deputy Eoghan Murphy: The Deputy knows as well as I do, as does Deputy Eoin Ó Broin, that a motion was passed by both Houses of the Oireachtas in November to refer this issue to an Oireachtas joint committee for approval.

(Interruptions).

Deputy Eoghan Murphy: That happened last year.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: The Minister agreed-----

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Order, please.

Deputy Eoghan Murphy: Consultation and approval are provided for in the legislation. Deputy Pearse Doherty is wrong on this issue. The legislation is not yet in place, but we have followed the spirit of it.

Deputy Eoin Ó Broin: Surely the Minister agreed-----

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: That goes for all sides of the House.

Deputy Eoin Ó Broin: The Minister is deliberately trying to mislead the House.

Deputy Eoghan Murphy: The Deputy has received details already and knows exactly what happened here. He is trying to mislead the House.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: The Tánaiste was asked a question and delegated the Minister to answer it. I have given him that opportunity. I ask Members on all sides to listen to the Minister. I have no control over the content of his answer.

Deputy Dara Calleary: Somebody needs to have control.

Deputy Eoin Ó Broin: More is the pity, a Leas-Cheann Comhairle.

The Tánaiste: On the question of what the Government is doing to protect people and keep them in their homes, it has introduced a series of initiatives, from the Abhaile scheme to ensuring there is free legal aid and looking at a new mortgage-to-rent scheme in order that we can provide options to keep people in their homes, even when they have difficult debt issues to deal with.

Deputy Joan Burton: This morning in Dublin city it was Groundhog Day again in terms of traffic disruption due to the failure to accommodate a really important public investment in the new Luas line. I travelled on a bus to check the timings.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: The Deputy is lucky to have a bus service. We do not.

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Deputy Joan Burton: In going to work all over the city every morning people lose 20 to 30 minutes which has enormous consequences for them and business in the city. The Taoiseach is a former Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport. The Minister for Finance, Deputy Paschal Donohoe, was also Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport. Deputy Shane Ross is the current Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport.

Deputy Michael Moynihan: Who?

Deputy Mattie McGrath: Who is he?

Deputy Joan Burton: They have not addressed in any way the chaos enveloping Dublin city.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Please ask the Tánaiste or the Minister a question.

Deputy Joan Burton: The Government is simply not addressing this issue.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: We only have 15 minutes in which to deal with it.

Deputy Joan Burton: We will have a big bells and whistles event tomorrow.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Will the Deputy, please, ask a question? This is not a Second Stage debate.

Deputy Joan Burton: There will be inadequate funding of public transport. What is wrong with the Government that it cannot address the chaos in Dublin city?

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Please, Deputy. Many Deputies have questions to ask.

The Tánaiste: The Minister was here this morning to answer questions. I do not think there was a single one on Dublin-----

Deputy Joan Burton: I assure the Tánaiste that he did not give any answer.

Deputy Brendan Griffin: The Deputy was on the bus.

Deputy Joan Burton: The Government seems to be incapable of resolving the issue.

Deputy Pat Deering: The Deputy was on the bus.

The Tánaiste: I do not think the Minister was asked one question about Dublin traffic; therefore, I do not see how he would have given an answer.

Deputy Joan Burton: Deputy Robert Troy's first question was about that issue

Deputy Brendan Griffin: Others asked questions that the Deputy did not.

The Tánaiste: Parts of the ten-year capital plan and the national planning framework-----

Deputy Joan Burton: Ten years, is it?

The Tánaiste: -----are about Dublin, just like parts of that are about other parts of the country. There will be a big focus on public transport in Dublin, as the Deputy will see tomorrow.

Deputy Joan Burton: That is not an adequate answer. The Government is refusing to ad-

dress the traffic chaos in Dublin.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: There are to be no supplementary questions. I have no control over the Tánaiste's answers.

Deputy Paul Murphy: I want to ask about the National Famine Commemoration Day Bill which was passed on Second Stage over a year ago. What is the plan to progress it to Committee Stage or if there is no such plan, what is the Government's plan to implement the decision to name a day as National Famine Commemoration Day?

The Tánaiste: It is confirmed that the Bill is awaiting Committee Stage, but we do not have a set date for it. I will ask the relevant Minister to come back to the Deputy on it.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: The Government recently committed to keeping the age of digital consent at 13 years. I attended a briefing this morning by Senator Michael McDowell and Dr. Mary Aiken at which huge concerns were raised about this issue. Best international practice is to have the age set at 16 years. Dr. Aiken says that, in her 20 years of experience, she has never been as anxious or concerned about the safety of children in Ireland.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: The Deputy should address legislation which has been promised.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: It has been promised. Looking after children is a very basic duty. Some want to introduce abortion as quickly as they can. We should look after the children we have and maintain their safety in their homes and schools. It is very important to increase the age of digital consent to 16 years in line with best international practice. Why do we allow interference in their lives?

The Tánaiste: This is a complex issue which is related to child safety. In the consultation process the Government has undertaken on the issue the majority of respondents, including the Ombudsman for Children, the Internet Safety Advisory Committee and the Children's Rights Alliance, recommended that the digital age of consent be set at 13 years rather than 16. It is important to say the special rapporteur on child protection, Dr. Geoffrey Shannon, also recommended setting the age at 13 years.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: The rest of us must be wrong and they are right.

The Tánaiste: There are two separate issues. There is the protection of children online from abuse and the digital age of consent, on which we need to listen to the experts in the area.

Deputy Catherine Martin: The 2010 national pension framework stated people should be confident and secure about their expectations on retirement. The Government has committed to reforming the State pension system from 2020 onwards. Yesterday, I received an answer to a parliamentary question on this issue which states that the proposal will not be finalised until after a public consultation later this year. While I welcome the public consultation on this matter, there is much uncertainty around exactly what these changes will entail. If these changes are only finalised at the end of the 2018 or in 2019 and they are due to take effect in 2020, this leaves very little time for anybody to prepare for retirement, especially given that mandatory retirement age is still legal in Irish employment contracts. What does the Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection intend to do for the first generation of pensioners from 2020 onwards so that they can plan ahead for these changes and will not be faced with significant

shortfalls in their pension expectations with little or no time to adjust?

Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection (Deputy Regina Doherty): As set out in the response to the Deputy's parliamentary question, there will be a lengthy public consultation on this matter during which we will conduct meetings and negotiations with all of the public stakeholders and all of the people who have not yet retired. The purpose and the premise of the contributory State pension is to provide for people in their retirement. We have no intention of stripping people of what they are entitled to, but we do intend to devise a mechanism over the coming months that will be announced at the end of this, which it is hoped will be ratified by this House, and that will prepare people for what will be a fair and sustainable pension system based on the social insurance fund. Nobody should be in fear of something that has not yet been designed. We will always have a non-contributory State pension in this country to ensure that we have a minimum standard of living for people in the older years.

Deputy Eamon Scanlon: There is a commitment in the programme for Government to the Government facilitating the return to this country of 70,000 emigrants. Irish citizens are returning from America in particular but, unfortunately, on their return their US driver's licence is valid here for only one year, following which they must apply for a learner permit, undergo 12 lessons, and then only drive when accompanied by a driver with a full licence, all of which, in addition to insurance cover, is costly. This is stopping people returning to rural Ireland to create employment. It is possible for a person here who holds a Taiwanese or South Korean licence to exchange that licence for an Irish licence, yet Irish citizens returning from America with US driver licences cannot exchange them for an Irish licence.

The Tánaiste: I thank Deputy Scanlon for raising this issue, which some of his colleagues have also raised with me. We recently commissioned Indecon to compile a report on all of the potential barriers for people returning home in terms of driver licences, insurance costs, life insurance, health insurance and a range of other issues. Yesterday, I had sight of that draft report. I will bring it to Cabinet, following which it is hoped we will have an opportunity to debate it in this House. It is a really good report and it deals with the issue raised by Deputy Scanlon and with a range of other issues for people who want to come home in terms of settling in, finding employment and setting up business here. We want to encourage as many people home as we can. Ireland has the fastest growing population in the European Union, with at least an additional 50,000 people each year. It is for this reason we need a planning framework but we also need to ensure that they can come home and settle in without any disadvantages.

Deputy Declan Breathnach: On the home building finance Ireland Bill and Deputy Pearse Doherty's reference to the consumer protection Bill, I want to revert to a point raised earlier by Deputy Calleary in regard to vulture funds. As has been stated, given the State's 75% shareholding in the banks, they must listen to the Government. I am solution driven. I do not like to get involved in the blame game in terms of what happened in the past. We need to find solutions.

Deputy Regina Doherty: Deputy Breathnach does not want to get involved in it because Fianna Fáil is responsible for what happened.

Deputy Declan Breathnach: I believe there is a simple solution to the problem. We need to introduce emergency legislation immediately which places an amnesty on the sale of distressed mortgages for six months and instructs all the lending agencies to afford the local authorities the first opportunity to purchase the distressed loans to increase our housing stock. It

is a no-brainer. Members on the opposite side need to start listening.

Deputy Bernard J. Durkan: On the same subject-----

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: A number of Deputies wish to raise the same issue so their questions will be taken together and replied to with one answer.

Deputy Niall Collins: On the programme for Government commitment to protect homeowners, it is fair to say that the Government stood back from NAMA when it sold distressed loans to vulture funds and it also stood back from the non-Irish banks when they sold their distressed loan portfolios. We have seen the fallout and carnage of that in terms of how people were dealt with by the vulture funds, which are unregulated, and how they were dealt with by the credit servicing agencies. This is no longer acceptable. We need to consider the introduction of legislation to deal with the banks that are owned by the Irish people. It was the Irish people who bailed out these banks.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: I could cut off the questions.

Deputy Niall Collins: I have been contacted by people from my constituency who are engaged in farming and business and who are homeowners. It was stated earlier that we just have to step back and allow the banks to repair themselves.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: I may have to apply the 15 minute rule. The Deputy is depriving other Members.

Deputy Niall Collins: That is not acceptable anymore. We need Government legislation to block the sales of these loans.

Deputy Bernard J. Durkan: On that subject, the substance of which I have raised on numerous occasions in the past six months, this is a new issue presenting.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: It is not new.

Deputy Bernard J. Durkan: It is an issue that I believe can be resolved. I refer particularly and specifically to those who have tried to meet their mortgage repayments and have consistently kept in touch with the lending agencies. These people have broken no rules. They have ended up in this situation owing to issues arising which were outside of their control. I have been in touch with the Minister for Finance on this issue and I have drafted the skeleton of a Bill which might deal with it. The Bill seeks to amend the code of conduct, which is in the hands of the lending institutions only-----

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: A question, please.

Deputy Bernard J. Durkan: -----and as a result they are rejecting all of the options being put forward. I ask the Tánaiste to take into account the hardship likely to be caused to homeowners, small business owners and small farmers the length and breadth of this country.

Deputy Michael McGrath: The confidence and supply agreement and the programme for Government contain a clear commitment to provide greater protection for mortgage holders and SMEs whose loans have been transferred to non-regulated entities - vulture funds - but this has not happened. The reality is that the banks are looking to outsource their dirty work. They do not want to go through their loan books, engage, restructure and take whatever steps they

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need to take. They will not do that. There is no compelling reason for them to sell large loan portfolios in this way. They are under pressure from the European Central Bank to reduce their non-performing loans but they can do so by working through their loan books. The reality is the vulture funds are not regulated and they are not accountable. The Government needs to step in and prevent these loan sales.

Deputy Jackie Cahill: I am sure the Tánaiste has a strong sense of the urgency around this issue in terms of it having been raised this morning by Fianna Fáil, Sinn Féin and by members of Fine Gael. There is an urgent need to introduce legislation to protect mortgage holders, particularly families, from the vulture funds. Permanent TSB has announced that it proposes to sell off thousands of loans. AIB will follow suit. We have to do something immediately. As the people elected to protect Irish citizens if we do not do something now, by which I mean this week, to protect these people, they will be at the mercy of vulture funds who have been ringing them daily causing huge distress.

Deputy John McGuinness: The first obligation of Government is to keep its people safe. This Government is not keeping the people safe.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: Hear, hear.

Deputy John McGuinness: It is throwing them to the vulture funds.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: Hear, hear.

Deputy John McGuinness: There is only one action that will stop this.

I o'clock

It is a matter for the Government to tell the banks we own that they are not allowed to sell the mortgages in distress until a one-to-one resolution has been worked out with each and every individual affected.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: Hear, hear.

Deputy John McGuinness: Those who own the mortgages should be given an opportunity to buy at the same price that will be offered to foreign vulture funds, which were invited into this country by the Government.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: Deputy Michael Noonan.

Deputy John McGuinness: It is a disgrace that they do not appear before the finance committee to be accountable and transparent to this House. They have caused loss of life in this country and their activity has resulted in the loss of SMEs. We are now going to cause people further difficulties by giving the loans to the vulture funds. Will the Government take the action that is necessary now-----

Deputy Mattie McGrath: We will support it.

Deputy John McGuinness: -----to ensure the loans are not sold on to vulture funds? His reply earlier to Deputy Calleary was nothing short of a disgrace.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: The Tánaiste has got an idea.

The Tánaiste: I answered this question earlier. I take the genuine concerns-----

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: We cannot mix Deputies' questions with Leaders' Questions. Deputies are entitled to ask and to have answers again.

The Tánaiste: The question asked was whether the Government would be legislating to change the regulations. The home building finance Ireland Bill, which was referred to earlier, is a priority for this session. It will present an opportunity for all parties to raise concerns and make amendments and suggestions in this context. It will present an opportunity to the Minister for Finance, who has direct responsibility, to deal with this.

Deputy John McGuinness: Stop them now.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: Too little too late.

Deputy Robert Troy: The programme for Government commits to ensuring robust oversight of Ireland's overseas development aid budget. While I acknowledge the great work being carried out in so many countries by so many of our NGOs, what action has the Tánaiste taken, since the recent appalling revelations about Oxfam aid workers' activities in countries they are meant to be helping and about the real exploitation of the vulnerable have become public knowledge, to ensure no Irish NGO is facilitating or participating in exploitation of the vulnerable in the Third World? This is relevant to his Department.

The Tánaiste: First, on the revelations linked to Oxfam in a certain country, the first step I took was to check whether there was any Irish money supporting that particular element of Oxfam's work. There is not.

On the broader question of ensuring the significant sum of money allocated for overseas development aid - I hope we will be spending a lot more in the future - is spent in a way that is transparent, appropriate and safe, we have pretty rigorous systems to assess constantly how the money is spent, be it through NGOs, UN organisations or directly through governments. There have been examples of where money was not used appropriately. We shut off funding sources as a result. There is ongoing vigilance regarding overseas aid. We will continue to ensure the money is spent appropriately.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Question No. 5 is the last. It is not that I have accommodated others but that I have called them because they were dealing with the same issue.

Deputy Michael Collins: On page 50 of the programme for Government, concerning rural development and the saving of post offices, only a few weeks ago the postmaster in Ballineen post office passed away, sadly. Within a couple of weeks-----

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Is this on promised legislation?

Deputy Mattie McGrath: It is.

Deputy Michael Collins: Yes. It is in the programme for Government, on page 50. Within a couple of weeks, An Post publicised the closure of this post office, which would affect the people of Ballineen and the surrounding area. If it is shut, it will be a disaster for the town. Can the Government intervene to save this post office?

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: That is a specific question. We are now going to deal with

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every post office in the country.

Deputy Michael Collins: No. This is the one that is closing.

Deputy Margaret Murphy O'Mahony: This is very special.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: It is in the programme for Government.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: The programme for Government does not mention that post office.

Deputy Margaret Murphy O'Mahony: There is a specific reference to the post office network in the programme for Government.

In the Tánaiste's home county, County Cork, there is fear that Ballineen post office will be closed. I attended a public meeting in the town last Monday night. The passion of the community in trying to keep the post office open is unreal. I ask the Tánaiste to do his best to ensure it will remain open.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: A general answer.

The Tánaiste: The Cabinet has had detailed discussions on the issues related to the financial pressures on An Post and the need for the Government to provide support, where appropriate. We recognise the importance of the post office network across rural areas.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: Support it, so.

The Tánaiste: It is unreasonable to expect me to deal with a specific case and a specific request-----

Deputy Mattie McGrath: There is one every day.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: The Tánaiste, without interruption.

The Tánaiste Simon Coveney: -----but I will ask the relevant Minister to revert to the Deputies directly.

Roads Maintenance: Motion (Resumed) [Private Members]

The following motion was moved by Deputy Robert Troy on Tuesday, 13 February 2018:

“That Dáil Éireann:

notes:

— that Ireland's network of regional and local roads is almost 91,000 kilometres in length, accounts for 94 per cent of Ireland's road network and carries about 54 per cent of all road traffic;

— that the local and regional road network serves as the main connection between homes and businesses in much of Ireland, including Dublin and other urban areas, and plays a vital role in balanced regional economic development;

— that according to the latest National Oversight and Audit Commission, almost 70 per cent of regional roads have structural or surface defects and that ten per cent or more of local primary roads were structurally distressed in 12 local authorities;

— that well-maintained and good quality local and regional roads facilitate strong links between and among communities;

— that the Department of Transport, Tourism and Sport has, on average over the past five years, provided local councils with less than half the amount of funding that is deemed necessary to maintain roads in a steady state condition;

— that repeated incidences of flooding and other extreme weather events have caused considerable damage to many local and regional roads;

— that many local authorities have too few outdoor council staff and have not been granted sufficient resources to hire additional staff;

— the importance of the speedy delivery of the planned upgrading of our national road network, for both the economy and a more balanced spatial distribution; and

— the considerable safety concerns arising from roads with structural or surface defects and that the presence of such defects increases the frequency of road collisions;

recognises that:

— the Programme for a Partnership Government commits to increasing the capital budget for regional and local roads by approximately 50 per cent, which has yet to be delivered; and

— the Department of Transport, Tourism and Sport has estimated, in its Strategic Framework for Investment in Land Transport, that an annual investment of €580 million is required to maintain the current regional and local road network, €163 million more than has been allocated this year; and

calls on the Government to:

— significantly increase the regional and local roads budget in the context of the Capital Investment Plan 2016-2021;

— publish a full response to the findings of the National Oversight and Audit Commission, with a detailed plan to address the issues and defects identified in this report, within three months;

— review the management of funds at local authority levels to ensure that funds are being used in the most efficient and effective manner possible and provide additional administrative supports where they are needed; and

— provide biannual reports to the Houses of the Oireachtas on the implementation progress of this plan, with the first update provided no later than six months following the passing of this motion.”

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To insert the following after “calls on the Government to”:

— reinstate the Specific Improvement Grants to local authorities this year;

— prioritise, with their partners in the confidence and supply agreement, the funding of local and regional roads in Budget 2019, to ensure that the commitment made under the Programme for a Partnership Government to increase funding to local and regional roads by 50 per cent is honoured.

- (Deputy Imelda Munster)

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: I must now deal with a postponed division relating to amendment No. 1 to the motion on local and regional roads funding. On Tuesday, 13 February 2018, on the question that the amendment to the motion be agreed to, a division was claimed and in accordance with Standing Order 70(2), that division must be taken now.

Amendment put:

<i>The Dáil divided: Tá, 39; Níl, 41; Staon, 44.</i>		
<i>Tá</i>	<i>Níl</i>	<i>Stاون</i>
<i>Barry, Mick.</i>	<i>Aylward, Bobby.</i>	<i>Bailey, Maria.</i>
<i>Boyd Barrett, Richard.</i>	<i>Brassil, John.</i>	<i>Barrett, Seán.</i>
<i>Brady, John.</i>	<i>Breathnach, Declan.</i>	<i>Brophy, Colm.</i>
<i>Broughan, Thomas P.</i>	<i>Browne, James.</i>	<i>Burke, Peter.</i>
<i>Buckley, Pat.</i>	<i>Butler, Mary.</i>	<i>Byrne, Catherine.</i>
<i>Burton, Joan.</i>	<i>Byrne, Thomas.</i>	<i>Canney, Seán.</i>
<i>Connolly, Catherine.</i>	<i>Cahill, Jackie.</i>	<i>Carey, Joe.</i>
<i>Coppinger, Ruth.</i>	<i>Calleary, Dara.</i>	<i>Corcoran Kennedy, Marcella.</i>
<i>Crowe, Seán.</i>	<i>Casey, Pat.</i>	<i>Coveney, Simon.</i>
<i>Cullinane, David.</i>	<i>Cassells, Shane.</i>	<i>D’Arcy, Michael.</i>
<i>Daly, Clare.</i>	<i>Chambers, Jack.</i>	<i>Deasy, John.</i>
<i>Doherty, Pearse.</i>	<i>Chambers, Lisa.</i>	<i>Deering, Pat.</i>
<i>Ellis, Dessie.</i>	<i>Collins, Michael.</i>	<i>Doherty, Regina.</i>
<i>Ferris, Martin.</i>	<i>Collins, Niall.</i>	<i>Donohoe, Paschal.</i>
<i>Funchion, Kathleen.</i>	<i>Cowen, Barry.</i>	<i>Doyle, Andrew.</i>
<i>Healy, Seamus.</i>	<i>Curran, John.</i>	<i>Durkan, Bernard J.</i>
<i>Kelly, Alan.</i>	<i>Donnelly, Stephen S.</i>	<i>English, Damien.</i>
<i>Kenny, Gino.</i>	<i>Fleming, Sean.</i>	<i>Farrell, Alan.</i>
<i>Kenny, Martin.</i>	<i>Haughey, Seán.</i>	<i>Fitzpatrick, Peter.</i>
<i>Mitchell, Denise.</i>	<i>Kelleher, Billy.</i>	<i>Grealish, Noel.</i>
<i>Munster, Imelda.</i>	<i>Lahart, John.</i>	<i>Griffin, Brendan.</i>
<i>Murphy, Catherine.</i>	<i>MacSharry, Marc.</i>	<i>Halligan, John.</i>
<i>Murphy, Paul.</i>	<i>Martin, Catherine.</i>	<i>Harris, Simon.</i>
<i>Nolan, Carol.</i>	<i>McConalogue, Charlie.</i>	<i>Harty, Michael.</i>
<i>O’Brien, Jonathan.</i>	<i>McGrath, Mattie.</i>	<i>Heydon, Martin.</i>

<i>O'Reilly, Louise.</i>	<i>McGrath, Michael.</i>	<i>Humphreys, Heather.</i>
<i>O'Sullivan, Jan.</i>	<i>McGuinness, John.</i>	<i>Kehoe, Paul.</i>
<i>Ó Broin, Eoin.</i>	<i>Moynihan, Aindrias.</i>	<i>Kyne, Seán.</i>
<i>Ó Caoláin, Caoimhghín.</i>	<i>Moynihan, Michael.</i>	<i>Madigan, Josepha.</i>
<i>Ó Laoghaire, Donnchadh.</i>	<i>Murphy O'Mahony, Margaret.</i>	<i>McGrath, Finian.</i>
<i>Ó Snodaigh, Aengus.</i>	<i>Murphy, Eugene.</i>	<i>McHugh, Joe.</i>
<i>Penrose, Willie.</i>	<i>O'Brien, Darragh.</i>	<i>Mitchell O'Connor, Mary.</i>
<i>Pringle, Thomas.</i>	<i>O'Callaghan, Jim.</i>	<i>Moran, Kevin Boxer.</i>
<i>Quinlivan, Maurice.</i>	<i>O'Keeffe, Kevin.</i>	<i>Murphy, Dara.</i>
<i>Ryan, Brendan.</i>	<i>O'Rourke, Frank.</i>	<i>Murphy, Eoghan.</i>
<i>Shortall, Róisín.</i>	<i>Ó Cuív, Éamon.</i>	<i>Naughten, Denis.</i>
<i>Stanley, Brian.</i>	<i>Rabbitte, Anne.</i>	<i>Naughton, Hildegarde.</i>
<i>Tóibín, Peadar.</i>	<i>Ryan, Eamon.</i>	<i>Neville, Tom.</i>
<i>Wallace, Mick.</i>	<i>Scanlon, Eamon.</i>	<i>O'Connell, Kate.</i>
	<i>Smyth, Niamh.</i>	<i>O'Dowd, Fergus.</i>
	<i>Troy, Robert.</i>	<i>Ring, Michael.</i>
		<i>Rock, Noel.</i>
		<i>Ross, Shane.</i>
		<i>Stanton, David.</i>

Tellers: Tá, Deputies Aengus Ó Snodaigh and Denise Mitchell; Níl, Deputies Michael Moynihan and John Lahart.

Amendment declared lost.

Motion put and agreed to.

Topical Issue Matters

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: 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 Jonathan O'Brien - to discuss the proposed infrastructure upgrade at Tinker's Cross Roads, Mayfield, Cork; (2) Deputy Joe Carey - the retention of the medical assessment unit at Mid-Western Regional Hospital, Ennis; (3) Deputy Michael Harty - to discuss the marine rescue services at Kilkee; (4) Deputy Niamh Smyth - to discuss the protection of jobs at Kerry Foods, Carrickmacross, County Monaghan; (5) Deputy Robert Troy - to discuss the recent revelations at Oxfam; (6) Deputy Fergus O'Dowd - to discuss the availability of tonsillectomy services in Our Lady of Lourdes Hospital, Drogheda; (7) Deputy Mary Butler - to discuss the unique south-eastern model in residential care homes; (8) Deputy Joan Burton - to discuss ongoing traffic congestion involving the Luas cross-city route; (9) Deputy Louise O'Reilly - to discuss a code of practice for advertising food and beverages; (10) Deputy James Browne - the need to discuss the shortage of respite care places in County Wexford; (11) Deputy Eugene Murphy - the lack of ambulance cover in west Roscommon; (12) Deputy Joan Collins - to discuss the urgent matter of community employment scheme workers hosted by the Guinness Athletic Union in Dublin 12 not receiving payment for the third week in a row, Guin-

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ness Athletic Union no longer operating as a host organisation and the severe disruption this is causing for the outreach projects; (13) Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire - delays in driving tests at Sarsfield Road in Cork; (14) Deputies John Lahart, John Curran, Jack Chambers, Seán Haughey, Darragh O'Brien, Jim O'Callaghan and Brian Stanley - soaring rent prices in Dublin; (15) Deputy Clare Daly - to discuss the shortage of primary school places in the Swords area; and (16) Deputy Mick Wallace - to discuss the restriction on the pupil intake to be imposed from September 2018 on New Ross Educate Together national school, County Wexford.

The matters raised by Deputies Jonathan O'Brien, Michael Harty, Joe Carey and Eugene Murphy have been selected for discussion.

Sitting suspended at 1.20 p.m. and resumed at 2 p.m.

Employment (Miscellaneous Provisions) Bill 2017: Second Stage (Resumed)

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

An Ceann Comhairle: Deputy Bernard Durkan was in possession when the debate adjourned and I understand he has concluded his contribution.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: Precarious employment is an extremely important issue and the Government's move in the direction of addressing it is long overdue. Precarious employment is a plague affecting large numbers of workers and one of the most terrible consequences of three decades of neoliberal policy under the guise of flexibility and competitiveness, two of the favourite words of employers. As a result, the conditions of employment for hundreds of thousands of workers have been severely degraded. Once upon a time, workers could expect some employment security and some sense of what their working week or month would look like. Nowadays, hundreds of thousands of workers are in temporary employment and do not know from week to week or month to month what hours they will work and, as a consequence, what earnings they will have. This has serious financial and personal implications for the workers in question, many of whom are women with families who suffer particularly from this type of precarious employment.

Precarious employment has serious impacts on family life and workers' ability to plan and have a life because they do not know how many hours they will work or how much they will earn. For example, the notion of securing a mortgage has become a complete fantasy for large numbers of workers owing to the precarious nature of their employment and the remuneration they may receive for it. In any event, low pay also plagues the sectors in which precarious employment is rife. Approximately 20% of workers in this country are low paid and working in terrible, precarious jobs.

To put some perspective on the claims of economic recovery and the often trumpeted figures about employment, for which the Government slaps itself on the back, despite the increase in employment in recent years, there are now 109,000 fewer permanent jobs than there were in 2008. The ongoing process of implementing neoliberal policy in this country, which has been largely championed by the Fine Gael and Fianna Fáil parties for three decades, intensified during the period of austerity. For neoliberals, the crash was as if all their birthdays had arrived at once because the economic downturn provided employers with an excuse to ramp up precarious employment. Workers were so desperate for employment that employers had the whip hand

and were able to employ people under precarious conditions. The quality of life of hundreds of thousands of low paid workers is diminished greatly by having to put up with these conditions.

It is worth noting the deterioration in the quality of life for workers in precarious employments when compared with the conditions enjoyed by previous generations of workers who could expect to be able to put a roof over their heads, make plans in life and obtain a pension. All of these expectations have been degraded for large numbers of workers. At the same time, many people have done very well because profits have increased significantly as a result of this development in the past decade.

It is not the case that we all felt the same pain in the past ten years. With the exception of 2008, employers have been doing better under austerity. The economic collapse worked for employers and the rich because it gave them the whip hand and allowed them to drive up profits. Since 2008, profits have gone through the roof. As I have noted several times, wealth inequality has grown dramatically and is linked to the downgrading of conditions for workers and a consequent boost of profits for employers. Another indicator of how the balance has shifted in favour of employers to the detriment of workers is that while wages accounted for approximately 60% of national income in the 1970s, with profits and shares accounting for the remaining 40%, the inverse is now the case. In Ireland, this reversal has been more significant than in any other country in Europe, with 60% of the national cake currently going to employers in the form of profits and only 40% going to workers. There has been a dramatic shift of wealth from the have-nots to the haves in recent decades, as reflected in the astonishing rise in wealth inequality in society.

On the face of it, the Bill attempts to address some aspects of precarious employment. The Irish Congress of Trade Unions sent a letter to the Minister after it published a document on precarious work. In its executive summary, ICTU makes a number of demands for dealing with precarious employment, including the provision of statements of core conditions and compensation for employees who are called in to work to find they are not given hours of work, measures to deal with banded hours and the imposition of penalties on employers who fail to comply with legal requirements. On the face of it, the Government has responded to the lobbying of the trade union movement but in looking at the detail, we can see the Government has diluted the propositions to the point where the Bill will be barely effective at all in many circumstances.

We can give some examples of how the Government has diluted the proposals. The bands proposed by the Government in the Bill are so wide as to give enormous flexibility to employers to continue imposing a great deal of precariousness on affected workers. The first band is between one and ten hours and there is a hell of a difference between one hour and nine hours. The next band is between 11 and 24 hours; if a contract indicates a person will generally work 12 hours in a week but that person consistently works 23 hours per week, under the Government's proposals that worker will not move into a different band and will have no claim to say the employer is being unfair. This can be systematically abused. In contrast, Deputy Cullinane's Bill on banded hours had several more bands. If the hours people were asked to work by the employer varied on a regular basis across the narrower bands, the worker could claim to move to a different band and for this to be acknowledged as a condition of employment. This suits the employers and does not really change much in what they will do in abusing the position of many vulnerable workers.

If a person is trying to plan life around kids, family and time off, having to do everything people have to do, with the variation in a working pattern up to 13 hours in a week, it can have

a huge impact. If that happens on a regular basis, there would potentially be enormous consequences for family, earnings and all the knock-on effects. This could happen systematically even if this legislation is passed, so it is not good enough and must be substantially amended.

There are similar concerns with the compensation for workers called in who do not receive work. The University of Limerick, which did the study that is supposed to inform this legislation, proposed that if a person was called in but did not get work, he or she would get the normal wage for that employment for three hours. Under this legislation, the payment rate will be the national minimum wage, which is substantially less than the payment that could be due in many cases, unless it is covered by an employment regulation order. Many types of employment are not covered by those orders, so that is not good enough. The Government must explain why it has diluted and downgraded compensation that would accrue to employees called in under those circumstances.

The provision of contracts and statements of terms and conditions within five days is an improvement but there is a big problem that is fundamental to this Bill. Workers' rights and employment legislation are as we speak being flouted left, right and centre. Even the existing inadequate and weak legislation is being flouted all over the place. I mentioned the Boland's Mills site, which is an iconic site connected to the 1916 Rising, which is seeing enormous redevelopment. The main contractor there will also be doing the new national children's hospital. I have heard reports of workers, many but not all of them immigrant workers, getting paid dramatically less than the sectoral rate for the area by a subcontractor. These workers feel very vulnerable and do not know their rights and entitlements. Part of the problem is that the main contractor can wash its hands of this as a subcontractor has been brought in. The subcontractor keeps changing name and it has operated under several guises. Those workers are very vulnerable and frightened and they do not know their rights. They are being underpaid dramatically and they are not getting payslips.

I know this because an Irish person employed as a foreman on that site complained about the underpayment of these workers and the fact that many workers, including himself, were not getting payslips. He said he would not put up with it unless something was done. He started a protest but nothing has been done.

Deputy Regina Doherty: To whom did he complain?

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: He complained to the employer. That is the problem. Unless there will be a very proactive move by the authorities, with inspections and raids happening on a much greater level, all the legislation in the world will make no difference. A person is legally entitled to a payslip but workers are not getting them. Such practice is rampant in the construction industry. There is also the problem of agencies, as it means there is a buffer for the main contractor, which might be responsible for big sites. This legislation does not deal with agencies abusing people at will with respect to hours of employment. If anybody kicks up about such issues, he or she is gone and will not get work again for months. What will we do about this?

The final demand of the Irish Congress of Trade Unions, ICTU, is not included in the legislation. I have raised it, along with many others here, time and again. It is bogus self-employment, which is rampant in construction and other areas. There are serious allegations about this happening in the film industry and we have been getting reports similar to what we have received week in, week out, month in, month out, year in and year out from construction workers for the

past decade. If workers walk on to a site and ask for PAYE employment, they can forget it as they will be shown the door. They either agree to being classified as subcontractors or they can forget it. The employer does not want to have any responsibility or give sick or holiday pay, or the various entitlements a person might have in direct employment.

It is very obviously the case that these workers are not entrepreneurs. The numbers of supposed entrepreneurs in construction are ridiculous, with the latest figures at approximately 60,000 from the total construction work force of approximately 130,000. Nearly half of construction workers in this country seem to be entrepreneurs, including the labourers. It is an absolute joke. To be classified as self-employed and an entrepreneur, a series of conditions must be met but they do not apply to these workers. Nobody is independently assessing this and instead the employer can go online and classify people as self-employed. That is the way it works. The onus is put on the worker again in this respect. When I mention the problem in this House I am told a worker can get on to the Revenue Commissioners and complain but if they do this, they will get sacked or blacklisted and never get on a site again. That is what happens. We now see allegations of similar carry-on in the film industry. None of it is dealt with in the legislation.

We will support the passage of the Bill because anything is better than nothing but I do not believe the suggestion that it will substantially address the plague of precarious employment which is affecting hundreds of thousands of workers. There are too many get-out clauses. It looks to me as if the employers have lobbied the Government intensively to dilute the legislation to ensure that it is easy for them to get around it. This is not good enough because, to return to my original point, profits have gone through the roof in every single sector where precarious and temporary employment and bogus self-employment are rampant. These are the sectors that have seen dramatic increases in profitability. Precarious employment is good for some but it is very bad for huge numbers of workers, and employers are lobbying and having an influence on the framing of this legislation which the Government claimed would address the issue of precarity.

We will seek to amend the Bill and I suspect many others will too. I welcome that we are at least debating it but we have to go a hell of a lot further than this if we are to address the problem.

In my last 43 seconds, I will raise one other matter about the Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection, which is the appeals process. Take, for example, the Rhatigan dispute where the workers had a ruling in their favour. Rhatigan appealed it and the matter went into the social welfare appeals office where the appeal hearing was a kangaroo court.

Deputy Regina Doherty: Not true.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: It was a kangaroo court. Rhatigan came in lawyered up-

Deputy Regina Doherty: I am sorry but I cannot let the Deputy say that.

An Ceann Comhairle: The Deputy is getting into an area that is not appropriate for the floor of the House.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: That is the report I got from workers.

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Deputy Regina Doherty: It is not true.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: We will debate it again but that is the report I got from the workers.

An Ceann Comhairle: I thank the Deputy for his contribution but that area is not appropriate to this debate. I call Deputy Mattie McGrath.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: I am pleased to speak on the Industrial Development (Amendment) Bill 2018. I have to declare that I am a long-standing employer although I am an employee as well. Listening to my good friend and colleague, Deputy Boyd Barrett, we are an endangered species. It is not safe to be an employer any more because we all should be locked up and the key thrown away. I am not having a go at Deputy Boyd Barrett but there are an awful lot of good employers and decent self-employed small business people who trudge daily and deal with all the regulations pertaining to their particular occupation. I cannot envisage the situation where, as the Deputy said, it is only a matter of going online and registering as self-employed. A person has to have a certain turnover and legitimate employment records in the business. He or she also must apply to the Revenue to register for VAT and everything else. I cannot imagine that it is like getting a lucky bag in a shop or online to become self-employed. That is not true at all. I agree with some parts of his comments, however, on some of the bigger companies and the subcontracted work where there might be bullying and intimidation going on, with people being forced to be self-employed in some areas.

An Ceann Comhairle: I must interrupt the Deputy. My apologies.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: The injustice.

An Ceann Comhairle: The Deputy is so prodigious in his output, however, that this is his second contribution on the Employment (Miscellaneous) Provisions Bill 2017.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: Gabh mo leithscéal.

An Ceann Comhairle: Apparently the Deputy spoke for 20 minutes last evening on it. While we would love to hear him again, Standing Orders do not allow it.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: My mistake.

An Ceann Comhairle: Not to worry. There was no harm done. We will move on to Deputy Burton.

Deputy Joan Burton: I understood Deputy Mattie McGrath was going to speak for a while.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: I would have if I was let.

Deputy Joan Burton: I would be happy to hear him speak but the Ceann Comhairle is in charge of the House.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: And he is right.

Deputy Joan Burton: The Employment (Miscellaneous) Provisions Bill 2017 is inadequate to address what is one of the most difficult and dreadful developments of our age, which is the continuing expansion and growth of different forms of precarious work. To be perfectly honest, this area is becoming like that of tax legislation. In other words, people in HR depart-

ments continually review and change work arrangements to meet, if one likes, the system of labour and wage regulation. The Government needs to acknowledge and wake up to that fact.

During my time in government, one of the first things I did was raise the minimum wage by €1 per hour, reversing the reduction introduced by Fianna Fáil and the Green Party at the height of the crisis. When I was Tánaiste, I got the agreement of Fine Gael to bring in the Low Pay Commission and to introduce the only labour legislation throughout the EU, and certainly in any of the countries which had experienced economic collapses such as Ireland's, to give additional powers to trade unions and strengthen provision in the area of collective bargaining.

The concept of what a job is and what is work is important. We all know how important work is to people and how important it is that they can get work. One of the very good things of recent years is the fact that, notwithstanding the 330,000 jobs lost at the height of the crisis, many people have been able to return to work. In some cases, people have set up their own businesses. All of that has been positive. The concept of work, however, is that a person will do work which is satisfying and important to him or her or gives experience so that the person can go on to do those things that he or she wants to do. It is important to people's lives and well-being. Furthermore, if people work hard, they can support themselves and their family. Through their PRSI contributions and taxation, they can collectively provide for a social insurance and social welfare system that will provide for income support in periods of unemployment and for pension entitlement on retirement. That is the way the social democratic model works and it has worked well in countries such as Germany, Austria and those in Scandinavia. It has also worked well here for generations.

The other key element is collective bargaining, but the Fine Gael Party is highly adverse to it. For the social democratic model to work, it must include collective bargaining. Fine Gael shies away from collective bargaining, however, and we can see that running through this legislation. Although the Bill seeks to improve on the serious flaws and gaps in current legislation, it simply does not go far enough, and this is not in our interests as a country. We want to attract more development, employment, business and foreign direct investment. We also want to develop Ireland in a way which provides employment and all of the different things we want in our society, whether that is education, health care, public development or public works.

When I was a Minister, the Irish Congress of Trade Unions brought to my attention issues relating to this area, including the issue of bogus self-employment. After a long wait and continuing questioning on my part of the Taoiseach on the matter, the report was finally published in the past week or two. It was approximately ten days ago. Lo and behold, there was no debate or discussion. In two tables, however, the report showed that there was a loss to the Exchequer of approximately €60 million in tax and social welfare revenue as a consequence of disguised or bogus self-employment, or whatever one might want to call it. That is part of the problem. There are very few days a Government will sniff at recovering an extra €60 million in either PRSI or taxation because that money would go into the collective to fund our system and give people assurance. Will the Minister arrange a debate in the House on the report on bogus self-employment? Why is the Government looking this gift horse of €60 million in tax and social welfare receipts in the mouth? It deserves a debate. The Minister made a short comment when the report was released but it received almost no media attention.

From my ministerial experience in this area over five and a half years, there are two sectors of workers who face particular difficulties, namely, younger workers, particularly those under 25, and older workers, particularly those over 55. If they have had spells of unemployment,

be they in an urban or in a rural area, they may find it extremely difficult to get a job. They are extremely vulnerable when it comes to precarious work. We need to take a sectoral approach to this and provide for a mechanism over and above the Low Pay Commission. I put forward this in the previous Government and Fine Gael agreed to it on a limited basis. I also appointed my colleague, Senator Ged Nash, as Minister of State in the then Department of Jobs, Enterprise and Innovation, to work on the required legislation and on which he did a good job. As this field is evolving so rapidly, however, it is difficult to keep up with the development of the structures, which continuously outrun and outwit the formal structure.

One of the best protections against this would be for the Minister to work in partnership with both employers and with the representatives of employees, particularly the trade unions. Including in this legislation a framework for an ongoing social partnership would be the greatest guarantee for the Minister and the Government, ensuring they would be advised and informed of new mechanisms emerging. This was traditional but disappeared at the height of the crisis, partly because it got a bad name. When I was in government, I argued strongly for a social dialogue, which was essentially the beginning of a return to social partnership. If we really want to tackle this issue, we need more institutional development.

Our society has a difficulty with certain kinds of jobs where the skills of our people are now being intensely sought internationally. We sorted this issue out with primary school teachers when the Labour Party was in government. However, we have researchers and teachers in colleges and universities whose skills are highly sought internationally. Our society invested in their education and in the development of their PhDs and other postgraduate qualifications. However, they have no proper employment contract structure or security. The bands set out by the Minister are too wide. Far more bands are needed to ensure it is possible to address different situations where, for periods, the amount of work available might be relatively small. However, as the person builds up in a job, there may be a callous disregard for that individual's right to employment. Accordingly, they may never get a permanent contract.

What are the social implications of this? If a skilled university researcher, qualified secondary school teacher or third level librarian is not able to get an actual contract of employment, it may mean that when they want to get a mortgage, they have no status of employment. In turn, this will prevent them from buying a home for themselves or their family. That is tearing the social fabric of the society apart. The Minister needs to give thought as to how she will strengthen the power of employers, employer organisations and the trade unions to have a social partnership which will seek to address these issues. As I said, the idea of social partnership is deeply unfashionable with Fine Gael. However, without that kind of structure, it is impossible to keep up with what is happening in the employment field.

Young people, those over 55 and those who live in jobless households, if they cannot get part-time or full-time employment, are more likely to be at risk of poverty than other groups. The economist, Joseph Stiglitz, who has written extensively on poverty, acknowledges the European model of social welfare and supports in Ireland has prevented the kind of poverty levels one sees in societies, such as Greece, where the social welfare system is either limited or non-existent over large elements of the economy. Similarly in the United States, if one loses employment, one loses medical insurance and so forth. In turn, as there is no replacement, one can sink rapidly down to losing one's home and so on. Joseph Stiglitz commends the European model, which we have here. While we need to strengthen it, all the longitudinal surveys showed that, notwithstanding our economic crash, our social welfare system saved significant numbers of people from falling into poverty. Joseph Stiglitz acknowledged this in his writings

and when he visited UCD.

Is the Minister open to amending the Bill to ensure strengthening of the social welfare and work protection framework in order that a job is treated in law as employment and the worker acquires rights? Is she prepared to address the bogus self-employment issue in which she is losing out on €50 million a year? The Labour Party will be happy to work with the Minister to achieve these two measures.

Notwithstanding all the work already done in providing younger people with opportunities around apprenticeships, little progress has been made by this Government. Apprenticeship numbers are staggeringly low. While I welcome the new apprenticeships in finance and insurance, the old model in the construction trade, which is returning to high levels of activity, whereby plasterers and so on used to take on one, two or three apprentices, is no longer available with small employers. Many young people would love to take up apprenticeships as sparks, plumbers or so on in construction or the motor trade, but that option is not available to them because the structure of those industries means that the small traditional employers who used to provide apprenticeships can no longer do so. Larger companies can, however. During my time, we got the ESB to restart recruiting electrical apprentices. Many large companies, including the one doing the work on Leinster House, are employing a large number of apprentices, which is great. If we keep building at this pace, however, and in light of all the new housing that we will build, we will not have enough people to do the skilled work. The Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government knows this. As such, the Government must think afresh about how to get young people who are interested in a range of trades into good apprenticeships and how to give them the opportunity to get qualifications and well-paid, regulated jobs with good terms and conditions, as provided for in the legislation.

The Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection should set up a monitoring unit in her Department if one is not already there. Since my time, employment has moved into her Department. Just as is the case with other areas of activity that are examined, there should be a unit that monitors continuously whether there are negative developments in respect of workers' rights. When I entered the Department, one of the tragedies of the time was that so many building companies had collapsed and gone into liquidation. The then Department of Jobs, Enterprise and Innovation was not able to cope with the level of demand for redundancy payments. The then Department of Social Protection took that function over, built platforms and ensured that people received their redundancy payments within a relatively short period. If a monitoring unit was established in conjunction with social partnerships, given that this is a social partnership model requirement, it would be possible to examine those areas where employment patterns do not allow people to earn a decent living wage, have proper terms and conditions and have access to the social welfare system in a way that would grant them entitlements in the event of experiencing periods of unemployment or other difficulties for which they would need social welfare support.

If-and-when contracts are not properly covered in this legislation, but they should be. The bands are too few and too wide. The House should be able to agree that this matter can be addressed immediately in the form of an amendment. The legislation will be no good if it does not help the person who is in an exploitative situation and needs proper terms and conditions. When replying, the Minister might be in a position to make those commitments for the benefit of workers throughout the country.

I see people cycling around Dublin on Deliveroo bikes and carrying large boxes. I was a

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student and I worked in all kinds of jobs down the years. We have all done that, but to think that grown men and women - men, in particular - might spend large parts of their lives as human carriers on the streets of our cities without having proper terms and conditions is sad.

Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection (Deputy Regina Doherty): I appreciate the views that have been expressed today and yesterday. They have been useful for me and my officials, and I am looking forward to what will obviously be a humdinger of a debate when we get to Committee Stage.

Everyone inside and outside the House will agree that every worker and, indeed, human being has the right to be treated with dignity and respect. We have a right to be respected by one another. Most importantly in a work situation, we have the right to be respected by our employers. That is why this and the previous Government - yesterday, I mentioned Senator Nash and the Ministers of State, Deputies Breen and Mitchell O'Connor, as well as the tremendous amount of work and consultation that the officials have undertaken in the past three years - worked to introduce this legislation. We want to ensure that we have copper-fastened in our law the dignity and respect that we should adhere to in society.

I will revisit a number of the points that were made during the debate. I value Deputy Burton's opinion, given that she spent five years in this Department, although it is now slightly different. She has an intense interest in this area, not least because of her political ideology. Like some other Deputies, however, she suggested that we were doing nothing to protect people on if-and-when contracts. That is not correct. The banded hours provision will apply to people on if-and-when contracts so that when they have worked an average number of hours over the 18-month reference period, they will be entitled to be placed on a band of hours that reflects the reality of the hours they have worked during that time.

The amendment of the Terms of Employment (Information) Act will require an employer to inform employees by the fifth day after commencing their employment with that company what the employer reasonably expects the normal length of their working day and working week to be. An established intention of what their work will be will be given to them. An employer will be required to state the expected duration of the contract and whether it is a temporary or fixed term.

Employees on if-and-when contracts will benefit from the new minimum compensation provisions where they are given notice of work but, after they show up, they do not get that work. They will also benefit from the anti-penalisation provisions, in that, if an employer penalises an employee for raising a query or issue or for exercising any of his or her rights under existing laws, he or she will be entitled to pursue the matter with the Workplace Relations Commission.

Deputy Penrose stated that a person on an if-and-when contract would have no recourse to employment rights bodies. With respect, that is not true. It is well established in the jurisprudence of the constitutional courts and the Labour Court that they will look behind the written terms of a contract to establish the true nature of an arrangement. The particular concern that Deputy Penrose raised was addressed in the Labour Court in a case, entitled Ticketline Trading as Ticketmaster and Sarah Mullen. The court accepted that, while the written contract of employment was that of an if-and-when type with no mutuality of obligation, it was operated on the basis that the employee was required to be available for work at all times and, therefore, was entitled to the protections of the Organisation of Work Time Act, in particular the compensations provided for under section 18.

Regarding the prohibition of zero-hour contracts, while we understand and agree with the University of Limerick, UL, that such contracts are thankfully not prevalent in Ireland, we want to ensure that it stays that way. Prohibiting such contracts except in some very limited and specific circumstances will help to achieve this goal. However, it is important for everyone to understand that we are not saying in this Bill that all casual or flexible working arrangements are wrong and should be stopped. It is worth recalling that the UL study acknowledged that the flexibility offered by genuine casual work can be mutually beneficial for employees and employers in some cases. In certain sectors, such arrangements can help employers to satisfy peak demands and fill staffing gaps on a short-term basis. It has often been mentioned in this debate that flexible arrangements only suit the employer. In some cases they do suit the employee, for example, students working during holiday periods, individuals who need to work around caring responsibilities for children or older people, or semi-retired persons who might only want to work hours that suit them on a flexible basis. We have to acknowledge that only a very small section of the community are engaged in casual work and that it works for them. While it has also been suggested employers will deliberately miscategorise employees as casual, it is important to remember that section 18 of the Organisation of Working Time Act 1997 refers to work of a casual nature but does not define it. In the 20 years since it was enacted, it has not led to a regulatory problem with employers incorrectly categorising employees as casual. The fears expressed about the Bill not specifically categorising or defining casual work are probably unfounded. Like all legislation, if, 12 months after it is introduced, it is not doing exactly what it says on the tin, we can reflect on it. It is not good practice to include definitions in legislation when the plain, ordinary meaning of a word is capable of being understood by all of the bodies responsible for adjudicating on it. The WRC and the Labour Court are capable of examining all of the circumstances of particular cases and making an appropriate judgment on whether a particular arrangement is genuinely casual, as they have been doing for the past 20 years.

Regarding the penalisation provisions, it is very important that all employees feel safe in order that they can exercise their employment rights without fear of being punished for doing so. It is worth bearing in mind that the penalisation provisions included in the Terms of Employment (Information) Act 1994 were broadly drafted to cover a wide range of scenarios in which an employee could be adversely treated. The relevant provisions mirror all of those in other employment legislation and are core to the Bill, the new banded hours provisions in particular. Under the banded hours provisions, if an employer reduces an employee's working hours or even threatens to do so because the employee sought to exercise his or her right, the employee can pursue a penalisation case to the WRC. He or she would be awarded anything up to two year's salary if the adjudication officer finds on the balance of probabilities that he or she was penalised for invoking his or her right under the Organisation of Working Time Act.

A number of Deputies have expressed concern that employees will have to wait 18 months post-enactment of the Bill to benefit from the banded hours provisions. I want to be forceful on this issue. They have potentially misunderstood the Bill. Perhaps they have read it, but their concerns are misplaced. I assure everybody that that is not what we intend. I draw attention to the proposed new section 18A(14) which specifically states a continuous period of employment before the commencement of the section will be reckonable as the reference period of the look-back period. In other words, if the section is commenced on 1 July 2018, an employee who commenced work on 1 January 2017 will be entitled from 1 July 2018 to seek to have a band of hours that reflects the 18 month period before the day it was enacted. Last night Deputies raised concerns that if we did not enact the Bill until the summer, people would have to wait for a further 18 months. That is not the case and it certainly is not our intention. Almost every

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Deputy who spoke last night and today said the 18-month reference period was too long for the banded hours provisions. It is fair to say we will be happy to look at the issues raised when we reach the Committee Stage amendments.

There are a number of points I would like to make. It is important that the look-back period and the length of time an employee is statutorily entitled to stay in a band of hours remain the same. If we are to look back 18 months, the time the employee needs to stay in the band of hours is the same. If people want to reduce it to six months, as was suggested last night, we would only be providing security for six months. We need to reflect very carefully and come up with something that is simple. It is also important that we use an easy divisor; therefore, 13 months as a reference period might not be desirable from that point of view. Nevertheless, we are genuinely willing and open to considering a reference period of 15 months. Deputy Róisín Shortall reminded us last night that the Joint Committee on Business, Enterprise and Innovation had recommended 12 months as the reference period, but it would not work because it would not reflect real seasonality.

Several speakers expressed concern about the widths of the bands. I understand their concerns and their points were well made. I reiterate that the bands should be sufficiently broad to allow a reasonable degree of flexibility in managing what will be the new banded hours arrangements. Wherever we finally pitch them, they will have to be beneficial to both employees and employers. Many of the Deputies who have spoken are left of centre, but we have to recognise that if we do not have employers, we will not have employees. The balance we need to strike in this legislation has to benefit both sides. A greater number of bands with a narrower range of hours would be more difficult to manage, but we will look at the issue on Committee Stage. We also recognise that some companies that have bargained collectively on banded hours arrangements may already have a higher number of bands with a narrower range of hours in each band, which works for particular sectors of employment. We certainly do not want to interfere with these arrangements because they work very well for those sectors, but we have to recognise that we are not passing legislation that is specific to a particular section of the retail market or the construction industry. We are passing legislation that will affect every employer and employee in the country. That is something of which we have to be very conscious and we will reflect on it on Committee Stage.

Some Deputies asked about the schedule for the five pieces of crucial information being supplied to employees by their employers and why it was not day one instead of day five. We need to reflect on the fact that today an employer has two months in which to provide that information. While the University of Limerick suggested one day, we want to be reasonable to employers. Day five is not unreasonable in the context of new employment. To those who do not accept that day five is sufficient, it is the first time ever we have introduced a criminal offence. We are very serious about making sure people will have their right to receive the most basic information on their employment terms of contract. Day five is reasonable, but for somebody who takes the Mick thereafter, there should be serious consequences. The introduction of a criminal offence sets the tone. What we are trying to do is make sure employers will give the information. It is the most basic information and the least we would expect to be given to employees before day five.

Different Deputies brought up the issue of compensation where workers showed up for work and none was available. I make no apology for targeting at the low-paid the minimum payment provision. If somebody is earning much more money, he or she will not be as adversely affected as somebody on a much lower wage who is called into work and then turned around

and sent home. He or she will not be as affected as those in a situation, as suggested last night, where ten people are called into work when the employer knows full well that it only has work for five and will give it to the first five who show up and to heck with the rest of them. They are the ones who need to avail of the stronger provisions and that is what we will make sure we do. It is also important to remember that the Bill deals with all employers and employees engaged in contracts of service, whether they work in the gig economy or any other part of the economy. As is the case where an individual believes he or she is being deprived of employment rights applicable to being an employee, he or she may refer a complaint to the Workplace Relations Commission where it can be dealt with by way of mediation or adjudication, leading to a decision that will be enforceable through the District Court.

There is a section in my Department to which Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett referred. If there is anybody who has a difficulty in establishing his or her employment status, he or she can make a case independent of his or her employer to the scope division and it will be adjudicated on. If there are issues, they can be backdated. An established practice will be established in the context of what the person's social insurance contribution should be, including whether he or she is self-employed or employed.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: What if they are vulnerable workers who are afraid?

Deputy Regina Doherty: We need to get past that issue. To that end, I will conduct a very large advertising campaign this year. People should not be afraid. I am not saying the scary examples the Deputy gave are not true, but in that case I need to do more to make sure people are not afraid. The penalisation measures included in the Bill, with what is in place in the scope division, will be complementary to make sure it is employers who should be afraid, not employees.

3 o'clock

That is why we are going to pass this Bill. I know the Deputies all want to make amendments to it and that is fine. We can discuss it. The reason for passing this legislation is to make sure that employees are treated with dignity and respect by the people they work for.

Deputies have referred to the fact that employers have been yielding huge profits over recent years. It would be remiss of me not to say that when a company is making money, the people responsible for its success are those who work for it. Business owners who do not reflect on that are exceptionally foolish. A happy workforce is an exceptionally productive one. We all have people working for us in our local teams and in here and we all know that the more respect is paid to employees, the more they give back. That is what this legislation will achieve, as amended by those who will make amendments in the coming weeks.

Many have said that while this legislation will be great, if it does not have the Workplace Relations Commission, WRC, inspectors to make sure it is implemented it will sit on a shelf and not be read. We have spoken to the WRC which has told us categorically that it is well equipped and has enough inspectors to be able to manage this legislation. It was brought to my attention last week that it set itself a target in the back of its annual report last year, expecting this legislation to be passed this year. I welcome that. As we should do with all legislation, if after a few months we reflect on it and find that it is not doing what we expected it to do, we will come back here to amend it. That may involve something as simple as giving more inspectors to the WRC. Our aim is to make sure employees feel comfortable making complaints and that

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those will be adjudicated on with respect for their dignity. They will have a sense of self-worth by getting up every day to go to a job they like, that pays the wages, and that allows them to have financial stability and to be treated with respect by other human beings who are making money off their backs.

I know the Deputies opposite will support the Bill because they want to do what I want to do, and we will come to a happy conclusion on Committee Stage and get a Bill that will protect workers. We want to make sure that in the few cases where unscrupulous employers take advantage of people, they will not be able to do it on our watch. I commend the Bill to the House.

Question put and agreed to.

Employment (Miscellaneous Provisions) Bill 2017: Referral to Select Committee

Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection (Deputy Regina Doherty): I move:

That the Employment (Miscellaneous Provisions) Bill 2017 be referred to the Select Committee on Employment Affairs and Social Protection pursuant to Standing Orders 84A(3)(a) and 149(1).

Question put and agreed to.

Public Health (Alcohol) Bill 2015 [Seanad]: Second Stage (Resumed)

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

Deputy John Brassil: I welcome the opportunity to speak on this Bill. As we all know, the abuse and overuse of alcohol is now a scourge in our society, particularly for the younger generation. Very serious health problems arise from overuse of alcohol, in particular from what is now known as binge drinking. As a nation we need to get to grips with this. I welcome many of the measures in this Bill, which is trying to bring about some measure of control over this problem for the sake our children and grandchildren.

The drinks industry is lobbying hard for changes to this Bill. We have to consider what it has done in recent years such as introducing alcopops which have a high alcohol content and, because they are very sweet and easy to drink, can be consumed in large quantities, leading to serious health issues. It has made cheap drink available. The industry might argue that it is the retail outlets that sell cheap but I think it is a combination of both. I welcome the introduction of minimum pricing.

There is a proposal to state on the label that alcohol can cause cancer. It may cause cancer, diabetes, obesity, cardiovascular and other health problems. Should we consider a label that states "Alcohol seriously damages your health", as opposed to specifying a disease such as cancer? Should we look to the industry to fund the HSE and the Government to produce advertisements showing the harmful effects of alcohol? People can then make up their own minds. The alcohol industry will always be one step ahead of us when it comes to advertising. It will always come up with a smarter advertising campaign that will grab the consumer's attention.

It might be a better strategy to have the ability and the money to fight back with advertising campaigns that show its harmful effects.

We should also reconsider the restrictions on advertising. If the industry has to move away from television, it will go to the Internet. No matter how big we build the mousetrap, the mouse will always get bigger. We really need to be as clever as the industry and inform people accordingly. These amendments came in late in the day. I would like the Minister to consider them. If we can come up with a better way to inform our population about the harmful effects of alcohol, we should do that. I understand that in France advertising of alcohol was banned approximately 30 years ago. What effect has that had? We could learn from the mistakes or otherwise of places that have banned advertising. I urge that this Bill be passed speedily. It is urgently needed to educate our population and stop it from continuing to overconsume alcohol and especially to stop the scourge of binge drinking among the younger generation.

Deputy Seán Haughey: I support this landmark Bill. It is a game changer in many respects. It has the same significance as the smoking ban introduced in 2004 in the teeth of strong opposition from vested interests. The time has come to confront our difficult relationship with alcohol. As a society, we cannot ignore the problem of harmful drinking anymore. The Bill is a major attempt to improve health, well-being and mortality in this country.

There has been a delay in enacting this Bill. It passed Second Stage in the Seanad in December 2015 so there has been an extraordinary delay in getting the Second Stage debate underway in Dáil Éireann. Again, this demonstrates the power of the drinks lobby in this country. There has been extensive lobbying on this Bill. I have been lobbied by a number of parties. On 1 February 2018, I met with the chairman of the Alcohol Health Alliance of Ireland, Professor Frank Murray, in Beaumont Hospital. Professor Murray is consultant gastroenterologist and hepatologist in Beaumont Hospital. He certainly presented to me the reality of the alcohol problem in Ireland in a very strong way. We do have a problem. It has been outlined by many of the speakers here. The cost to our economy of the alcohol problem is estimated to be €2.35 billion annually. It is a fact that every major family event or celebratory occasion in this country is dominated by alcohol, be it First Holy Communion, a wedding, a graduation or indeed the festival of Christmas itself. Alcohol is front and centre at these events and this attitude must change. I detect a small change in public attitudes but, obviously, more work needs to be done in that regard. It is estimated that three people die every day in Ireland as a result of alcohol. We all know the problems associated with excessive use of alcohol - absenteeism, problems in our health care system, a strain on our health services, problems relating to crime, drink driving, assaults, domestic violence, broken families, accidents and anxiety and depression, particularly among young people. Youth suicide is a particular worry.

We all know what is in this Bill. Obviously, the main part of it involves minimum unit pricing of alcohol. This is a targeted measure designed to prevent the sale of alcohol at very cheap prices. It is aimed at those who drink in a harmful and dangerous manner. I am satisfied that this is an evidence-based measure and that it is a proportionate response.

I have my own anecdotal evidence relating to young people. It is very easy for underage drinkers to get their hands on alcohol. From my observation, young girls are drinking far more spirits. There is also the practice of “prinks” where young people consume as much alcohol as possible in someone’s house before going out for a night on the town. Again, these are attitudes that need to be confronted and need to change. We have a problem with binge drinking. The statistics are there, particularly relating to the 18 to 24 year old age group. It is a league we do

not want to be top of and we need to do something about that.

With regard to the display and visibility issue, the issue regarding the separation of alcohol products in mixed trade retail outlets has been mentioned. A concession is proposed here. In the interests of practicality and the reality on the ground, I support the new agreements reached on this issue. I did visit a supermarket in my constituency and saw the situation for myself.

One last concern I have relates to those on low incomes. There is the possibility that this Bill could be particularly hard on those on low incomes, for example, somebody who might buy one or two bottles of wine a week in their local supermarket or off-licence as a little luxury. However, we do need to see the bigger picture. We must see what the common good is. At the end of the day, those on low incomes are the ones who will benefit most from these measures. This is a pragmatic response to the problem. We must reduce our alcohol consumption in this country. I hope this Bill has a speedy passage through the House.

Deputy Bobby Aylward: I welcome any restrictions that would help. We have a problem with excess drinking in this country with problems such as underage drinking. However, I worry about this legislation. I am coming with a different perspective to that of previous speakers. I think it is too excessive. I am talking about measures to do with labelling. No other country in the world has mandatory cancer labels on alcohol products. I am talking specifically about cancer. The word “cancer” is a very serious one. It is a very serious word to put on a bottle. I am a survivor of cancer myself. Putting the word “cancer” on something that is a luxury that can be abused but which is not abused by 90% of the population is very serious and we need to think long and hard before we put it on a bottle. The Scottish try to sell their Scotch whiskey worldwide while we are trying to sell our whiskey. Many new companies and start ups are in the market. We promote them and then we come along with this labelling and talk about putting statements about how alcohol causes cancer on bottles. This is a step too far. We could put some warning that alcohol can be abused but I am worried about using the word “cancer” because it has repercussions across society. The introduction of Irish-only labels will result in significant additional costs of €50,000 per label according to the EY-DKM report. Somebody travelling to France or Spain on holidays might bring back a few bottles of wine. Will they have put labels on them when they bring them back to Ireland? This kind of thing must be looked at. When we sell our whiskey abroad, we will have to remove labels stating that alcohol causes cancer. This is unfair on companies all over the country and we need to be careful how we do it.

The advertising restrictions will make it difficult for new distilleries and breweries to market their products and compete against established brands. The Bill will stop product innovation in Ireland, which we are trying to grow to boost jobs and SMEs, and will reduce consumer choice and competition. Furthermore, advertisements for visitor centres that contain the name of the brand will be severely constrained. Over 2.5 million people visit breweries and distilleries annually. This is why I am worried about the competition end of it. I know we must take an overall view but I worry about that end of it as well. It has been said that the restrictions on advertising could cost Irish media €20 million in lost revenue. This is a lot of money. I know it is for their own good but will it be a big loss to sport in this country that it will not be able make up?

I am also worried about structural separation. These are very significant restrictions on small grocers in small villages. I met one woman who showed me her store, which is a little store serving a small rural population. She does not have room in her store but she must now put in these restrictions. She does not have the room to do this and will have to build on. All

she is selling are bottles of wine. She is not even selling beer or whiskey. She is just selling bottles of wine. People come in and buy a bottle of wine, particularly at the weekend and on Friday when they get their wage package. They buy two or three bottles of wine to drink at home. We are going to put this kind of cost on them. I think this is prohibitive and I think we should think again about it.

With regard to overall alcohol consumption, we never allow for the 8 million people who visit Ireland. We are supposed to be one of the biggest consumers of alcohol in the world. I think we have gone from consuming fourteen point something litres per year to nine point something litres but we do not allow for the 8 million people who visit the country. They are all included in these consumption figures. When I visited Spain last year, of course, I drank a few extra glasses of wine. That is natural because people are on their holidays. This is all included. The 8 million people who come to Ireland drink more when they are here, particularly because we are known for our Guinness and our whiskies. Of course, they will taste the beverages we have here. This is part of the overall picture and I think this is not being taken into account. While I welcome any restrictions relating to the abuse of alcohol, I think this could be a step too far and could destroy our industry and what we advertise ourselves as offering, which is the nice welcome from the people of Ireland with a sup of Guinness and a drop of whiskey. Perhaps it is a step too far. I think it is a bit too restrictive.

Deputy Eugene Murphy: I want to make a short contribution to this debate and put it on the record of the House that I support this Bill. I do not drink but I do go to pubs, clubs and hotels with friends and I can have a mineral or water. One thing I see from time to time is the shocking abuse of alcohol. At times, we, as politicians, must stand up, be brave and do the right thing. If one visits, or has a family member in, an emergency department in any part of the country at the weekend, much of what one sees late on a Friday night or a Saturday night is down to the absolute abuse of alcohol. In recent years, I have witnessed with my own eyes what the staff, the doctors, the nurses and the ambulance people, have to go through. It is what families have to go through also.

I do not know if Members have ever seen the family of a young lad or lassie who has excess alcohol in her or his system and it is an issue of life or death called to the hospital. The worry and distress caused to those people are shocking. Abuse of alcohol also causes accidents and broken families. People talk about a shortage of money, not being able to pay the mortgage and breaking up families. The abuse of alcohol has done horrendous damage to families.

I refer to violence and poverty. Often in the case of people who are well paid, much of their money goes on alcohol. If they have a family, that leads to poverty for that family. Ill health is also a huge issue. I have spoken to consultants and doctors about supporting the Bill. They will say the abuse of alcohol is costing the health service millions of euro. We have to take that into account. Most of all, I refer to the worry and distress caused to families, which is why I support the Bill.

Before I conclude, I refer to a couple of things of which we need to be careful. We are giving support to breweries and we all acknowledge these are lovely little businesses. However, I spoke to a man developing a brewery in Lanesborough, County Longford. He hopes to bring 25,000 visitors to that village if he gets his brewery up and running. That happens because breweries are interesting places to visit in terms of the story being told. Locke's Distillery in Kilbeggan attracts 70,000 people a year. It is wonderful to hear that story.

To some extent, attention needs to be paid to what breweries are stating. I partly agree with Deputy Bobby Aylward about using the word “cancer” the labels on bottles. Abuse of alcohol will cause cancer. However, abuse of certain foods will also cause cancer. Perhaps we might look at a label stating: “Abuse of alcohol causes ill health”. People in the business would not be against this.

People in various parts of rural Ireland are developing breweries and the stories around them. That will be good for tourism. As some of the proposals on labels and advertising could affect them, perhaps the Minister might take that into account. Overall, it is my duty to be upfront and say I want to support the Bill. However, I would like to see the one or two reservations I have addressed.

Deputy Pat Deering: I welcome the Minister and the opportunity to speak about the Bill. I support its main principles, but I have a few reservations which I hope to address in the next couple of minutes. The main aim of the Bill is to have some control. We have had an uneasy relationship with alcohol in this country over many years. The aims of the Bill include a minimum unit price, new labelling and structure separation. The overall aim is to reduce the adult consumption of alcohol.

The first issue I want to address is the minimum unit. This is the key issue in the Bill. We have seen strong evidence that when the price of alcohol goes up, the level of harm goes down. That has been proved time and again. The main aim must be to target the cheap supply of alcohol. We have seen time and again, especially the summer, large groups of young people - I am not picking on young people - going into places and walking out with slabs of alcohol, slabs of cheap beer, on their shoulders. That issue needs to be addressed. One can probably get 22 or 23 cans or bottles of beer for €20. That beer is being bought to drink in an uncontrolled environment. In the past, when we were all that little bit younger and went out to have a social drink, we probably had it in the pub where it was controlled. If a person drank too much, he or she was told to go home or, more to the point, was brought home. We have a situation now where there is no control whatsoever. Cheap alcohol is being produced and sold. That is a key issue that needs to be addressed. A main aim of the Bill is to have a minimum unit price. It is a starting point but we are not going far enough.

There has been much talk about the labelling issue. It is to be mandatory for labels on alcohol products to include information on grams of alcohol, calories, dangers to women and so on, which are very important. Like previous speakers, I have certain concerns about the word “cancer” being put on labels. Cancer can be caused by a number of things. I am not a medical person, but I have concerns about it.

Like previous speakers, I express my support for local breweries and distilleries which have been a good news story in the past few years. We have seen them spring up around the country. The Joint Committee on Agriculture, Food and the Marine, of which I am Chairman, produced a report on the future of the tillage sector recently. One of the key drivers of and support for the tillage sector is the development of local breweries.

The development of these breweries is very beneficial to the promotion of tourism in an area. I refer to the opening of a new distillery in Carlow, Walsh Whiskey Distillery. That is a €25 million investment in a local area that is crying out for something different from a tourism point of view. It exports to 45 countries around the world. In order for it to comply with the regulations, the company will have to have two lines producing two labels for two bottles.

That is a huge cost but not only that once its bottle arrives somewhere in Europe, it will be put on a shelf beside a bottle with no label. It will be a huge disincentive in terms of promoting its product around the world. We must look at the European angle in that regard. There is a need for a European label in order that we will all be playing on a level field. That is a huge issue.

I support the principle of the Bill, but the labelling issue and the cost involved need to be looked at again. We are promoting these breweries and distilleries, but we should not tie their hands behind their backs as they move forward.

The other issue is advertising with which I have a major issue. I ask the Minister to look at it again. Going back to my local distillery, Walsh Whiskey Distillery, the proprietor is a man called Bernard Walsh. He is an ambassador in terms of the promotion of tourism in Carlow, a county that is crying out for it. He is the face of that product in the area, but in the future he will not be allowed to use his or his family's photograph on whatever advertisements he may have and - correct me if I am wrong - he will not be allowed to advertise in an open space. A tourist or tourist bus coming to Carlow to visit the distillery and the visitor's centre which Mr. Walsh is proposing to build, will not be able to find the place without Google maps. It is an issue we need to address. It is important that we do not tie the hands of people who are trying to promote and develop these products.

I compliment the Minister on his engagement on structural separation. This issue generated much debate and interest, but we have come to a reasonable compromise. There are two issues, namely, the big multiples and the small corner shop. We should not disadvantage the small corner shop in a rural area to the advantage of the big multiples.

The final issue I want to bring to the Minister's attention is education. We cannot emphasise enough that it is the key issue. Culture is very important, but we saw the smoking ban come in. Who would have thought, 20 years ago, that such a thing would be introduced? Looking at a different area, there are safety belts in cars. Some of us who may be a little older will remember hopping into a car with no safety belts. One just drove on and everything was okay and there may have been six or seven in the back of the car. I will probably exempt the Minister from this particular discussion, but culture has changed where these things are concerned. The only way we can change the culture relating to alcohol in general is by educating people and children at a young age about the dangers of alcohol. Drink can be taken in moderation. I do not mean to be a spoilsport and do not think anybody does. I enjoy a drink socially, but there are huge issues to be addressed. The best way to do it is by starting to educate our people at a young age, when children go to school. That would enable the change of culture that only happens over a generation.

I welcome the general principles of the Bill. There are a couple of issues which I have addressed. I hope the Minister will take some of my concerns on board, but in general I thank him for his engagement and support the Bill.

Deputy Peter Burke: I concur with Deputy Pat Deering about the Minister's work on the Bill and the path it has come along since its inception. A huge amount of work has been carried out on it. The Minister has listened to many sectors and business people who are struggling in rural areas. I have a few concerns. It is important that we stand up and take responsibility. We have to lead as a country and accept the issues with alcohol in society. It is important that we see key advertising to provide awareness about the difficult and harmful effects that excessive drinking can have on family life. A recent advertisement was very poignant, stating the more

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a person drinks, the less time that person has to spend with his or her loved ones. That is very true. If a person drinks excessively, that person will do huge damage to those closest to him or her. We have to mitigate that and ensure society is informed.

The key areas about which I am concerned are the craft brewery sector and distillery sector which have been growing in Ireland in the past few years. There were four whiskey distilleries in Ireland prior to 2010 and there are now 18, with 16 more in the final stages of planning. We are now working on the Intoxicating Liquor (Breweries and Distilleries) Bill 2016 in the House to try to allow those distilleries and breweries to sell their products to visitors, with the current system being out of kilter with other countries worldwide. It is important that we carry forward that legislation.

My constituency has Kilbeggan Distillery, which was founded in 1757 and is the oldest distillery in Ireland. There are currently 40 people employed in it. Some 65,000 visitors go through its doors every year. It has another 70 people employed in County Louth. It has invested €14 million in the past six years and invested €4 million in Kilbeggan in my constituency to attract visitors and have sustainable rural jobs, which are vital to our society. Blacksmith Ventures is in Lanesborough, another area which needs employment and sustainable business to operate in that environment. It has received planning permission for an extensive distillery and visitor centre. I do not want to see businesses like that being affected by this legislation. They are businesses which are not really selling significant volumes to consumers. These businesses attract foreign investment and tourists to see the businesses first-hand. This sector has grown significantly in recent years.

I will address sections 12 and 13. One of the distilleries is on the River Shannon, almost overlooking Lough Ree. It needs to be able to tell the story about its business. The Bill precludes from the storytelling any person or scenic views of Ireland. It is hard for a craft brewery or new distillery to operate in that vacuum when trying to market a new product. It can be very difficult to market a new product because a person is operating in a vacuum, so to speak, with tough competitors. Those with well recognised labels will come to the fore but places like this new distillery in Lanesborough with new, sustainable jobs need to be able to market and sell their products. If there is a situation in which up to one third of the label has to have a harmful warning, with cancer having been mentioned, that is very serious. The alcohol industry has a responsibility with labelling to display nutritional values, include warnings for pregnant women and about harmful effects that it may have on health. If we compound that with a reference to cancer, considering that we process foods, how far will we go with this?

I am interested in hearing what the European Commission has to state about this. We all advocate free trade on one level. I am sure someone will take a case relating to this if this aspect of the Bill is not looked at. We are hampering free trade by, in effect, putting that label on it because we stand out among European countries. That is a big move to make. We have to support small manufacturing industries which are starting, including family businesses and companies. That is what this industry has grown from. They bring huge numbers of people into an area. The distillery in Lanesborough has full planning permission. If it is open two or three years after getting full planning permission and if, for argument's sake, a crèche opens 50 m away, does that mean that business is no longer viable or will not be able to put its name in front of its door? We need to look at sections relating to it.

Has the provision put forward relating to the cancer label been approved by the Cabinet or has the Cabinet assessed it? It looks like a late add-on to the Bill about which I would be hugely

concerned. The groceries order was a huge issue which was talked about by many presenters. There were shows about it and the harm that it was doing. I think Deputy Micheál Martin was the Minister when it was abolished. One of the greatest failures at that time was that alcohol was not exempt from it. What happened, in effect, in convenience stores and such was that alcohol was sold as the loss leader to attract people. It left a situation where people could get vast quantities of alcohol at very cheap prices. We have to be sensitive to Northern Ireland. I know we are watching that as we bring the legislation forward. We also have to ensure that cheap alcohol is not as accessible as it was before since it is very bad for society. The people who had *ripoff.ie* and such programmes need to stand up to take responsibility too because they advocated that the groceries order be abolished, yet we faced huge social problems as a result of that. I remember Eddie Hobbs said it would reduce the housewife's weekly basket but it had the reverse effect. Being responsible, we need to call these things out.

Supporting business is very important. My real fear in this legislation is that there may be unintended consequences and the societal benefit from one or two small provisions of this may not be as great as people think where labelling is concerned. I would be grateful if the Minister considered that issue and assessed the late provision that was brought forward. I have heard people advocating for why it has been included. I am not trying to say we do not need some kind of nutritional values or warnings, but to require one third of the label to contain a serious, significant warning about cancer or something of that nature is too significant for business and the industry and I do not think there will be a benefit on the other side. That is the main point that I would like to see looked at.

We need to be careful with advertising where it relates to the small industry that is setting up and that we are facilitating through the Intoxicating Liquor (Breweries and Distilleries) Bill 2016. The owner standing in a distillery or craft brewery to promote it is not allowed to do so under this legislation. It is regrettable that, if someone is employing people such as Kilbeggan Distillery which employs 40 people, it will be very difficult to advertise successfully or to promote a new product such as in Lanesborough.

I thank the Minister for coming to the House for the debate. It is important that, as a society, we own up to the fact that we drink too much. It is welcome that the drinks industry has come a long way in the code of conduct it has employed on advertising. When finalising the legislation we need to be mindful of the sustainable businesses in rural Ireland that are providing vital employment, particularly the new breweries set up since 2010. It is important when crafting legislation that we do not unintentionally damage the industry. A visitor from overseas to the distillery in Kilbeggan is not someone who is engaging in excessive drinking. It is a different market, but it provides vital employment in the area.

An Ceann Comhairle: The next slot is for a Fianna Fáil speaker who will be followed by Deputy Thomas P. Broughan. The debate is to be adjourned at 4 p.m.

Deputy Frank O'Rourke: Like other speakers, I welcome the opportunity to contribute to the debate on the Bill. It is also welcome that the Minister for Health is present for this engagement.

Like my colleagues, I support the Bill and many of the measures contained in it. Being conscious of the time, I will not speak about issues raised by other speakers. There are three or four areas on which I would like to focus.

I am supportive of the minimum pricing proposal. It is a positive move in that it will deal with the abuse of alcohol by young people and those who are under age, in particular. We need to do all we can to ensure they cannot access alcohol by creative and innovative means, including with the assistance of older people, which is wrong and often leads to abuse and anti-social behaviour and domestic problems. The introduction of minimum pricing will, I hope, reduce the access of young people to alcohol which they can currently buy for a small amount of money, which is a huge problem in several areas, including my constituency. We may also need to consider making it an offence for an adult to purchase alcohol for a person who is under age. I have witnessed young people give money to adults to buy slabs of beer for them in an off-licence or a shop. They then abuse the alcohol, which is a problem. It might be worth considering making it an offence either in this Bill or in future legislation for adults to purchase alcohol for persons who are under age. We need to send the message that the purchase of alcohol by persons who are under age is not permissible. It should not be possible for them to access it by being creative, innovative or smart or by getting an older person to buy it for them, which causes a lot of social problems. When the minimum pricing provisions come into force, they will impact positively on businesses that provide employment and operate in a proper way. They will have a positive impact all round.

The proposals related to separation and the segregation of alcohol also need to be re-examined. I understand amendments will be brought forward on Committee Stage. I accept that alcohol products need to be separated from other products, but what is being proposed is drastic and a step too far. The financial burden on the SME sector in doing what is proposed will be negative. While alcohol products should be separated from other products, we need to engage with SMEs on how it can be done in the least cumbersome way possible.

The proposals on labelling are also an issue. While all labelling needs to draw attention to the negatives, the increased requirements in the labelling of alcohol are a concern. I understand the European Union is working on guidelines in this area; perhaps, therefore, we should wait to see what it will propose and then compare it with what is being proposed here. A label which carries references to cancer is alarmist. There are lots of things we do every day in moderation. A lot of people drink in moderation and only a minority abuse alcohol. We must be mindful, therefore, of how we draw attention to the fact that over-indulgence in different things can cause sickness and ill-health, including the consumption of alcohol. While there is a level of labelling that is necessary, we must be measured in our approach in how it is designed and put in place such that it will not impact negatively on what we are trying to achieve and will not be out of kilter with what is brought forward by the European Union. Given that we are pro-European Union and implement many laws and regulations driven by it. Perhaps, therefore, we should wait and see what it will propose on labelling, into which we can then tie what is being proposed here.

The abuse of alcohol is a huge issue in families and for individuals. It causes lots of social issues and domestic problems. That said, the abuse of anything causes problems and difficulties and impacts negatively on families. In regulating to reduce the level of abuse and improve people's health and circumstances we must do so in a way that will not impact negatively on those who do not abuse. We must be careful that we do not over-regulate for the minority such that we will spoil it for those who indulge in and enjoy alcohol in a responsible way. While alcohol is being abused, there are many who enjoy it in a responsible way. They do not over-indulge and are measured in what they do. We must be careful not to send a message to people outside Ireland that will label us negatively. There is lots to see and do in Ireland. We are a

people who are open to engaging with others and can enjoy ourselves in a responsible way without over-indulging in or abusing alcohol. We have to balance this with what we are trying to achieve in this legislation. Therefore, we need to step back from and review some of the measures proposed in the areas about which I have spoken. We need to examine how we can achieve what we want to achieve in a way that will not be overly excessive, as in what is being proposed.

As stated by other speakers, including on the Government side, breweries create huge numbers of jobs. That feeds in positively to the local, regional and national economies. We cannot always be driven and governed by lobbyists and the creation of employment. I ask that, as part of a balanced approach with a view to having a balanced outcome, we be mindful of the positive contribution these businesses make to the economy by creating local jobs.

Deputy Robert Troy: It is welcome that the Bill is before the Dáil and not before its time. The previous Cabinet signed off on it in February 2015. We must be realistic and acknowledge that there is a serious problem with drink and the drink culture in this country and that it must be addressed. No one can argue against the facts, which are that an increasing number of people are presenting in hospitals with liver disease and that the average age of those presenting with it is becoming younger. This is not coincidental but because of the availability of cheap booze.

A welcome consequence of the Bill is that we will, straightaway, tackle below-cost selling of alcohol. The availability of cheap drink encourages excessive drinking, particularly in poorer socioeconomic regions. Collectively in this Dáil, we should work together to ensure the legislation will proceed through the next Stages as rapidly as possible because the problem needs to be tackled.

On advertising, it is welcome that the Minister is proposing to introduce a ban between 3 a.m. and 9 p.m. That is all very well and would probably have worked a couple of decades ago when most people had access to no media other than RTÉ One and RTÉ Two and the stations they could receive on a transistor radio. Given the advances in telecommunications, I wonder whether the initiative will have a real impact. I do not believe it will. On the flip side of the coin, it will cost Irish media companies millions of euro. As I said, I do not believe it will make a huge difference. Many people of my age and younger are accessing media through iPads and mobile phones and by streaming, etc. Consequently, I wonder whether the advertising aspect of the Bill is worthy.

Let us consider the tourism industry. Perhaps I am misinterpreting the legislation in believing that under it places such as the Guinness Storehouse will not even be able to advertise on the outside of their own buildings. The Guinness Storehouse is one of the main tourist attractions in the country. People do not go there to drink excessively. One gets only one pint when one goes in and it is part of the Irish cultural experience enjoyed by tourists from abroad. The same applies in a smaller scale to Locke's distillery in Kilbeggan, one of the only distilleries still in operation in all of Ireland. I was surprised to learn recently that 70,000 visit it. It will not be able to advertise on the roundabout outside Kilbeggan in order that people entering the town will know where it is located. If I am wrong, the Minister can correct me. If I am not, we need to address this issue.

It is welcome that the Minister made concessions on the issue of separation. It was common sense.

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Whose responsibility is it to have labels on bottles? What is the position on small-scale distillers of specialist gins and brewers of craft beers that are predominantly for the export market? Are we using a sledge-hammer to crack an egg in that regard? Will we impose too many costs on small businesses considering that the majority of their products will be going to a market that may not require the proposed labelling?

Most people who buy drink in duty free shops are on their way out of the country. One very seldom sees people entering the country picking up drink in duty free shops. What we are doing is placing an unnecessary burden on duty free shops which support large-scale employment where they operate, be it at Shannon, Knock, Dublin or Cork Airport. Perhaps this issue might be examined. Is there a need for labelling in that context?

I acknowledge that excessive drinking is very harmful. In that regard, I mentioned the increase in the incidence of liver disease, particularly in the younger age categories. What we should refer to on labels is the abuse of alcohol. Having a glass or two of wine per week or fortnight is not as harmful as having a bottle or two of wine per night.

Deputy Thomas P. Broughan: I am grateful to have the opportunity to speak to the Bill which was first introduced in the Seanad by the Taoiseach when he was Minister for Health in 2015. While I often disagree with him and the current Minister on many aspects of health, I warmly support the Bill. I have received many emails during the years from constituents urging me to support such legislation. If passed, it will be positive for the country.

There has been some misinformation circulated and intense lobbying by the alcohol industry on the provisions of the Bill. I have been contacted by constituents who enjoy a drink at home, as many do, and have expressed concern that the cost of alcohol will rise for them. In reality, however, there will be very little change for those of us who enjoy alcohol moderately and responsibly. The general thrust of the Bill is to curb binge drinking and delay access to alcohol by children and young people.

We know from the website of Alcohol Ireland that the rate of consumption of alcohol in the State rose from approximately 4.9 litres per person aged 15 years and over in 1960 to 14.3 litres per person aged 15 years and over in 2001. There was a slight decrease in the following years, but the rate still stands at around 11.6 litres per person per year. Our target is to reduce that figure significantly. It is estimated that three deaths per day are alcohol related. The World Health Organization states alcohol is a factor in over 200 conditions, diseases and injuries, including heart disease and cancer. Some 1,050 deaths per year, or 88 per month, are due to alcohol. One quarter of the deaths of young men aged between 15 and 19 years are due to alcohol. It is also an element in half of suicides and approximately 30% of incidents of self-harm. There are alcohol-related cancers. I welcome provisions included in the Bill to allow this sobering health information to be displayed at the point of sale.

The issues of labelling and segregation have arisen. To a large extent, the Minister has addressed the segregation issue. We are all familiar with small shops throughout the country, including the west.

On labelling, we have reached the stage where we expect to find fairly good information, nutritional and otherwise, on all products we consume. Perhaps it might be the same for alcohol.

The Minister already knows of my interest in and work on the issue of road safety. Drink-

driving is one of the major causes of death and serious injuries on the roads. The Road Safety Authority has estimated that alcohol has been a factor in around two fifths of fatal road traffic collisions. I argue that this is an underestimation as replies to parliamentary questions in recent years have shown that testing for alcohol is not always carried out at the scenes of collisions.

The harmful effect of alcohol is not only felt by the person drinking but also by his or her family, friends and society at large. We have had this problem during the centuries. Behind us in the Chamber is a statue of one of our great predecessors, Thomas Davis. When he and members of Young Ireland, men and women, were writing in the newspaper *The Nation* in the 1830s and 1840s, alcohol abuse was a very severe problem. It was the time of Fr. Mathew and the Temperance movement. Society is, of course, changing and one of the biggest social changes in the past decade has been the development of coffee shops which have changed the social atmosphere. In general, therefore, I support the Bill.

We will be able to see how the concept of minimum pricing works in Scotland when it is introduced in May.

4 o'clock

The Scots' relationship with alcohol is very similar to that of the Irish. We are sister nations with very deep associations. Many of the effects and costs of alcohol-related harm are mirrored in the two countries. The Scottish Bill was long delayed following the legal challenge by the Scotch Whisky Association, but the Supreme Court ruled that European law had not been breached and that such legislation was constitutional.

Debate adjourned.

Estimates for Public Services 2018: Message from Select Committee

An Ceann Comhairle: The Select Committee on Finance, Public Expenditure and Reform and Taoiseach has completed its consideration of the following Revised Estimate for Public Services for the service of the year ending 31 December 2018: Vote 13 - Office of Public Works.

National Broadband Procurement Process: Statements (Resumed)

Deputy Eamon Scanlon: I am pleased to have the opportunity to speak about broadband provision. Last week before the adjournment of statements I made reference to a meeting I had had in Sligo with a UK company which was prepared and eager to set up a business in my home town of Ballymote. We were looking at between eight and ten jobs being provided. Unfortunately, we do not have a broadband service to allow the company to start up. We have the premises, but we do not have the broadband service required.

Rural Ireland needs a guarantee that it will have fair access to the social and economic services which are essential if communities and businesses are to thrive. Whether it is the closure of post offices, the reduction of infrastructure funding or poor broadband coverage, rural Ireland is facing official policy which is making it tough to survive. I recently asked the Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation, Deputy Heather Humphreys, by way of parliamentary question the status of work to market counties Sligo, Leitrim, Donegal and Roscommon as job

locations; the number of IDA Ireland site visits that had taken place in these counties in the past five years; and the other initiatives that had taken place to contribute to highlighting the north west as a destination for new businesses. In her reply the Minister stated, as regards site visits, "The IDA always does its best to highlight suitable sites in regional areas - including in counties Sligo, Leitrim, Donegal and Roscommon - to potential investors. It is sometimes the case, however, that IDA clients will have specific requirements that may preclude certain locations." The elephant in the room is that the Government refuses to acknowledge the importance of broadband or, more appropriately, the lack of it in many parts of rural Ireland. Companies will not move to invest in or support rural counties if they cannot access high quality broadband. Jobs growth in the regions is being stunted. People have lost patience, especially in isolated rural areas.

The World Bank found that a 10% increase in broadband penetration increased economic growth by 1.3% in the long term. The facts do not lie. Ireland ranks 42nd in the global rankings for the distribution of high speed broadband, while 40% of the population and 96% of the country geographically still lack commercial or fibre broadband coverage.

The Government's national rural broadband roll-out programme is a shambles. I do not blame the Minister for Communications, Climate Action and Environment, Deputy Denis Naughten, for this, as what has happened is unfortunate. Since the tendering process started in 2015, two bidders have left and there is now only one bidder remaining, namely, enet. The further delay in the roll-out of the national broadband plan will limit the number of jobs which can be created in the regions. With rapid advances in technology, Irish households should not have to settle for moderate Internet speeds which will be overtaken by technological progression in the next five years. The Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation, Deputy Heather Humphreys, must do better. She needs to make it crystal clear that IDA Ireland's continued overlooking of rural Ireland needs to stop and, above all else, the two Ministers must impress on the Taoiseach the absolute need to deliver the national broadband plan.

As a rural politician and a businessman, I am consistently disappointed, although not surprised, by the neglectful stance taken by the Government towards the provision of broadband for rural homes and businesses which are struggling to survive in an increasingly digital era. In order to reduce rural isolation and ensure businesses across the country will have a fair opportunity to compete, we need to deliver fibre broadband to every home. Black spots are costing jobs, threatening rural sustainability and creating an already large digital divide between urban and rural areas. Broadband provision can help to open up a global market for rural tourism and small local producers. The lack of broadband is directly harming business, as well as frustrating people in their day to day lives.

We have seen multiple reports, Bills and regulations, but none of them has advanced the process. The latest estimate for broadband to be rolled out is 2023. It beggars belief that ten years after it was announced that it would be done by 2012, some 540,000 homes are still not connected to fibre broadband in the ground. It seems extraordinary that the tender has not yet been put in place and it will take between three and five years to build the network. This week we are talking about the national planning framework, Ireland 2040, and capital infrastructure investment, but it will be 2040 before every home in Ireland has fibre broadband. When will the neglect of rural Ireland end? I call on the Government to allow rural communities to reach their full potential and prosper, retain young people, jobs and businesses and give people a real future in their home towns and counties. The project cannot be held up any longer.

It is almost 12 months since I first raised the issue of fibre broadband provision on behalf of the residents of Castlebaldwin, County Sligo and those living off the N4 route through the village. I have done so by way of parliamentary questions, emails and letters to the Minister and eir. For several months I have been trying to resolve the matter with eir, or at least I have been trying to ascertain the position on the issue. Progress has been nil and it is beyond frustrating. However, it is nothing compared to the frustration of locals in the village of Castlebaldwin and the surrounding area. That is just one example of a rural area without broadband. Several letters and emails to the CEO of eir, Mr Richard Moat, have not even been acknowledged, let alone responded to. I am extremely disappointed by the lack of response, competency and support offered by eir. For almost two years it has had a fibre to the cabinet, FTTC, unit in the village to facilitate the provision of broadband. However, the service remains unconnected. The fibre broadband connection passes Castlebaldwin on the N4 but does not branch off for those residents or businesses who need it. In recent months work has been done to rectify this and the points and boxes were upgraded but not connected. One person, in particular, is affected in that he has been offered employment with Apple, as an at-home adviser, on the proviso that he has a fixed-line Internet connection with a speed of at least 10 Mbps, which he does not have. I have written to eir, with a view to having the matter resolved on behalf of my constituents in the area who are, over a year later, still without broadband. It is difficult to understand. The box is in place, as is the fibre cable, yet the company will not connect it.

More than 500,000 homes and businesses in rural areas do not have broadband. They will not have commercial broadband and their service will not be enhanced by announcements on the roll-out of the tender process. In 2016 Fine Gael committed to providing high speed broadband for at least 85% of premises by 2018 and 100% of premises by 2020. It appears that the deadlines will be missed. Almost one third of the population live in areas where commercial broadband is not available. Elsewhere in Europe, between 15% and 20 % are in that position. In certain parts of rural Ireland there are broadband speeds 36 times lower than those in Dublin. That is not acceptable.

I accept that the Minister is in a difficult position. He is a rural Deputy and knows how people are suffering and job creation has been delayed by the lack of broadband provision. I wish him well in dealing with the company that remains in the process. I hope it will reach fruition and that we can deal with the issue as quickly as possible.

Deputy Louise O'Reilly: I am not convinced that the Minister's belief the sole bidder under the national broadband plan is "really committed" is enough on its own. We need more than that; we need certainty. There is a serious problem with broadband provision in the State. At the end of 2017 Ireland was ranked 62nd for average mobile download speeds and 81st for upload speeds. In the second half of 2017 the State was ranked 42nd in the world for average fixed-broadband download speeds, with an average speed of 38.81 megabits per second. At 13.42 Mbps, the State was ranked 59th for upload speeds, placing it between Cambodia and India. Ireland is 21st of 25 EU member states for broadband speeds, behind Slovakia, Slovenia, Estonia and Jersey.

Fingal is only out the road from here, but, as I said to the Minister's colleague during a debate on roads, sometimes it might as well be Timbuktu for all the notice that is taken of it. There are major connectivity issues there. The problem is particularly acute in rural Fingal, for example, in certain parts of Balbriggan and areas surrounding the airport. The lack of availability of broadband is preventing Balbriggan and surrounding rural areas from achieving their economic and social potential. This is having a devastating effect on residents. People living

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in Fingal want to be able to Skype their parents or children or book tickets online to go see the Dubs play. Regrettably, the connectivity problems restrict what they can and cannot do. When I am driving to work in the morning I look to my left and right and see people who I know are in their cars because they cannot work from home. Many of them come from my constituency and clog up the M1 in the morning. If there was connectivity, they would much rather work from home, but it is simply not an option for some.

There have been problems with broadband and telecommunications in the country for many years. The genesis of the sharp side of these issues was the forced liberalisation through the European Commission of telecommunications infrastructure. As technology developed, the Commission and private interests saw an opportunity to make profit and forced liberalisation had to follow. Forced to open up the sector to private operators, the State had to privatise Telecom Éireann in 1999. It was madness at the time and the forced marketisation is still madness. It should be resisted. We should now look at the possibility of progressing the national broadband plan under State ownership.

Minister for Communications, Climate Action and Environment (Deputy Denis Naughten): I thank all colleagues who contributed to the debate. I know that some of them disagree with the approach we are taking with the ownership model. We held a debate on the matter in the House in 2016. However, I believe everyone in the House agrees with the primary objective, that is, to bring high speed broadband to every home, community, business and farm in Ireland.

I appreciate the frustration being expressed by colleagues. I, too, am experiencing it, not only as a public representative but also as someone who was born, bred and reared in rural Ireland. I know its extraordinary potential.

I have always likened this debate to conversations I had on numerous occasions with a former Member of the House, my late father. He spoke about the impact the rural electrification scheme had had in our village of Ardkeen. People living in communities throughout rural Ireland wanted to have electricity in order to have a lightbulb in the kitchen in order that they could read the newspaper. However, they soon found out about the extraordinary potential the supply of electricity offered in cooking, listening to the radio, watching television and operating milking machines. The scheme transformed the economy of rural Ireland and the lifestyle of women. It gave them great opportunities at the time. Broadband will do the same. We should remember that this was the first country in the world to bring an electricity supply to every home and it will also be the first to provide high speed broadband for every home.

I understand and appreciate the sense of frustration. That frustration has been compounded by the fact that some people are gaining access to broadband. The commitment agreement into which I tied eir is delivering high speed broadband to approximately 300 farms per week and 40,000 premises every quarter. That is some achievement, but it makes it even more frustrating when people see a neighbour at the end of or half way up the road being provided with pure fibre high speed broadband, while they are left with absolutely nothing. That is why I was determined, in tandem with the commitment agreement, to make progress on the issue under the broadband and mobile phone task force. There are ways by which we can encourage the roll-out of wireless, as well as 3G and 4G, broadband in the short term.

Mobile broadband is a sticking plaster. The point was well made in the article in the *Sunday Independent* by Adrian Weckler, who is not a strong advocate for me. If anything, he has

probably been one of the biggest thorns in my side. However, I acknowledge that throughout the process he has called a spade a spade. He has set out the idea clearly. I have heard people the length and breadth of the country say on radio that those of us living in rural Ireland should damn well accept 4G mobile broadband, that it is good enough for us. It is not. A 3G mobile broadband service was rolled out under the national broadband scheme. I recall that the former Minister, Deputy Eamon Ryan, was involved at the time. The day it went live, it was already obsolete. Mobile broadband will never meet our needs. It is a stop-gap measure, albeit a welcome one. I will assist in that regard, but it is a mobile, not a point-to-point, service. The reality is that over time people will not use broadband simply to watch a range of television channels or surf the Internet using a range of devices. I am engaged with several companies and what we are looking at is a pilot scheme to improve health outcomes for people living in rural communities. There are major opportunities for small post-primary schools. For example, if children want to take applied mathematics but the option is not available in their school, they can take it using online tools. The opportunities are endless for Irish ingenuity and business. I urge everyone to work with me. I will work with Members, too. I will give one commitment. I will engage with Members both here and in the Upper House. We will keep them briefed and updated on what is happening.

Deputy Eamon Ryan: May I speak briefly to make one brief comment?

Acting Chairman (Deputy Bernard J. Durkan): The Minister has spoken. It was the closing speech.

Deputy Eamon Ryan: I will not say anything contentious. If I can, I will make one point because I had not realised the time-----

Acting Chairman (Deputy Bernard J. Durkan): A single sentence, please.

Deputy Eamon Ryan: There is but one simple thought to put to the Minister as we enter the final process. We did not vote to delay the process, but this needs to be done. I have one question to put to the Minister. The fundamental principle, in thinking 20, 30 or 40 years ahead-----

Acting Chairman (Deputy Bernard J. Durkan): That is it.

Deputy Eamon Ryan: May I finish the sentence?

Acting Chairman (Deputy Bernard J. Durkan): I am sorry, no.

Deputy Eamon Ryan: Two wires will be put into every house. It may make sense for us to pick one of those wires, probably the electricity wire, and say it is the connection point.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Bernard J. Durkan): I am sorry, but the Deputy is out of order.

Deputy Eamon Ryan: The final decision should reflect the fact that the enet-SSE group has expertise in the provision of electricity wires. It may make sense to make a decision to go with the electricity rather than the telephone wire as a point of entry. The reasoning is simple. Why would we support the provision of two wires, two poles and two systems?

Acting Chairman (Deputy Bernard J. Durkan): The Deputy is out of order and I want to explain the reason. There was no one in the House offering to speak when the Minister replied. There was space in which to do so when the previous speaker, Deputy Louise O'Reilly, finished her statement. As there was no one else offering, I called the Minister to make the closing state-

ment. That is it. We cannot and do not go back.

Deputy Lisa Chambers: On a point of clarification, we received notification of certain times. This is a really important topic. Is there any leniency or leeway for those Deputies who want to make a contribution in the national Parliament on what is an important issue in our constituencies? Would the Minister be willing to stay to hear the contributions of those who are present and would like to speak? Otherwise, we will have to revisit the matter.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Bernard J. Durkan): While I appreciate the Deputy's point, the problem is that during statements, when a speaker concludes and no other speaker is available, the only order is that the sitting be suspended. I did not have any other name and no other Deputy presented. That is the end of the story.

Deputy Denis Naughten: This is the sixth day in a row I have dealt with this issue.

Deputy Lisa Chambers: I appreciate that, but it is not as if other Deputies were not ready to speak. I have been put a great deal of work into making a submission and preparing my contribution.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Bernard J. Durkan): I assure the Deputy that it is not personal.

Deputy Lisa Chambers: Is there any facility available to Deputies who wish to speak?

Acting Chairman (Deputy Bernard J. Durkan): No; if we were to start facilitating Deputies in these circumstances, it would bring the House into disrepute and we would have to facilitate everybody at all times.

Deputy Catherine Murphy: I ask that Standing Orders be suspended to allow Deputies to contribute. It is not the case that we intentionally decided not to appear in the Chamber or that we were not following the debate. We draw up rotas of speakers for a legitimate reason. As Deputies have prepared for this debate, I ask that Standing Orders be suspended to allow us to make our contributions.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Bernard J. Durkan): There is no provision in the order to suspend Standing Orders. The instructions, by order of the House, are that statements must conclude not later than 5 p.m. and, in the event that they conclude earlier than 5 p.m., that we proceed directly to Topical Issues. The Minister was the final speaker and there were no other speakers available when he was called.

Deputy Catherine Murphy: I made inquiries several times today because I would not have been able to contribute today if speakers from two of the groups that had indicated an intention to speak had done so. I had been monitoring the position and made inquiries throughout the day. When I saw the Minister rise to speak, I rang to ask what was happening. A degree of fairness should be shown.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Bernard J. Durkan): The Deputy knows the rules as well as I do. If we were to depart from them in the manner proposed, it would set a precedent. We will not do so. Deputies can raise the matter with anyone they wish in any form they wish.

Deputy Stephen S. Donnelly: Under Standing Orders, must the Minister's response be the final contribution?

Acting Chairman (Deputy Bernard J. Durkan): The Minister was the final speaker.

Deputy Stephen S. Donnelly: Several Deputies were in the Chamber while the Minister was still on his feet. If Standing Orders do not explicitly state the debate must conclude when the Minister finishes speaking, those who were present during his contribution should be allowed to speak.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Bernard J. Durkan): The Minister finished the debate.

Deputy Stephen S. Donnelly: Given that we were here when he finished speaking, unless Standing Orders or the order before the House state the Minister must be the final speaker, there is no reason other Deputies should not be able to speak now.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Bernard J. Durkan): When I took the Chair, I had before me a long list of speaking slots, but there were no Deputies present to fill them. When the final speaker concluded, we had to proceed to the next business.

Deputy Stephen S. Donnelly: I understand that, but I am asking a different question. Several Deputies present in the Chamber indicated that they wished to speak when the Minister concluded his contribution. Unless the order states no further speakers may be called after the Minister concludes, we should simply proceed to the next speaker. I suggest it would be within Standing Orders to proceed to the next speaker.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Bernard J. Durkan): According to the order, a Minister or a Minister of State shall be called on to make a statement in reply which will not exceed five minutes. The Minister was called on because no further speakers were available at the time.

Deputy Stephen S. Donnelly: I understand that, but other speakers were present by the time the Minister concluded his contribution.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Bernard J. Durkan): The Deputy is missing the point. When the second last speaker sat down, the Minister became the final speaker because no other Deputies were present. He was entitled to reply for not more than five minutes. That is the end of the story and I do not propose to break the rules.

Deputy Stephen S. Donnelly: I want to operate within the rules. Does the Acting Chairman have anything before him that states the Minister must be the final speaker? If not-----

Acting Chairman (Deputy Bernard J. Durkan): I will explain the matter in its entirety. Deputy Eamon Scanlon was in possession when the debate was adjourned the previous day. He concluded his contribution this afternoon, at which point we had a *rí-rá* about the list of speakers along party lines. The order provides that all other Members have ten minutes' speaking time each and that the Minister or a Minister of State shall be called on to make a statement in reply which shall not exceed five minutes. Since no one else was present to fill the remaining speaking slots, the Minister replied. I could have informed him that other Deputies were on their way to the Chamber, but no one gave me information to that effect.

Deputy Catherine Murphy: Does the Acting Chairman have a list of speakers in front of him?

Acting Chairman (Deputy Bernard J. Durkan): No.

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Deputy Catherine Murphy: The Bills Office informed me that my name was on a list, as were the names of other Deputies, including Deputies Clare Daly and Stephen S. Donnelly.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Bernard J. Durkan): I am sorry, but I am closing the discussion. I ask the Deputy to, please, resume her seat. The speaking slots are set out in the normal manner, with the Government, the Fianna Fáil Party and the various Opposition parties and groups listed. The list did not feature the names of Deputies. We would have proceeded if the names of Deputies had been listed, but there was no one in the House.

Deputy Eamon Ryan: On a point of order-----

Acting Chairman (Deputy Bernard J. Durkan): As the Deputy knows, a point of order does not arise.

Deputy Eamon Ryan: -----the Minister does not appear to oppose listening to the contributions of Deputies for the next 25 or 30 minutes, after which he could make further concluding remarks. I can think of numerous examples of the Chair, in such circumstances-----

Acting Chairman (Deputy Bernard J. Durkan): I will not change my mind. When it became obvious that there were no other speakers, I asked who was the next speaker on the following item of business. The Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport has come to the Chamber to deal with the next business and we should deal with it now because otherwise we will delay him. I do not mind if Deputies wish to delay the Minister all day. It is unfortunate that no further speakers were available before the Minister spoke, but I cannot change the position. I am sure we will have statements on the matter at another time.

Deputy Stephen S. Donnelly: On a point of clarification-----

Acting Chairman (Deputy Bernard J. Durkan): No clarification is required. The position is crystal clear.

Deputy Stephen S. Donnelly: Will the Acting Chairman confirm that he did not have a list of speakers in front of him at the time we are discussing?

Acting Chairman (Deputy Bernard J. Durkan): I did not have a list of speakers at the time, although I have one now.

Deputy Stephen S. Donnelly: When did that list appear?

Acting Chairman (Deputy Bernard J. Durkan): After Deputy Louise O'Reilly spoke, the next slot was to have been taken by the Labour Party, followed by Solidarity-People Before Profit and Deputy Clare Daly. No one was present in the Chamber at that point.

Deputy Stephen S. Donnelly: Did the Acting Chairman have the list when he called the Minister?

Acting Chairman (Deputy Bernard J. Durkan): Yes, but the bottom line is that there was no one in the Chamber. I am sorry, but we must proceed to the next business. I have been in a similar position as the Deputies. It is a matter of watching who is speaking in the House.

Deputy Mick Wallace: I suggest the various groups lobby have a short period provided on Tuesday to allow us to contribute. The Minister could send a Minister of State to the House. I acknowledge that he has spent a long time in the Chamber for this discussion.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Bernard J. Durkan): Members could do that. Perhaps they might raise the matter at the Business Committee.

Deputy Eugene Murphy: I am sure the Minister, who is my constituency colleague, will accommodate us. I was informed that I should come to the House by 4.30 p.m. I am not making an issue of the Acting Chairman's decision because I accept that these things can happen. Perhaps the Minister might consider providing a slot next week to allow those of us who have not spoken to contribute.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Bernard J. Durkan): I do not have a problem with that suggestion.

Topical Issue Debate

Acting Chairman (Deputy Bernard J. Durkan): With the agreement of the House, we will take the matter raised by Deputy Michael Harty first as Deputy Jonathan O'Brien is not present.

Marine Safety

Deputy Michael Harty: The issue I raise is marine safety and marine rescue services at Kilkee, a popular seaside resort in County Clare. This is an important issue for those who use coastal waters and those who operate marine rescue and recovery services. These are essential services and a vital component for those who make a living from fishing off our coast, those who engage in recreational activities and our tourism industry. Water users must be confident that, should they get into difficulty, there are marine rescue services suitable for putting to sea with proper equipment, local knowledge and training in order to competently engage in sea rescue and search and rescue when required, because, unfortunately, many people are recovered from coastal waters who have drowned by accident or suicide.

Kilkee is suffering from structural, operational and funding issues in the supply of marine sea rescue services. Historically, the service in Kilkee was voluntary. Started in 1981, it filled a gap in the Royal National Lifeboat Institution, RNLI, service between Valentia and Galway. In addition to the surface rescue provided at Kilkee, there was also diving recovery because it had a diving centre. The funding of the service was voluntary until 2012 but voluntary subscriptions were very difficult to come by, particularly during the recession. The Irish Coast Guard agreed to take over the running of the service in 2013 but many of the volunteers, with their experience and local knowledge, were not taken on the rota. The number of people involved dropped from 26 to 12. All reference to Kilkee maritime rescue services was removed from the buildings. Former President Hillary unveiled a plaque commemorating and acknowledging the activities of marine service in a voluntary capacity but it was removed.

There was a tragic loss of life in September 2016 when a Coast Guard volunteer was drowned off the coast near Kilkee. There is an ongoing investigation to try to understand the circumstances of that tragic accident. It is being carried out by the Marine Casualty Investigation Board and the Health and Safety Authority. Since the incident, there has not been a full Coast Guard rescue service at Kilkee, which is very unsatisfactory because it is a very busy

maritime centre, especially during the summer. In January, a Hungarian man got into difficulties and later died. The Coast Guard was not able to assist the rescue on the water and could only assist on land. I understand that two vessels are located at Kilkee, with one having limited range and capability and the other not fully operational. There was no water-based rescue and a helicopter had to come from Shannon to engage in the operation. Unfortunately, the man died.

Local fishermen and tourists are very apprehensive about putting to sea without having proper Coast Guard rescue back-up. The Coast Guard is made up of professional rescuers and volunteers who must have local knowledge and expertise in the locality. This is the difficulty that is arising regarding the Coast Guard service at Kilkee. I ask the Minister and his Department to intervene and bring about a satisfactory solution so as to restore full rescue services based at Kilkee. He must ensure that these services are of the highest quality.

Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Shane Ross): I thank the Deputy for raising a problem that is very current in County Clare and about which he is extremely concerned.

First, I praise the volunteer members of the Coast Guard who undertake such vital work in support of safe use of our coastline and coastal waters. Kilkee Coast Guard station is the unit which experienced the tragic loss of Cairtriona Lucas's life, as mentioned by the Deputy, on 12 September 2016 during a search-and-recovery mission conducted by means of boat and shoreline searches off the Clare coast. The circumstances leading to the loss of life are under investigation by the Marine Casualty Investigation Board and the Health and Safety Authority, and it would not be appropriate for me to comment on the incident until such time as the investigations have reached a conclusion.

Coast Guard units comprise three types, namely, search only or different combinations of search, cliff and-or boat, depending on requirements for local geographic terrain. Originally, a search-only unit, Kilkee Coast Guard unit, was categorised as a search-and-boat unit in 2013 following its assumption of the service previously provided by the Kilkee marine rescue service. Since the accident, in the interests of ensuring the immediate safety of Kilkee volunteers, the unit has been restricted to shoreline searches and inshore boat searches using a soft inflatable rescue boat known as a D-class lifeboat. This is to allow time for the training of new crews and for existing members to be recertified to a sufficient standard to operate the more complex rigid inflatable boats, RIBs, which can venture further out to sea or into more challenging conditions. I can understand why people may feel frustrated by this but I hope the Deputy will also understand the reasons it is being done.

In the meantime, the area normally covered by the Kilkee unit is covered by various other units. There is the Doolin unit directly to the north, the Kilrush RNLi lifeboat inside the mouth of the Shannon, the Aran Islands all-weather lifeboat and the Ballybunion community rescue boat unit directly to the south. Search and rescue coverage is also provided by the Coast Guard's helicopter service, including the helicopter based at Shannon Airport. The restriction on the operation of the larger RIB will be lifted when the crew have attained the necessary team and individual competencies and when the unit has passed an operational readiness audit. I hope it will be done with haste but with care and prudence as well. All Coast Guard units must pass such audits regularly to remain operational. As it takes time for crew to gain the necessary experience and competencies to reach the standard required, this is a process that cannot and will not be rushed.

I am mindful of the fact, as reported in the media and articulated by the Deputy, that there have been some concerns voiced in Kilkee about the capabilities of the unit, and I wish to reassure the House that a full safe RIB service will be restored when the unit is ready but not beforehand. In the interim, the safety of our volunteers remains of prime importance and Kilkee Coast Guard unit continues to serve its community as a search unit and as a boat rescue service using its D-class rescue boat.

I take this opportunity to clarify the role of the Coast Guard, which is a division of my Department, in the management of volunteer units and issues that naturally arise from time to time within a cohort of over 900 highly motivated volunteers. A code of conduct is in place that clearly sets out who does what at a local level and, where issues or grievances arise, how these are managed and what appeal procedures are available. I have made it clear in answer to parliamentary questions that it is not appropriate for me as Minister to intervene in such matters.

Deputy Michael Harty: As the Minister knows, just having shore-based activity is not sufficient to supply a rescue service in a seaside resort like Kilkee. Kilkee has a small population in winter. In the summer, however, the number of people there can rise to 25,000. These individuals avail of the sea-based activities on offer in Kilkee, which is a major tourist attraction. Not having proper sea rescue services is completely unacceptable.

The Minister indicates that the rescue services are covered by other units. Kilrush is a substantial distance away and one must go down the coast, around Loop Head and down the estuary to get there. Doolin is also some distance away. The Minister knows that sea rescue is an immediate requirement and not something that can be delayed for a number of hours so boats can come from other areas or the rescue helicopter can come from Shannon. These are of course essential components but there should be a sea-based rescue service in Kilkee. There were six incidents last year where no sea rescue was available from the Coast Guard. As a result, boats from the diving centre and recreational boats had to go to the assistance of those in difficulty. That is unacceptable.

We must take into account the fact that there is already expertise in the area. These are the voluntary members who were part of the Kilkee marine rescue service and they are still available. They are very anxious to provide a sea rescue service and participate in the coastguard service. There seems to be a difficulty with taking on these volunteers and availing of their expertise and local knowledge, which is critical in any sea rescue. The Minister should put pressure on the Coast Guard to provide a sea-based rescue service before the onset of the forthcoming holiday season, when so many people will come to Kilkee and use the facilities there but for whom such a service will not be provided.

Deputy Shane Ross: I am impressed by what the Deputy said. He will understand that the Coast Guard has been active in response to this tragic incident and the Coast Guard has kept a vigilant presence in Kilkee. While the unit was off-service for some time, there has been a process to ease it back incrementally to full operability. Training is ongoing in Kilkee as it is in all Coast Guard units. That said, in cases where extra training is required, as is the case in Kilkee due to the stand-down period after the accident, this is being provided and is ongoing. Search and rescue units do not work in isolation for one specific geographic area but in partnership with other resources in the vicinity. Kilkee and its surroundings are comprehensively served by the Coast Guard helicopter in Shannon, an RNLI lifeboat to Kilrush and Inishmore, a community rescue boat at Ballybunion and Doolin-Ballybunion CGUs. In any task, the Coast Guard's first concern is the safety of our Coast Guard volunteers.

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In reference to what Deputy Harty said, if there were six incidents of the sort, I will make fresh inquiries to see whether there is anything we can do to give further necessary cover in the weeks and months ahead while awaiting a permanent solution to the problem.

Road Projects

Deputy Jonathan O'Brien: The Minister may be aware that the week before last I tabled a parliamentary question on this issue and received a reply from his Department. The reply stated:

The initial selection and prioritisation of works to be funded is a matter for the local authority. The Department has not received any proposal from Cork City Council in respect of a proposed upgrade of Tinker's cross junction in Cork city.

I was quite happy with the reply and passed it onto my constituency colleague on the ground who is a member of Cork City Council. He raised it with the city council at the roads meeting last Monday. The reply he received from the city council on this proposed upgrade was that the preliminary design, Part 8 planning, detailed design and construction tender processes are complete, the contractor has been selected and the project awaits funding approval.

The Minister will see that we have two differing answers. Cork City Council states that it is shovel-ready for this €2.5 million upgrade of Tinkers Cross and awaiting funding from the Department while the Department's reply states that it has not received an application from the city council. The reason I therefore gave notice of this topical issue is to see if I can get some answers from the Minister. Will he clarify whether the information I received the week before last is correct?

The Minister may not be familiar with the junction itself but it is right outside a community centre and next to an estate entrance. It is used several times a day by residents from the estate who wish to cross the main road over to the shops and the community facilities. It is an extremely busy junction that is used daily by articulated lorries coming from Tivoli to get to the Blackpool area. The upgrade is vital but the difficulty is that no one seems to know what stage the project is at because we are getting different answers from the Department and Cork City Council.

Deputy Shane Ross: I will address that issue in a second because it is one which can be resolved very quickly, but I will address the substantive issue first. I was not aware of the information the Deputy has just provided when preparing for this subject but I will address it at the end.

The improvement and maintenance of regional and local roads together with traffic management in Cork city is the statutory responsibility of Cork City Council. Works on those roads are funded from the council's own resources, supplemented by State road grants. The initial selection and prioritisation of works to be funded is also a matter for the council. Before the financial crisis, local authorities could regularly apply for grants for specific improvement works for the strengthening, widening or realignment of rural roads where the proposed scheme cost generally less than €5 million. However, the extent of the cutbacks in grant funding during the crisis meant this grant scheme had to be curtailed after 2013 because expenditure on maintenance and renewal was falling well short of what was required to maintain adequately the regional and

local road network.

The capital plan for 2016 to 2021 provides for the gradual build-up in funding for the road network but it will take some years yet to reach the level required for the adequate maintenance and renewal of the network. For this reason, there is limited scope at present for funding projects under the specific grant programme. Any projects proposed by local authorities for consideration under this grant programme are assessed by the Department on a case-by-case basis. All projects put forward by local authorities for consideration must comply with the requirements of the public spending code and my Department's capital appraisal framework, and it is important for local authorities to prioritise projects within their overall area of responsibility with these requirements in mind. Cork City Council has not, however, sought funding for the Tinkers Cross junction improvement scheme under this grant heading.

I understand that there was an original design for the Tinkers Cross scheme funded by the National Transport Authority. I also understand that, on foot of discussions in 2017, the National Transport Authority and Cork City Council agreed to prioritise funding for the nearby Ballyvolane to city centre, or Ballyhooley Road, element of the northern ring road corridor in 2018 and a contractor is on-site with these works. There is, therefore, no funding allocation at present for Tinkers Cross in 2018.

I am puzzled by what the Deputy says and do not doubt it for a second. It seems to me that there is a complete lack of contact somewhere between the local authority and my Department. The Deputy said that there appears to be no contact or response even though the application has been made. I think that is what the Deputy is saying. If that is the case, I apologise. However, I do not know if it is. I will immediately make inquiries with my Department about it. If the Deputy gives me the name and the point of contact after the debate, I will ensure that contact is made in the next 24 hours. Would that be alright?

Deputy Jonathan O'Brien: That is perfect. I appreciate it. I do not know if contact has been made with the Department either. It could also be that the information from Cork City Council is wrong. I am not for one moment saying the Department is wrong in its answer to my parliamentary question. When the Minister gave the answer last week, it kind of fitted in with everything that I was hearing on the ground, which was that the city council had not made an application and that there was an application for a wider project which was under way. This appears to have been confirmed in the Minister's reply. Therefore, when I spoke to the local councillors on the ground, they followed it up because we were under the impression that we were awaiting funding. When I told them the Department was saying no application had been made for funding, they went back to the city council. The answer from Cork City Council dates from last Monday and it is very clear, however. It states that the contract has been selected, that the tender process is complete and that it is awaiting Government funding for the project. I would appreciate it if the Minister were to clarify the situation. I will provide him with the details of the contact person in Cork City Council and he can pass those on to the departmental officials to follow up on the matter.

Deputy Shane Ross: I thank the Deputy. I guess this is a misunderstanding because the officials in my Department in that particular area are super efficient. I have never come across anything like this happening or there being a lack of response to something so important. My guess is that there is a mismatch somewhere which we will be able to sort out between ourselves one way or the other.

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Hospital Services

Deputy Joe Carey: I wish to express my thanks to the Ceann Comhairle for affording me the opportunity to raise this issue. I welcome the Minister for Health to the House and thank him for taking the debate. As he will be aware, the medical assessment unit at Mid-Western Regional Hospital, Ennis was established following reconfiguration of acute hospital services in the mid-west region. Medical assessment units, MAUs, facilitate the immediate assessment, diagnosis and treatment of patients presenting with medical conditions. Patients are referred to the MAU by a case manager, their GP, Shannondoc, or through University Hospital Limerick, once it is established they are suitable for the service.

Since its opening in Ennis in 2013, the number of patients presenting at Ennis MAU has increased every year, with between 20 patients and 35 patients attending it every day. Following a comprehensive business case submitted by the University of Limerick hospital group to the Department of Health, the service was extended from a five-day to a seven-day service in May 2016. The then Minister for Health, Deputy Varadkar, visited the hospital where he received a comprehensive presentation from Dr. Tom Peirce, the consultant in charge at the MAU, on the merits of extending the service into the weekends. I was delighted when the service was extended. I compliment Dr. Tom Peirce and his team for delivering a top-class service to the people of County Clare. The stated aim of the MAU team is to have same-day diagnosis, treatment and discharge of patients whenever possible.

Last Tuesday, however, a misleading claim was made in the House that weekend MAU services at Ennis Hospital will be discontinued. That misinformed charge has led to unfounded headlines in local newspapers declaring proposed reductions in services at the unit. Following discussions with the chief executive officer of the University of Limerick hospital group, Professor Colette Cowan, and with the Minister for Health on several occasions yesterday, it is my understanding that the seven-day MAU service is secure and will not change. In fact, it will be improved with the construction of a new MAU area, a new minor injuries unit and a new radiology area.

I thank the Minister for being in the Chamber this evening, as he is now in a position to bring absolute clarity to this situation. Will he place on the record of the House the accurate position regarding the future of the MAU at Ennis Hospital? Such clarity is now required following the unfortunate events of this week.

Minister for Health (Deputy Simon Harris): I welcome this opportunity to provide assurance to the House regarding the continued operation of the Ennis MAU. I thank Deputy Carey for tabling this Topical Issue matter and providing me with a chance to allay any concerns in Ennis or County Clare regarding the continued operation of the MAU. I also acknowledge the presence of Deputy Harty, Chairman of the Oireachtas Committee on Health, in the House.

Ennis Hospital is a constituent hospital of the University of Limerick hospital group. As such, it plays an important role in meeting the health care needs of the population of the mid-west. The smaller hospitals framework, published in 2013, outlines the need for smaller hospitals and larger hospitals to work together in hospital groups.

The MAU in Ennis Hospital operates Monday to Friday, 8 a.m. to 6 p.m., and on weekends from 10 a.m. to 6 p.m. Patients are referred there for medical assessment by their GP or by Shannondoc via the Bed Bureau. The service is consultant-led and facilitates the immediate as-

assessment, diagnosis and treatment of patients presenting with medical conditions such as chest infections, urinary tract infections, fainting episodes, anaemia or non-acute cardiac problems. The Ennis MAU opened in 2013. In May 2016, it became the first of the four MAUs within the University of Limerick hospital group to operate on a seven-day basis. The numbers of patients attending for medical assessment has increased over the past year, with between 15 and 25 patients assessed daily.

The hospital group chief executive officer, to whom I have spoken directly on this issue, has advised that the current concern surrounding the future of the seven-day service does not arise from any top-down initiative or proposal from the University of Limerick hospital group. I have also been assured by the Department and the HSE that, not only has no such decision been made, there is no such proposal from group management.

Deputy Carey will appreciate the executive and clinical directors are required to visit all hospitals in the group to review and discuss service delivery as per normal oversight arrangements and in line with good management practice. It is important that senior management and clinical directors would visit smaller hospitals to check data, assess how they are doing and look at the metrics.

In that context, I understand that last week the chief clinical director and clinical director for medicine met the team at Ennis Hospital and many issues, including the MAU, were discussed. The chief clinical director and clinical director for medicine sought data on the weekend usage of the Ennis MAU. This information will allow the executive to assess the impact and effectiveness of the MAU and inform how best the service can be optimised in the interests of the people of Clare. Ennis Hospital is integral to the proper functioning of the University Limerick hospital group. A properly functioning MAU and injury unit are essential to help minimise unnecessary presentations to the emergency department at University Hospital Limerick in Dooradoyle.

University of Limerick hospital group continues to identify opportunities to increase activity in Ennis Hospital. It is examining proposals to increase vascular and plastic surgery at the hospital. The national patient experience survey carried out in May 2017 found that 88% of all inpatients in Ennis were happy or very happy with their overall experience. This is a tremendous tribute to the staff and management at Ennis Hospital and the care they provide. The programme for Government commits to extending opening hours of MAUs. If anything, I want to see Ennis Hospital do more, as does the University of Limerick hospital group. We will look at other opportunities to do so. There is no proposal from the University Limerick hospital group, the HSE or the Department to reduce the opening hours of Ennis MAU.

Deputy Joe Carey: I thank the Minister for bringing absolute clarity to this situation firsthand in the House. It is also reassuring to hear of the positive developments happening at Ennis Hospital. The retention of seven-day MAU services is important as the more patients who can be diverted from University Hospital Limerick, the better.

Notwithstanding the opening of a new €25 million state-of-the-art emergency department in University Hospital Limerick, there is an issue with bed capacity in the mid-west which is compounding the trolley crisis in University Hospital Limerick. The Minister is aware of the proposal to provide 96 additional acute beds in the hospital which has been submitted to the Department. Will this proposal be included in the capital plan to be published tomorrow? Will the Minister give us a sneak preview of it?

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Deputy Simon Harris: After receiving such clarification on the first matter, Deputy Carey is now trying to get me into awful trouble by having me reveal details of the Government's capital plan, which will be considered at the Cabinet meeting in Sligo tomorrow and will be published in the afternoon. He is correct that the people of the mid-west have been left without proper hospital bed facilities. Bizarrely in the past, Governments in boom times thought it was a good idea to reduce the number of beds in our hospitals. Thankfully, that is not the policy of this Government. We are committed to expanding the number of beds.

I commissioned a bed capacity review, which I published in full and which is available on my Department's website. It stated that even after the health service is reformed, we will still require 2,600 additional acute hospital beds by 2031. I am conscious that the people of the mid-west and in the University Limerick hospital group have a shortage of hospital beds and require more. I am pleased we were able to invest €25 million of taxpayers' money in a new state-of-the-art emergency department in Limerick, serving the people of Clare. However, it is clear we need to put more beds in.

I am aware there is a 96-bed ward proposal from the hospital group. I would like that to be looked upon favourably. It is badly needed and should have been delivered years ago. It is terrible it was not delivered during the time of the previous economic boom. I am determined we will deliver it.

I am also conscious we need to relocate and redevelop the maternity hospital and move it alongside the acute adult hospital in Limerick. The Government knows the needs of the people of Clare. Deputy Carey and his Oireachtas colleagues from Clare highlight them regularly.

5 o'clock

I hope that, as part of the €115 billion capital plan that we will publish, we will tomorrow be able to show good faith and commitment to the people of Clare in terms of advancing some of those important projects.

The outpatients department at Ennis general hospital has also been reviewed in terms of quality and capacity requirements. As the Deputy will probably know, the HSE is in the process of procuring new accommodation for the department, which I hope is good news for the people of Ennis.

Ambulance Service Provision

Deputy Eugene Murphy: I appreciate the fact the Minister has attended to take this matter, given his particularly busy schedule today. He is also getting ready for tomorrow.

Approximately three weeks ago, a 13 year old girl waited for an ambulance for 50 minutes after she took seriously ill at her home in west Roscommon. She suffered a serious neurological attack. Only for the help of a neighbour, a former nurse, her family is convinced that she would have died. As the emergency occurred, her father rang 999 and was told that the ambulance would not arrive for around 50 minutes. It was coming from Sligo, which was the nearest an ambulance could be found. At this stage, the man's daughter was seriously ill. She was struggling to breathe and he asked for an emergency response. Without a doubt, an air ambulance should have been called in at that point, but none arrived. What a traumatic and stressful situ-

ation for any family.

When the ambulance arrived, the staff were excellent. In a short space of time, they stabilised the girl and her breathing and made her comfortable.

When the accident and emergency unit in Roscommon closed, we were guaranteed an increased ambulance service for the county. That has not happened. The people of west Roscommon have been left without a service. While I acknowledge that, from time to time, the air ambulance does a good job and gets to places quickly, this was a serious situation and one about which I am sure the Minister would be concerned.

In January 2016, an ambulance base was opened in Loughglynn, close to where the family lives in west Roscommon. However, no permanent ambulance staff are located there. An ambulance comes from Roscommon University Hospital and parks at the building when one is available.

Will the Minister consider putting in place a permanent ambulance team in Loughglynn to serve the vast countryside of west Roscommon? It is desperately needed, which is a message that the Minister has also been given by others. I hope that he will be able to bring solace to the people of that area so that they do not live in fear of being unable to get an ambulance quickly when it is urgently needed.

Deputy Simon Harris: I thank the Deputy for raising this important and sensitive matter. I also thank him for telling me of the difficulty that a particular constituent of his experienced. It is important that such issues be brought to the floor of the House, as we are referring to real people when we talk about statistics, numbers, resources and decisions. I will ask the HSE and the National Ambulance Service, NAS, about the matter that the Deputy has brought to my attention.

Within Roscommon, the NAS operates from a number of bases. As the House will be aware, though, the NAS dynamically deploys resources to respond to incidents as they arise. This is achieved in the Roscommon area by dispatching resources from adjacent ambulance stations in neighbouring counties. Resources from ambulance stations including Carrick-on-Shannon, Tuam, Longford and Athlone can be, and are, deployed to incidents in Roscommon as required in addition to the resources of ambulance bases in Roscommon.

As the Deputy outlined, in order to develop services in Roscommon further, the NAS acquired the former Garda station at Loughglynn, refurbished it and opened it as a dispatch point in 2016. However, I take the Deputy's point. The ambulance service in west Roscommon has been reviewed a number of times in terms of available resources and demand for services. Since 2011, extra staff have been assigned to Roscommon to provide an additional 24-7 emergency ambulance and a 24-7 rapid response vehicle. In addition, an intermediate care vehicle has been deployed to Roscommon to undertake inter-hospital and inter-facility transfers.

As the Deputy alluded, Roscommon is well served by the Emergency Aeromedical Service, EAS, which operates from Custume barracks, Athlone. I am eager to see whether we can do more in the aeromedical space, since that would enable the EAS in Athlone to do even more in the Deputy's part of the country. That service was established to provide a more timely response to persons in rural areas and is available seven days per week in daylight hours. The service is specifically targeted at the west of Ireland, with the highest demand for services coming from counties Galway, Mayo and Roscommon.

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The capacity review, which was the first review of the ambulance service that I published when I became Minister, examined overall ambulance resource levels and distribution against demand and activity. Future investment in ambulance services will be guided by that capacity review.

In recent years, year-on-year additional investment has been directed towards the NAS, but I accept that we have more to do. This year, an additional sum of €10.7 million has been made available, which includes €2.8 million to fund new developments in the ambulance service, for example, the development of alternative pathways to care, with the “hear and treat” clinical hub expected to go live soon in the national emergency operations centre. This will divert some lower acuity patients to alternative care pathways and will free up some emergency capacity. In time, it is hoped that such initiatives will help to improve response times around the country, including in the west Roscommon area.

I should also mention that the capacity review identified particular difficulties serving rural areas such as County Roscommon. Outside the greater Dublin area, the population is widely dispersed with a relatively large population living in rural areas. Due to this population distribution, Ireland has a far higher percentage of activity in rural areas than other ambulance services. This is something with which we must grapple. When we compare ourselves with other jurisdictions, our population is dispersed in a different way. That is a good and welcome thing, but it means that there are extra challenges in ensuring that we get ambulances to every part of this country as quickly as we would like. We need to approach these challenges head on.

As well as additional investment in the ambulance service, the review indicated that one of the practical ways of improving first response times was through our community first responder, CFR, schemes. I am pleased that the NAS is working closely with local CFR groups across the country in order to develop and enhance services.

I assure the House that the NAS is focused on improving the ambulance service in west Roscommon and throughout the country. I will bring directly to the NAS the concerns and points highlighted by Deputy Eugene Murphy on the floor of Dáil Éireann. I will ask that the NAS revert directly to the Deputy on those specific issues.

Deputy Eugene Murphy: It was nice to hear the Minister say that he was worried about people rather than numbers. That is important. I acknowledge his statement that an ambulance can sometimes be in an area and get to a location quickly, but this happened after a family came home from church on a Sunday. That should have been a quiet day, but no ambulance was available in Roscommon to get there. Getting an ambulance from Sligo took 50 minutes. There was a shortage of ambulances in the area.

The Minister has acknowledged that there is a difficulty - we have a sprawling countryside. As he is well aware as a Member of the Dáil, however, our responsibility has to be to our people.

Deputy Simon Harris: Absolutely.

Deputy Eugene Murphy: We must do our best for our people and serve them. That is why I am pressing this case so hard. I am grateful for the Minister’s answer. Hopefully, there will be some progress towards putting the service in place. It would be welcome. If the Minister puts the service in place, I will be the first to stand up publicly and give him credit for doing it.

Deputy Simon Harris: I agree with the Deputy that we have a responsibility to all of the

people of this country regardless of where they live. In fact, in many ways we have a particular responsibility to people who live in rural and regional communities in terms of putting services in place. That is why we have increased the budget for the NAS year on year. We increased it by more than €10 million this year, including an amount of €2.8 million that will enable us to invest in more ambulances and paramedics. The Deputy will agree on the importance of the NAS following an evidence-based assessment and targeting resources in the areas most in need. I hear clearly the case that he and all Oireachtas Members from Roscommon make about the need for more resources for its ambulance service. I will pass those comments directly on to the NAS and ask it to contact the Deputy directly on this matter.

Report on Lone Parents: Motion

Deputy John Curran: I move:

That Dáil Éireann shall consider the Report of the Joint Committee on Employment Affairs and Social Protection entitled Report on the Position of Lone Parents in Ireland, copies of which were laid before Dáil Éireann on 16th June, 2017.

At an early stage in formulating the work programme of the Joint Committee on Social Protection, now the Joint Committee on Employment Affairs and Social Protection, we recognised that the position of lone parents in Ireland should receive particular attention. Our interest was particularly in lone parents accessing various support payments and schemes, mostly but not entirely from the Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection. We recognise that there are many lone-parent families that make their own arrangements in pursuing work and educational opportunities, but the joint committee is concerned about the position of those families who require assistance.

The work of the joint committee was done with a view to the report being published in a timely fashion to afford the Minister an opportunity to reflect on it in order that it would have budgetary implications. In that regard, the report was published in June 2017 prior to the announcement of budget 2018. The Minister appeared before the joint committee where many of the issues were discussed. The final comment I will make about the Minister's appearance at the joint committee is that before she left, she told it, with regard to the preparation of the budget, that if we had one or two particular issues that were of significant importance, we should highlight them and that she would act on them. We duly acknowledged that lone parents and the 2012 pension anomalies on which we had also produced a report were issues of significant concern to the joint committee. It was one of a number of reports available to the Minister which had been carried out by Indecon and Dr. Millar and Dr. Crosse from NUI Galway. There were a variety of reports dealing with this issue.

Since the budget, I have asked what has happened and where we are. I want to outline the changes the Minister has said she has made. She said in a reply to a parliamentary question:

Budgets 2015, 2016 and 2017 included a range of measures that benefited lone parents. I ensured improvements for lone parents ... in Budget 2018 by introducing the following measures:

- an income disregard for lone parents on [one-parent family payment] and the job-seeker's transitional payment (JST), to be increased from €110 a week to €130 a week

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with effect from 29th March 2018;

- the qualified child (IQC) rate to be increased from €29.80 a week to €31.80 a week with effect from 29th March 2018.

A number of other budgetary measures will also benefit lone parents, including the €5 primary rate increase, the additional week to the fuel allowance and the Christmas bonus of 85%, which was paid in early December.

These changes will see a lone parent on [one-parent family payment] or JST working 15 hours a week on the National Minimum Wage gain by almost €1,000 per year in their overall income.

My Department's social impact assessments of the last four budgets show a cumulative increase of €36.75 in the average weekly household income of employed lone parents and €33.60 for unemployed lone parents. This compares favourably with a weekly increase of €34.45 for the average household.

The Minister went on to say:

I intend to continue to prioritise supports for lone parents, particularly those which incentivise work over welfare. I stated at the publication of the Indecon report that I intend to provide for the further review of the [one-parent family payment] scheme.

I thank the Minister for her response. It is up to others to judge on the issues highlighted by the joint committee and whether they are adequate, but it is fair to indicate what the Minister said has been done and her acknowledgement of what still needs to be done.

Being a lone parent carries its own particular difficulties. Being the sole carer makes it difficult for the parent to avail of full-time and better paid employment or access educational opportunities that would facilitate future access to better paid employment. The State must, therefore, provide a range of measures, including but not confined to housing support, child care access and educational prospects, to empower these families to break free from the dangers of long-term deprivation.

In considering this matter the joint committee met many stakeholders with expertise in the different challenges facing lone parents. We heard from the Department on the availability of various supports, from Barnardos on cycles of poverty and disadvantage, from the UNESCO child and family research centre at NUI Galway on lone parent activation, from the group Single Parents Acting for the Rights of Kids, SPARK, on perceived inadequacies in available supports, from Focus Ireland on the issue of homelessness and from One Family on work and education supports. The joint committee's report was laid before the Houses in June 2017 and its findings were underpinned by the presentations, the delegates and their accounts. I acknowledge the time they took to appear before the joint committee. It is clear from its analysis that the main challenges facing lone parents are child poverty, housing costs, child care costs and its availability, obtaining maintenance, job activation, access to education and changes to the one-parent family payment.

According to census 2016, 25.4% of all families with children are lone-parent families. There are over 350,000 children living in lone-parent families, with 86.4% of the parents being female and 13.6% male. The lone-parent population is a diverse group. Lone parents may be

single, separated, widowed or divorced. Lone parent families contain parents who cohabit with partners, or with partners and their families in so-called blended families. The lone-parent population is diverse in the age of the parents and children, the size of families, work participation rates and the range of educational levels. The available data suggest some lone parents have comparative disadvantages in certain areas, with fewer completing second level education and more likely to be unemployed. This leads to fewer opportunities to achieve higher earnings.

Longitudinal research in Ireland and other countries indicates that it is poverty, not family structure, that is the key determinant in predicting outcomes for children and that lone-parent families are at much greater risk of poverty than other groups. According to the CSO, lone-parent families have the highest consistent poverty rate of 26.2% of any group in Irish society and suffer higher rates of deprivation, at 57.9% compared to 25.5% among the general population. Children living in one-parent families are three times more likely to live in consistent poverty than in families with two adults with one to three children. To help to reduce the level of poverty in this group, the joint committee recommended the removal of some payment anomalies. It proposed the full restoration of the income disregard for those on the one-parent family payment and the jobseeker's transitional payment. It also recommended that lone parents be able to remain on jobseeker's transitional payment until their youngest child is 18 years rather than the current cut-off age of 14. I note that in budget 2018 the income disregard was increased by €20 to €130 per week, which is welcome. All of these measures have to be acknowledged.

Lone parents are less likely to be in employment than at least one parent in a two-parent family. Child care, or the lack of child care supports, is frequently cited as a barrier to labour activation. A lone parent's capacity to work cannot be equated to that of a parent in a two-parent family. Lone parents devote more of their time to caring responsibilities, responsibilities which impinge on their availability for work. Among other difficulties, child care costs in Ireland are among the highest in the OECD. Lone parents, as the sole carers of their children, are more affected by these costs. They simply have no one else to help them to bear them.

A key concern raised by the joint committee was the recent change in the one-parent family payment policy. Recipients who were in part-time employment prior to the change experienced a reduction in income. This encouraged welfare dependency as lone parents found that taking up work could actually lead to reduced income. Given the specific challenges facing lone parents in trying to access employment, the joint committee agreed with the recommendation of Dr. Millar and Dr. Crosse of NUI Galway who gave evidence to it that a package of supports for lone parents should include pre-employment supports, employment supports, financial support and child care support.

According to evidence given to the joint committee, homelessness disproportionately affects single-parent families. Everyone is aware of the stark and ongoing increase in rental costs. By their nature, lone-parent families are less likely and less able to keep pace. It was made clear to the joint committee that the value of family income supplement, now the working family payment, had been eroded for many. It was traditionally seen as a means of lifting families out of poverty, but local authorities, in considering applications for rent supplement and SUSI grants, among other payments, were including FIS as a source of income. While recognising that homelessness among lone parents is only part of a much larger problem, the joint committee strongly urged that rent allowance be decoupled from family income supplement.

In a 2003 report the OECD suggested long-term poverty might be reinforced by the one-parent family payment if there was a lack of government engagement with lone-parent families.

This engagement should monitor changes to supports and schemes to ensure they are actually helping those they were designed to assist. The most significant issue affecting lone parents since 2012 has been the change to the administration of the one-parent family payment, OFP, introduced in the Social Welfare and Pensions Act 2012. These changes were applied to new and existing recipients and the age of the youngest child at which payment ceases was reduced from 18 to seven. Stakeholder groups expressed concern to the joint committee about anomalies which caused incomes to drop for those in work. Although the reforms were intended to encourage lone parents off social welfare and onto an in-work payment, many parents who transferred to family income supplement would now be better off transferring back to job-seeker's transition payment.

The joint committee recommended that the Department introduce markers within its systems to ensure that those leaving OFP are still recognised as lone parents, even when they are in receipt of another payment, such as jobseeker's allowance or family income supplement. This would allow proper monitoring through comparative data on outcomes and progression for lone parents on these schemes, thus ensuring additional supports could be offered or accessed as required. The joint committee also recommended that caseworkers assigned to support lone parents on one parent family payment or jobseeker's transition payment should be given training to ensure that they fully understand the challenges and needs of lone parent families, and to enhance their ability to intervene as effectively and beneficially as possible.

The joint committee paid particular attention to the issue of maintenance. It found the introduction of the one-parent family payment scheme extended the requirement for lone parents to make efforts to obtain maintenance from their former spouses to unmarried cases. Previously, this provision only applied to separated spouses. Although the scheme sought to relieve hardship for lone parents who had not secured adequate, or any, maintenance from the other parent of the child, there were unfavourable consequences for lone parents. The cost of any support given to lone parents from the other parent of the child now became recoverable by the State. Further, the requirement to contact the former partner brought unintended potential negative consequences. A lone parent may not have contact details for the second parent or there may be difficulties in their relationship, such as abuse. Despite assurance from the Department that it will not require a lone parent to seek maintenance where there has been an abusive relationship in the past, such a relationship may have existed without having been proved to exist and the lone parent may find it impossible to demonstrate. Even if there is no difficulty in making contact, a lone parent is forced to seek payments through an adversarial and costly court system if the second parent is averse to making payment. In Ireland only 35% of lone parents receive child maintenance payments.

The joint committee noted that Ireland has no state body with responsibility for child maintenance payments, whereas in other jurisdictions, such as Sweden, New Zealand and Canada, the state is involved in facilitating the transfer of maintenance to parents. The committee recommended that such a state body should be put in place to appropriately seek and pursue maintenance payments, and urged strongly that lone parents should ever have their social protection payment threatened or reduced due to non-receipt of maintenance from the other parent. The obligation to pursue the liable adult should be removed from the lone parent.

We have all met lone parents at our clinics who have been unable for a variety of reasons to approach the other parent. It is very telling to meet them, some with the fear of God in them. We can all cite case studies. It is time that the Department considered an alternative system where the individual starting out as the vulnerable one is better protected by the State. It is not

always a question of additional payments but of a better and fairer process for that parent.

All of the joint committee's recommendations have been made with the interests of lone parents and their children in mind. The problems of poverty, homelessness and educational disadvantage are not of course confined to lone parents, but their particular set of circumstances results in each individual problem exacerbating the others. As a society, we want to help all families and especially all children to reach their full potential. For that to happen, it behoves us to assist in breaking cycles of poverty and help avoid creating multi-generational disadvantage.

Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection (Deputy Regina Doherty): I am pleased to have an opportunity to speak on the report on the position of lone parents in Ireland produced by the Oireachtas Joint Committee on Employment Affairs and Social Protection and thank the committee for its extensive body of work. I had a chance to speak on this in the Seanad last October and welcome the opportunity to debate this further in the Dáil this evening. There have been some changes since we first had a conversation about this. I thank the committee for acknowledging them. I thank the committee members for the programme of work it has completed in the past 12 months, and particularly the interested parties it has invited which have given valuable information and practical examples of how life reflects our policy decisions and will, I hope, make an input into those in the future.

As Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection my priorities include the children living in consistent poverty, of which there are far too many, and lone-parent families. Reports such the one produced by the committee and the recent Indecon review of the changes to the one-parent family payment are very welcome, as they help to inform the policy in these areas. Both of these reports have influenced the budget measures that I introduced for lone parents for 2018. Budget 2018 included a range of measures that directly benefit lone-parent families and their children. I will discuss some of these measures in more detail later.

The committee's report outlines the main challenges facing lone parents. These cover several areas including child poverty, activation and education, child care costs, maintenance payments and the changes to the one-parent family payment scheme. It also made 22 recommendations as to how these challenges could be addressed. These recommendations relate to areas that are under the responsibility of my Department, and also to areas under the remit of other Departments including the Department of Children and Youth Affairs on child care, the Department of Education and Skills on educational supports and the Department of Justice and Equality on maintenance arrangements. While I cannot address all of the 22 recommendations this evening I will address the broad areas of concern highlighted in the report and I can assure Members that the recommendations have been carefully considered by officials and the Department.

As I stated in the Seanad, the poverty rates currently experienced by lone-parent families are unacceptable. The Central Statistics Office, CSO, survey on income and living conditions, SILC, for 2016 shows that between 2015 and 2016 there was a reduction in the consistent poverty rate for lone parents of 1.6% to 24.6%, and a reduction in the deprivation rate of 7.8% to 50.1% but an increase in the at-risk-of-poverty rate of 4% to 40.2%. That is not acceptable. There is no doubt that these rates are still too high and that further reductions are needed to improve the lives of lone parent families.

The recent ESRI report on poverty dynamics of social risk groups in the EU also found that high poverty rates for lone parents are not specific to Ireland. That does not give us any com-

fort. This research showed that across 11 countries, lone parents, along with adults with disabilities, stand out as having higher poverty risks when compared to other working age adults. Lone parents are also most likely to stay in poverty for at least two years.

All of this information shows that lone parents are one of the groups that are struggling. It also shows that poverty is a complex problem but it is up to all of us to solve it. What steps can we take? My view, which is supported by the Indecon report, is that the policy approach of encouraging and supporting people into work is correct, and has positively impacted on lone parents' lives where they have found employment.

We need, however, to do more for these families with no or low paid employment whose risk of poverty is still too high. In budget 2018 I introduced a range of measures that I hope will benefit lone parent families. From March of this year the weekly rates of payment will increase by €5 and the qualified child payment will increase by €2 per week. Both of these increases represent a significant first step to help reduce the poverty rates for these families. The extension of the fuel allowance season by an additional week will also help to support them.

Reducing the poverty rates for lone parents is not just a question of income support. It is essential that we also provide the policy supports needed to help lone parents into sustainable employment. When we talk about helping people find a job, it has to be a job, a better job and then a career. Some people have different views on the Indecon review but it is comforting that it shows that the measures were working, notwithstanding the cuts that were made at the same time as the policy changes. The survey of one-parent families that was carried out as part of this review showed an increase in full-time employment among the survey respondents from 15% to 22%. We need to continue with this good progress by improving the supports that will help more lone parents to work that pays. There is no point in them getting work that makes them less well-off than they were when they were entirely dependent on welfare so from March this year, I am increasing the earnings disregard on the OFP and jobseeker's transitional payment, JST, from €110 per week to €130 per week allowing a lone parent on OFP or JST to take home an additional €20 per week before it will affect the payment. This builds on previous increases to these disregards that saw the JST disregard increase from €60 to €110 across budgets 2016 and 2017 and the OFP income disregard increase from €90 to €110 in budget 2017. When the budget 2018 increase is combined with the increase in the national minimum wage to €9.55 per hour and the rate increases, it results in an extra €19 per week in the pocket of a OFP and JST recipient with one child who is working 15 hours on the national minimum wage. This is almost €1,000 per year. While it might not seem like an awful lot of money, it is going in the right direction and it is a very good start.

The working family payment thresholds - formerly the family income supplement - for families with one to three children will also increase by €10 per week from March resulting in an additional €6 per week for these families. The legislative sunset clause for the back to work family dividend will also be removed. This effective support will remain available to lone parents and couples who make the transition from welfare to work, including those who also avail of the working family payment. I know that the committee recommended higher increases to the income disregards for OFP and JST and to the child payment rates in its report. I am very much aware, and I hope the committee is very much aware, that I am in sync with what it has recommended. Obviously, I could not achieve it all in one budget. If I am lucky enough, I might be around for a few budgets and we might get to what we are looking to do. However, apart from trying to increase supports for families, the biggest thing we can do is to increase the figure of 22%, who are in the main women, who have received support from my Department

and have managed to get full-time employment in the past number of years. We are to keep going until we get up to 100%. In fairness, the budget struck what I hoped was a fair balance between what some of our obligations are to other people on different schemes. I was particularly conscious of the work done by the committee in the report because it was published when I came into office. From my own experience with people in this category, I am well aware of how hard it is to be a parent on one's own.

The committee's report highlights the importance of access to education to improve the position for lone parents. It also recommends that the activation services provided by the case officers in my Department must tailor these supports specifically to the person and the challenges they face in this category. I agree that supports such as education, training and employment programmes are critical to help lone parents progress to really good sustainable employment. There are already a wide range of financial supports available to lone parents that allow them to participate in the variety of educational and employment programmes available through my Department and the Department of Education and Skills. For example, lone parents on OFP or JST who wish to participate in education can retain these payments and also avail of the SUSI grant from the Department of Education and Skills. Members might be aware that this option is not available to other people on different schemes.

My Department's employment services also currently provide a case-managed approach to assist lone parents to make a personal plan that is specifically tailored to their circumstances. This plan includes availing of the various educational supports and progressing towards employment opportunities, thankfully, within an ever-improving labour market. For lone parents on JST, the engagement is a proactive tailored support that can be available for up to seven years while JST is in payment. This case-managed approach is being monitored and will continue to be developed over time to offer more tailored progression plans for lone parents that reflect their individual circumstances.

My Department is also a member of the steering committee recently initiated by the Department of Education and Skills to progress the recommendations made in the independent report on barriers to lone parents in accessing third level education. Deputies may remember that this research was commissioned by that Department and published in April of last year. The intention is that an action plan will be agreed by all relevant Departments based on the recommendations of the report. The Department of Education and Skills will monitor progress against the plan. There is some overlap between this report and recommendations made in the committee's report around educational opportunities for lone parents. For example, both reports recommend introducing more part-time and flexible educational options so this will now be dealt with as part of that steering committee. I would just like to note that the committee's report recommended voluntary access to activation supports for lone parents. This is in fact already available to lone parents so our thinking is similar. Lone parents have always had the option of self-referring for activation supports. All they have to do is literally contact their Intreo centre and we will help. Finally, the Pathways to Work plan developed by my Department also commits the Government to extend activation services to other groups of working-age adults, including lone parents so a lot of good work and progress is happening in this space.

The committee's report also recommends access to affordable child care. As Members know, this is the responsibility of the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs. I know that the Minister shares my interest in prioritising supports for lone parents and that her interest in these families goes back to her time not just as a Senator but her advocacy work before that. I know she has a very longstanding interest in supporting lone parents and in tackling child

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poverty. The Minister has made great progress in the area of child care in budget 2018 building on previous developments, including the extension of the free pre-school scheme, ECCE, for an additional year and further investment in child care affordability measures, both of which will, hopefully, assist lone parents. My Department will continue to support and assist the Minister and her Department with these initiatives.

The committee's report also included details of some of the challenges facing lone parents when arranging maintenance and recommended the development of a child maintenance agency. Following the completion of the Indecon report, my Department recommenced the review that had been stalled while the work on the Indecon report was ongoing because the same people were working on both reports. I am in discussion with my officials on this currently and I expect to have a paper for the committee relatively shortly. As I promised in the Dáil, I will give the relevant interested parties plenty of time to input to this area. Some Members have already provided me with their reflections on that. However, as any reform in this area is predominantly owned by the Department of Justice and Equality, I must also consult with the Minister for Justice and Equality on the next steps and not stick my two left feet into his Department before I get the nose chopped off me. I also want to confirm that I have followed through on my commitment given in the Dáil last November that in cases of domestic abuse, no lone parent will need to provide evidence in order to satisfy the efforts to seek maintenance condition. I stated then and I state now that we absolutely trust women. We will accept their word and no further evidence will be required. This is departmental policy and is being rolled out to local offices. I only heard yesterday that the circular was issued to all staff instructing them about exactly what we had committed to heretofore.

I think I have managed to cover the broad recommendations made in the committee's report. I again thank the committee members for them. The measures I have outlined covering financial supports, activation supports and my plans to progress the maintenance issues demonstrate my continued commitment, which is shared by Members, to improving the lives of parents rearing families on their own. I suppose we should all be grateful that the economy is out of recession and is growing. Unemployment has fallen from 7.4% in January 2017 to 6.1% in January 2018. Hopefully, we are still going in the right direction. This recovery and the positive impact of recent budget changes on lone parents can only help to further reduce the financial environment in which they live and reduce the poverty rates for these families. As previously promised, I intend to provide for a further review of the OFP scheme when the benefits of these changes can be measured. This review will include data to the end of 2018.

I thank the committee for all its help and invite it, in any deliberations it may have, or if any other Members or organisations are invited in during the coming months, to give me any information it thinks might be relevant as we prepare for this year's budget but also changes in policies that we hope will improve the lives of people who are parenting alone.

Deputy Joan Collins: I congratulate the committee on the report because much hard work went into it. I thank the Chairman for organising the committee to look at this area and produce a report. What really made the difference was that lone parents and Single Parents Acting for the Rights of Kids, SPARK, appeared before the committee and we had the report from Millar and Crosse which pulled previous information together. That really fed into the committee. Too often at committees, we hear from civil servants and different groups that do not really reflect the sections of society affected by the changes. That is one of the reasons I am going to refer to what One Family and Single Parents Acting for the Rights of Kids, SPARK, said when the report was published and following the budget. One Family said that it was heartening

the voices of lone parents had been heard by the committee through its continued, determined representation, that the committee reiterated and supported what it had evidenced in policy work and in submissions for the past decade, that the main challenges facing lone parents were child poverty, housing costs, availability of affordable child care, obtaining child maintenance payments, job activation, access to education and changes to the one parent family payment, that lone parents had waited long enough and that action was needed to ensure the Government provided a range of measures, including but not confined to, housing support, child care access, education prospects and in-work supports to empower one parent families to break free from long-term deprivation and poverty, that it acknowledged the extensive work that had gone into the completion of the report and that the next step was to ensure budget 2018 contained significant measures which could resource the recommendations and make them a reality and that, in particular, it supported the committee's recommendation to broaden access to and increase supports available to those in receipt of jobseeker's transition and the call for the establishment of a State body to seek and pursue maintenance payments.

After the report was published, SPARK said:

Last month, the Joint Oireachtas Committee on Social Protection issued a groundbreaking report on the welfare of lone parents. The debate around lone parents in Ireland has traditionally been a dualistic argument around work or welfare. This report, arguably for the first time, introduces the third strand into the debate, the role of the absent parent in the welfare of their child. We have a long history in Ireland of absolving absent fathers from responsibility, in respect of mother and baby homes and this tradition has continued.

It said that this was a welcome break from that.

It went on to say that in 2012, the Minister for Social Protection introduced reforms to lone parent payments which cut the income of working lone parents and those in education and training, that EU SILC, survey on income and living conditions, reports showed that since her reforms were introduced there had been a 50% increase in the consistent poverty rate for lone parent families, while concurrently there was a small reduction in the rate for the general population, that children in lone parent families were now over three times more likely to live in poverty than children in two parent families, that it believed a major reason for this was that one parent could legally walk away, that the committee undertook a comprehensive analysis of the reforms introduced by the Minister of Social Protection in budget 2012 and included oral testimony from officials from the Department and representatives of various organisations such as the Society of St. Vincent de Paul, Barnardos, Focus Ireland, One Family and SPARK.

SPARK also said that as a result of changes made by the Minister, the Department now writes to the non-custodial parent once the youngest child in a family turns seven and informs them they are no longer obliged to pay child maintenance, unless it is court ordered, that this has resulted in a 28% drop of families receiving maintenance and, according to the Department, only a third of families now receive maintenance, that in March of this year, the United Nations Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women, UN CEDAW, committee called on Ireland to consider setting up a statutory maintenance system, that in this report the Oireachtas committee had now also called for a statutory child maintenance system and a review on how child maintenance was assessed by the Department and that it was essential that the Minister, Deputy Regina Doherty, considered the important findings in this report and acted on its recommendations and that taking child maintenance out of contentious litigation could only help heal separated families. This is an important point and I would like to see

how that is progressing. Perhaps the Minister might make a few points around that.

After the budget, One Family welcomed the €5 weekly social welfare payment increase, and the household income threshold for FIS increase by €10 for families of up to three children, along with new housing initiatives. However, it said it was not enough to lift lone parents and their children out of the consistent poverty and deprivation that resulted from previous reform of the one-parent family payment, and to support them in overcoming systemic barriers in accessing education and employment. One Family was quite critical that the Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection had released the Indecon independent review of the amendments to the one-parent family payment which should have formed the basis of changes in budget 2018 for social welfare dependent one-parent families. It said that increases should have been targeted and strategic to reach the poorest children and families across the board, following the evidence and Government commitments to lift 100,000 children out of poverty. It went on to refer to the Economic and Social Research Institute, ESRI, report, Poverty dynamics of social risk groups in the EU, in relation to the specific barriers faced by lone parents in accessing work and their experience of higher levels of deprivation and child poverty. That paper draws on the EU-SILC dataset to investigate changes over the period 2004 to 2014 in the trends and dynamics in poverty for social risk groups in selected European countries representing different welfare regimes and that out of 11 EU countries, the persistent poverty gap in Ireland was the largest and that it also increased the most during the study's timeframe.

That contradicts the point the Minister made in her contribution. One Family continued by saying that the main findings of the report indicated that one parent families in all countries have among the highest risks of both material deprivation and income poverty. The point it is making is that in terms of ordinary instruments to try to eradicate poverty, more has to be put into the areas of lone parents and disability. There have to be more of those instruments to deal with that.

I refer to what SPARK said because it is important. It said that in general, the situation for domestic abuse survivors had been sorted, that a few local offices were still ignoring it but, to be fair, once it highlighted it to Department officials it was resolved. It also said that there was a massive problem around people transferring from the one-parent family payment to JST, that shortly after the transfer, the liable relative got a letter stating the Department no longer held them liable for maintenance but that any existing court orders were still valid, that many men stopped paying and because, legally, the Department could not do anything, it put pressure on the lone parent to prove they were seeking it, that many lone parents did not have an address for their ex-partner so the courts would not issue a summons, that the Department had the father's PPS number and address yet it put pressure on the woman when she did not have that information and that people with young children aged seven to 13 were really being pressurised over this. That is an area that needs to be looked at in a critical way.

SPARK also said that a positive of the budget was the €10 per extra per week for qualifying lone parents, although that was still €17.60 less than it was back in 1971. That is going back a long time. It referred to the €5 extra in the basic payment and €2 extra for qualifying - small but welcome. It said that it failed to address higher costs of teenage children and left lone parents with teenagers in a very precarious position, that even with child benefit, €31.80 a week, this did not adequately feed and clothe a young adult and that they are charged adult rates for most things and that it did not cover even basics such as schools costs, trips, transport, etc.

The other main point was that there was no provision made that would allow child main-

tenance be seen as a benefit for the child and that in general, 50% of a maintenance order is deducted from social welfare but it is 100% for people on rent supplement and that this happens whether the maintenance is paid or not. That point was made earlier on by a Deputy.

It was a positive report. Some positive things happened around the budget but lone parents are expecting a lot more and they will continue to campaign for what they think has to be done in respect of getting them out of poverty and deprivation.

Deputy John Brady: I welcome this debate on a comprehensive piece of work carried out by the committee. I thank the Chair of the committee for facilitating and allowing comprehensive analysis and detailed questioning of all our expert witnesses, and more importantly, real life witnesses. They are out there dealing with the consequences of the failure of successive Governments to tackle one of the most deprived sectors of our society. I say that with reference to the changes made in 2012 and the consequences those changes have had on lone parent families right across the State. I also say that in the full knowledge of the impact of changes that the Labour Party and Fine Gael implemented in government. It is one of the problems lone-parent families are facing. It is unfortunate that Labour is not here to try to bring forward the solutions to help lone-parent families and address the difficulties they are facing.

While the report the committee published is comprehensive, it does not contain any new information. The report provides a snapshot of the reality of life for lone parents and their children. There is now so much evidence about the difficulties facing lone parents and their children that it is difficult to comprehend the Government's indifference to the issues involved. Government action is certainly not reflective of the wealth of evidence we have in respect of lone parents and their children. Aside from the report before the House, we also have the Millar and Crosse report. The latter tells us that, as a result of changes made by Fine Gael and the Labour Party to the one-parent family payment, some lone parents are actually better off on social welfare than at work. We have the Indecon report which tells us that the majority of lone parents surveyed experienced greater levels of deprivation after the changes to the one-parent family payment than was the case before their implementation. We also have the survey on income and living conditions, SILC, report for 2016. This tells us that there was a 4% increase in the number of lone-parent families living at risk of poverty in just one year. When the report was published, the overall figure in this regard was 40%. We have also had the ESRI report which tells us that, of 11 EU countries, Ireland has the highest persistent deprivation rate among lone parents. There is a significant gap in deprivation rates for lone parents compared with other adults in this State.

What more evidence do the Minister or Government need in order to take the steps to assist and support lone parents and their children? How much longer is the Government going to continue to neglect them? We need targeted measures across all Departments if we are to improve the lives of lone parents and their children. We need to make it easier for lone parents to upskill, train and to return to education if they so wish. Their doing the latter is not only beneficial for lone parents, it is also beneficial for their children. Research shows that the better educated a parent is, the better the educational outcome for his or her child. Education can play a key role in opening doors for lone parents, in finding them sustainable employment, in helping to lift them out of consistent poverty and in moving them away from a position of being at risk of poverty. Relaxing the rules relating to the back to education allowance is just one way in which we could assist lone parents to return to education.

We need to ensure that lone parents and their children are not left struggling to afford ever-

increasing rents, particularly as most lone-parent families are in private rented accommodation. Other lone-parent families live in hotel rooms and indeed bed-and-breakfast accommodation across the State. We know from the homeless figures that the majority of homeless families are lone-parent families. The Government could have ensured that lone-parent families did not suffer ever-increasing rents by introducing rent certainty. Unfortunately, however, it was assisted by Fianna Fáil in rejecting Sinn Féin's calls for rent certainty on six separate occasions.

In the area of social protection, we need to tackle poverty among lone-parent families. This must be a priority for the Minister. We can do this through targeted increases in payments that would specifically benefit the children of lone-parent families. This can be done through increases in qualified child payment as opposed to universal increases in child benefit. Qualified child payment increases could be targeted further by aiming them at families with teenage children in recognition of the fact that it is more expensive to raise teenagers than it is younger children. We could allow lone parents to remain on jobseeker's transitional payment until their youngest child is 18 rather than 14. This Administration needs to look at assisting lone parents and their children by means of a whole-of-Government approach. I have just outlined some of the ways in which this could be done but there are many others.

One cannot talk about lone parents and the issues they face without mentioning child maintenance. I welcome the fact that the Minister mentioned this in her contribution. Evidence has shown that child maintenance payments can play a role in reducing child poverty. That is not a myth, it is a fact. I have put this idea to the Minister for Justice and Equality on more than one occasion. It is achievable and would make a real, telling difference for lone parents. Last month, I put forward Sinn Féin's proposals regarding the establishment of a child maintenance service, which is recommended in the cross-party committee report and which has been recommended by the United Nations. The latter criticised the failure of the State to have such a service in place. These proposals are supported by the lone-parent organisations, One Family and SPARK, the National Women's Council of Ireland and Women's Aid. Sinn Féin's proposals are based on a successful model in place in the North. The proposed child maintenance service would be available for lone parents to use, to seek basic advice and guidance, to assist in calculating maintenance amounts and to actually collect maintenance and transfer it to such parents. This would be a free service available to all lone parents if and when they need it.

Revenue will play a key role in the calculation of means of non-custodial parents for child maintenance payments. There would be special protocols in place for lone parents who have suffered domestic violence. They would be protected from ever having to come into contact with ex-partners. Their applications would be fast-tracked and they would not be expected to provide information, such as addresses, for ex-partners at any stage as is currently the case unfortunately. The only way to seek child maintenance at the moment is through the courts. According to lone parents, this process is degrading, it causes tensions and it simply does not work. I have met many lone parents who have had to go to court up to 14 times to seek maintenance and who, unfortunately, still have not received it. A court is no place to deal with child maintenance arrangements. If one looks at this process from the court's perspective, one realises that it takes up court time and resources unnecessarily, and gives rise to costs. It is possible that the initial cost of setting up a child maintenance service would be neutral, particularly when the cost relating to the courts is taken into account.

The Government should stop categorising child maintenance as household means in the context of rent supplement and other social welfare payments. Child maintenance is not a household income. We have a long way to go to create an environment where lone parents and

their children are assisted and supported. The committee's report should not be left to sit on a shelf. The report highlights the issues right across the board - from education to social protection, from child care to employment and from housing to health - that require Government attention.

If new politics is to achieve anything, then let us commit ourselves now to making life a little bit easier for the 218,817 lone-parent families across the State. Successive Governments have done them wrong and it is time to do the right thing for them and their families.

6 o'clock

Deputy Kathleen Funchion: I commend the committee, in particular the Chairman, Deputy Curran, and my colleague, Deputy Brady on the report and on the manner in which it addressed this issue. Approximately 25.4%, or one quarter, of families in this country are headed by people who are parenting alone. The lack of attendance for this debate is disappointing.

There has been much talk in this debate about the facts and the figures. We all know that it is difficult for somebody parenting alone to manage a household. In reality, if that parent is working, there is only one income coming into the household but there is no reduction in household costs such as rent, bin charges and so on. If that person is on a social welfare payment, managing is even more difficult. We need to look at ways of encouraging people back into the workforce or back into education, but we also need to look at the issue of child care costs. I acknowledge the plans to introduce an affordable child care scheme, which is an issue in which I have a huge interest. We need to be a lot more flexible in terms of child care provision. For example, a lone parent who is a nurse will be required to do shift work and, therefore, he or she will be unable to collect a child from a crèche at 5 p.m. We need to look at expanding the affordable child care scheme to childminders so that people have greater access to child care and can return to work or education.

We also need to take on board how difficult it is to parent alone. A lone parent is not only burdened with meeting all of the financial costs of running a home, such as school lunches, oil and money to pay the rent, he or she also takes on all of the emotional aspects of parenting alone. Nobody plans to be a lone parent. It is not anybody's ambition in life to raise children alone. There is very little emotional support available to lone parents. It is embarrassing and degrading for a lone parent to have to go into a social welfare office and inquire about the schemes or payments he or she can access as a lone parent. Many people will not do it. They cannot bring themselves to do it. We need to look at how, through our mental health services, we can help people to have the confidence to apply for their entitlements as a lone parent, including to return to education. Unfortunately, for many the experience of attending a social welfare office is negative. There is still a stigma around lone parenting despite the increasing number of people who are parenting alone. We need to tackle that and to ensure greater access to financial supports. We need more common sense in relation to lone parenting. For example, a child of seven or 14 is not capable of looking after himself or herself and so we need to consider extending the one-parent family allowance. I welcome the increase in the income disregard, but we need to take further similar steps. We also need to examine the emotional aspects of parenting alone. The groups representing lone parents are the experts in this area, and we need to listen to them and to take on board their views.

Our society is changing, and the number of lone parents is increasing rather than decreasing. We need to look at how realistically we can support people so that they can reach their full po-

tential and their children can reach their full potential. We also need to do support these people to ensure that children are not going to school hungry and they able to access the extracurricular activities that other children can access. There is a gap in the system in terms of equality for children, which is unfair and wrong. We need to examine the financial aspects of lone parenting and lone parents' access to education and the workforce. We also need to examine the emotional aspects of it. Much of what was said by Deputy Brady about maintenance payments and the establishment of an agency in that regard would remove the stress and tension of the courts system for lone parents. We need to consider issues like that and to support and encourage our lone parents.

Deputy Louise O'Reilly: I too commend the members of the committee, including the Chairman, Deputy Curran, and my colleague Deputy Brady, on their efforts in producing this report. I echo Deputy Funchion's remarks regarding the attendance for this debate. I know that, as we speak, there people who are busy in their offices and watching this debate and so the numbers here are not reflective of the interest in this issue. Nevertheless, it is disappointing that there are not more people here. I sought time to speak on this issue because it is one about which I am passionate.

Lone parents, the majority of whom are women, have been consistently under attack in this State. From organised religion, to politicians, to the media, they have been on the receiving end of persecution and discrimination. They have been sneered at and ridiculed, and their treatment in some cases has been nothing short of disgusting. Lone parenting is possibly one of the most difficult jobs with which a person can be tasked, yet the State does little genuinely to help lone parents. I know this because my daughter is a lone parent. I know how hard she works and I know how difficult being a lone parent is for her. She is doing her best but there are many barriers in her way.

The 2016 census revealed that there are a growing number of lone-parent families in this State. According to that census, there are 218,817 lone-parent households in Ireland. The report cites the 2015 survey on income and living conditions which shows children in lone-parent families are among the poorest cohort of people in the State. It also shows how consistent poverty among lone-parent families is four times that of households headed by two parents. I found that shocking. The response of successive Fine Gael Governments was to punish, attack and directly target lone parents.

Earlier, I heard Deputy Burton speak about Joseph Stiglitz. She was not too concerned about the social and economic viewpoints of Mr. Stiglitz when, as Minister for Social Protection, she was busy attacking lone parents in the social welfare Bill in the last Dáil term. With the full backing of Fine Gael, Deputy Burton waged war on these parents. As stated by the political writer, Richard McAleavey, relying on ever present prejudices and inequalities, the lone-parent cuts were purely an accounting exercise. The outcome would cost more money, provide no solutions and fulfil none of the stated aims, but Deputy Burton did it anyway, causing untold stress and misery just to meet the bottom line. This is the outworking of policies.

The report lays bare what needs to be done and it leaves us questioning why on earth it has not been done before. We all know that child care costs are a barrier to lone parents finding work yet child care costs in Ireland are among the highest in the OECD. We need to see sustained and significant investment in affordable State-run child care facilities and State investment in jobs which provide a living wage, enabling lone parents who would like to work to have that opportunity. High rents are also crucifying lone parents. Homelessness figures show

that a majority of homeless families are lone-parent families. What has been the response of the Government? It has presided over an unregulated rental market that commodifies housing, pushing lone parents and others into homelessness and forcing average income workers to spend 40-50% of their wages on rent.

In education, too, lone parents are punished. According to research, education levels are lower among lone parents. This then leads to poorer outcomes for their children. Back to education is made difficult as the back-to-education payment is not payable with the SUSI grant and this further hinders the ability of lone parents to upskill. Furthermore, a very low level of child maintenance is paid to lone parents in Ireland, and lone parents are obliged to seek child maintenance from ex-partners to retain their one-parent family payment. When paid, child maintenance is taken as household means by the Department towards rent supplement and other social welfare payments. This should not happen. Maintenance payments are not household means. A significant body of research has shown that the payment of child maintenance plays a role in lifting children out of poverty, yet this Government either stands idly by or actively participates in punishing them by presiding over this draconian policy.

The main challenges for lone parents - poverty, housing costs on one income, availability and cost of child care, obtaining child maintenance, education and the changes made to the one-parent family payment - need to be addressed urgently. We are not just an economy, we are a society. Addressing the inequality experienced by lone parents will have social as well as economic benefits.

Deputy Bríd Smith: I want first to pay tribute to SPARK, a group which campaigns for lone parents. I pay tribute to all the women and to the men - there are some - who are involved. I recognise the tremendous work they have done in highlighting, through the media and by lobbying politicians in this House, inequality and discrimination against lone parents. My secretary, Ms Leah Speight, is one of the founding members of SPARK. She has contributed significantly to the speech I am about to make.

I welcome the report and the work thereon by my colleagues in the committee. I am now a member of the committee but was not when the work was done. We welcome the overall shift in the tone and language used when discussing lone parents in this House. The recommendations in the report should be supported. We believe they should be a starting point in beginning to reverse the failed policies of previous Governments. They should be reviewed regularly with an intention to improve policies and supports for lone parents.

Poverty rates among lone parents are the highest in the country and are at an all-time high. There are reasons for this but it is no accident that lone parents suffer from the highest rate of deprivation, at 50.1%, and that they show a consistent poverty rate of 24.6% in the most recent EU SILC report, published in 2016. Since this report was issued, an ESRI report was published, two weeks ago. I am sure others referred to it. It shows that out of 11 EU countries, Ireland had the highest persistent deprivation gap between lone parent adults and disabled adults by comparison with the general population. Lone parents had the highest persistent deprivation rate, 26 percentage points higher than for any other adult.

Time after time, we have had reports showing that lone parents and their children suffer the highest consistent poverty and deprivation rates. We have a long list of statistics to pull from. I will not focus on them too much as others have done so. The persistent trend is because of politicians, the media, our culture and the general stigmatisation of lone parents throughout the

history of this country.

I do not believe the language change in the report reflects a change on the part of the Government or officials in the Department but we must welcome it as a beginning. As has been said, it is to be improved upon and updated all the time.

At the time of the announcement that Ireland was in recession in 2008, the idea of a gravy-train ride for lone parents was used by shock jockeys on radio and in many media outlets to suggest lone parents were having a great time and just having children for the sake of getting lots of money. That was the mantra that was being aired all the time. Instead of the then Minister responsible for social protection, Mary Hanafin, attributing the recession to the greed of bankers, developers and others, she reasserted the family role in her Department. She wrote in an article in the *Sunday Independent* in July 2008 that a lone parent on benefits has no incentive to get into a steady relationship, marry or obtain employment. Her focus was on families and family values and, in her words, not on disadvantaged areas, as had been the case in the past. One often hears locally that families get no attention and that lone parents get all the attention but statistics on poverty and living standards do not show this is the outcome. This is tied in with the mantra that recipients of social welfare and the poor, particularly lone parents, were receiving too much and that their lifestyle choices were sometimes the reason the country was suffering from recession. Clearly, that is nonsense. It is terrible media propaganda.

In September 2011, before budget 2012, a newspaper report was published claiming a quarter of lone parents' claims were fundamentally fraudulent. The article stated a shocking new report from the Department of Social Protection revealed fraudulent claims were costing the taxpayer millions each year. The current Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform, Deputy Paschal Donohoe, called at the time for zero tolerance towards fraudsters, whom he said were "taking the taxpayer for a ride". In July 2012, after budget 2012 was implemented and after a sustained attack on lone parents, it was revealed in a fraud-and-error report inspection of 1,000 lone parent files that only 71 out of 1,000 payments were terminated due to fraud. Government politicians, in collusion with some officials in the Department, entertained by the media, had already painted the picture that they wanted lone parents to be viewed as fraudulent. That has to end. The Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection is shaking her head in disgust. I welcome that because it has been for too long that politicians, media and the culture in this country have scapegoated lone parents and their children.

I have some statements from politicians that back up what I am saying. They comprise just a small example of the stereotyping that lone parents have had to listen to and endure. Often there have been radio phone-ins on stations such as 4FM, which held a twitter poll asking whether the State makes it too easy to be a single mother. The report, a welcome start, should begin to turn the tide against the discriminatory culture that exists right across the country.

There is no doubt but that there was co-operation to try to paint lone parents in this matter. Now we really have to reject that and begin to say there was disgraceful treatment of lone parents throughout the history of the State. As has been said by Deputy O'Reilly, the activity of Deputy Joan Burton in particular, as Minister for Social Protection, in getting rid of the income disregard was very negative, not just in terms of its perception but in terms of the impact on the material lives of lone-parent families.

Let me give one example from the report, namely, the proposal to restore the income disregard to €147.60. This is not a radical proposal. The income disregard in 1997 was £115, which

converts to €146. Despite the income disregard never having increased with inflation since 1997, it was cut and is now €110. Therefore, asking for it to be restored to €147.60, the rate in 1997, is not a big ask. Bearing in mind the consumer price index, a basket of goods that cost €147 in January 1997 would cost €217 today. In other words, the payment does not keep up with inflation or the increases in the cost of living. Instead of improving the lot of lone parents, the income disregard put them way back. The attempt to address that is falling way below what it should be. There should now be an income disregard of a minimum €217 for lone parents. This is what the committee needs to be considering and what we need to be asking the House to approve. It is certainly not radical.

The committee has put a lot of work into this report. This is the first time that the real lives of lone parents trying to juggle work, parental responsibilities, house duties, meeting child care costs, employment and facing educational barriers have been discussed alongside policy. I ask that this report not be left to one side, on top of the others on child poverty etc. that are piling up with no action being taken. In this House, we have had to look honestly at what the State did to women and children right back to the time of the Magdalene laundries and the time of the Tuam babies. I do not know how many times we have referred to this each week since I became a Deputy. It very much forms part of the debate in the lead-up to the referendum on the eighth amendment. As I stated previously in this House, having a choice to have a termination should also mean one has a choice to have a child. If women face a life of poverty, discrimination and stigmatisation, it makes it very hard for them to make the latter choice.

Lone Parents and their children are living in poverty. They have the highest rate of consistent poverty in the State. We need a big shift in this House and in society to set the current thinking aside and change it for those who are being discriminated against and stereotyped.

I thank my colleagues on the committee for the report and I thank the Minister. I welcome the report and hope and believe that the Deputies present, if they mean what they say tonight, will keep the pressure up and that it will be the beginning of a progression towards changing the lives of lone parents and their children in a meaningful way and towards ensuring we do not return to stigmatisation and discrimination.

Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection (Deputy Regina Doherty): I wish to refer to one or two points that were made in the debate. Deputy Curran referred to the fact that due to some of the changes we made since 2012, the jobseeker's transitional, JST, payment may be a better payment for some people than the working family payment. He is correct, but it is not something we in the Department see as a difficulty because in those cases the JST payment will offer a higher total income to the lone parent than the working family payment. It will allow them to balance the work and to care for their children in a more flexible way, but it will also give them access to tailored activation supports such as education and training courses to which they might not have had access, and it assists them towards achieving what we want which is a job, a better job and a career for those in that section of society.

Deputy Curran also made reference to the requirement to seek to obtain maintenance for lone parents who have been victims of domestic violence. The changes have been made. The circular was issued yesterday. The training is just about to commence with Women's Aid. We are not blind to the cases that have been brought to our attention. I acknowledge the efforts of Single Parents Acting for the Rights of Kids, SPARK, in highlighting the issue. We have listened and we have very much changed our policy.

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I am not sure whether it was Deputy Funchion or Deputy Louise O'Reilly who made the point but I wish to clarify that the current position with regard to means assessment of maintenance is that all maintenance is in fact assessed as means. Where the lone parent has a housing cost the disregard is applied of €95.23 per week and the balance is assessed at only 50%. That often results in no reduction in the payment of lone parents' payments, or if there is a reduction it is incredibly small.

The work is not finished. The recommendations that were made in the report were not all completed in the previous budget. We are not going to be finished until we find ourselves in a position where we have a much higher employment rate among lone parents and that the 218,000 families have a level of income whether it comes from supports and transfers from the State and employment or full employment, and that they finally receive the respect and dignity they deserve from this country and its citizens.

I agree with the ladies in the House who made reference to the view that has prevailed for far too long in this country. It does not just come from religious organisations, politicians or the media because the narrative has crept into the psyche of what I would classify as normal people, who have an incredibly wrong view that reflects on society, that we make it too easy for women to be single mothers. People have a disgraceful and shameful view that women choose to be single mothers, as if we go around at 17 or 18 years and target some poor unsuspecting young fellow so that we can get a house or get a buggy. Holy God. There are very few things that make my blood boil but this is one of them. Throughout the history of the State we have had religious orders deal with women when they got pregnant that put them in homes to hide them away. Families acquiesced to that where they should not have. We have reached a stage now where we think we are modern, politically correct, and great as it is the 21st century yet we still have radio stations castigating women because people think they are throwing their leg over because it is some sort of a better lifestyle.

I am the mother of four children and I have a husband. He is dead, and I would not have this job only for the support he gives me. However, by Jove, being a mother with a husband is bloody hard and I cannot even begin to countenance what it must be like to be a mother on one's own and to have all of the financial burdens, emotional burdens and everything else that goes along with rearing a family. Could we all agree – all parties and none – that today it stops – the castigating, stereotyping and stigmatising of the women who are the backbone of this country? That is no disrespect to the lads. The women who rear families support the Social Insurance Fund by rearing the children who become the workers of this country who pay to support pensions. Could we stop with the historical bullshit of being incredibly rude, disrespectful and undignified towards the women of this country because it is intolerable?

We are now in the 21st century. Different families of different shapes and sizes deserve to be treated with respect and dignity and supported by the State. Whether they are blended families, single families or foster families, it does not matter. Everybody deserves the dignity and respect of being treated by the State as a human being, but we must take responsibility for the stigmatisation and stereotyping because it is not just politicians, the media and some religious organisations. It seeps into the psyche of every single normal person and it will only be changed through the changes in Government policy and by all of us standing up together to say that we will not tolerate it anymore and by educating people to say that the lot of lone parents is a bloody difficult one. Not everybody gets to see ESRI reports or SILC reports we all trawl through every weekend for our sins, but we need to be able to show the difficulty and supports and services that will allow independent women and men who are rearing their families alone

to receive the education, training, financial transfers and supports so that they can get a job, a better job, and a career. That is responsible and incumbent upon all of us.

Deputy John Curran: I have only a few concluding remarks. In my opening remarks I acknowledged the contribution of the witnesses to the committee and I wish to reiterate that. Those people who attended, made opening written presentations and answered questions, in fairly specific detail, informed the report that is in front of us. It is not an academic report, it was formulated by real life input. That is very important.

I also acknowledge that the report would not be the report it is without the co-operation of all members of the joint committee, both those from this House and the Upper House. This was not a majority report, it was a unanimous report from all members of the committee. We had considerable evidence in front of us. There was considerable drafting and redrafting in terms of recommendations. The recommendations and thoughts of every person on the committee were considered, irrespective of whether he or she was a member of a party or not. Everybody on the committee agreed with the final report.

In making my opening remarks I was conscious that the recommendations and findings were those of the committee, that they were not my own personal views and it was very important to accurately reflect and summarise the work of the committee given the considerable effort that went into it. The report is all the stronger because of the quality and input of the witnesses, including written presentations, and the co-operation and work of members. It was not just a case of members turning up for a short meeting, there was much drafting and redrafting to produce the report. I acknowledge and recognise the work members of the committee put into it.

I wish to refer to one or two brief points that came up during the course of the debate. Although I did not mention it in my opening remarks the additional cost of teenagers was brought to the attention of the Minister. We recognise that in other areas, for example, the way we approach the back-to-school clothing and footwear allowance. A distinction is made between primary schoolchildren and older children. It is important to recognise that in real life teenagers are more expensive and they need subscriptions for football, designer tracksuits or whatever else. We have all had the experience of living with teenagers and while they progress beyond that stage we all know teenagers are more expensive and we must be cognisant of that. We recognise it in certain areas and we must demonstrate a differential approach to older children in future budgets in terms of a different or additional payment in recognition of the additional costs.

I welcome the Minister's comments on the issues I raised on maintenance. I welcome the fact that women who are in awkward or abusive relationships do not have to go through the same process. However, it is necessary to update the website for anybody who goes to the welfare site and looks at the list of requirements. I only looked at it today and it is concerning if people feel they have to go through that process. More important regarding maintenance, it should be taken away altogether and it should be a stand-alone issue that lone parents, who are predominantly female, get a payment and do not have to worry about maintenance. The State should play a role in that regard. Certainly, none of the people I see wants to have to deal with a former partner as the relationship is over. In many cases, they do not know where their former partner is or do not want to track him down, etc. It is welcome that the Minister has committed to providing a paper on the issue in the near future. I encourage her to submit it to the joint committee. She should give us a look at it at an early stage to try to deal with this issue in a meaningful way. That would have a positive impact.

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The Minister referred to how getting people back into work was the solution. I do not disagree, but I am keen to make the point that the real challenge is presented by the quality of work. I did not get an opportunity to speak in the debate last night on the employment Bill which deals with the issues of banded hours, security and so on. The same applies to lone parents. It is important that the quality of work available to them affords them the lifestyle that goes with moving out of poverty.

We need to consider our analysis for the future. It is not good enough to say people are in work or employment. We need a qualitative analysis to assess what impact employment is having. Is it having the desired beneficial positive impact the Minister intended? That is not a criticism, but if we shift in the direction of people moving into employment which is seen as the solution, there is no use in it being a subsidy. It needs to be real and meaningful. It needs to have the desired outcome for them for which we are all striving. It is important to ensure there will be a continuous analysis of the level and type of employment available.

The joint committee's report was published in June last year to give the Minister an opportunity to consider its findings. The idea was that its timing would have an impact in how the budget might be formulated. The report this year will be equally relevant. The numbers of lone parent families may change and the numbers living in deprivation and poverty will go up and down somewhat, but the broad issues addressed and the broad solutions suggested will be as relevant in the compilation of the budget for next year. I acknowledge that incremental progress has been made, but more work remains to be done. If the Minister is before the joint committee in advance of the preparation of the budget for next year, I appeal to her to revisit this report. While the numbers may be somewhat out of date when she enters the budgetary process, the report will still be a roadmap she should follow.

I thank everyone for his or her contribution.

Question put and agreed to.

Messages from Select Committees

An Ceann Comhairle: The Select Committee on Justice and Equality has completed its consideration of the Intoxicating Liquor (Breweries and Distilleries) Bill 2016 and the Judicial Appointments Commission Bill 2017 and has made amendments thereto.

The Dáil adjourned at 6.35 p.m. until 2 p.m. on Tuesday, 20 February 2018.